

QUESTIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN 2019

BY JANHAVI APTE

When you think of a humanitarian crisis, you likely picture a place ridden with massive casualties, destruction, displacement, and disease. When imagining a response to such a crisis, you probably envision airplanes dropping food into inaccessible areas, aid workers setting up clinics and refugee camps, and the distribution of basic supplies like water and sanitation kits. Now imagine doing this for not just a few months, but for years, in multiple contexts, and with no end in sight. You are

unable to scale back aid and push for self-reliance among affected communities because the needs are too overwhelming. You are responding to enduring health crises, with brutal epidemics affecting generations. And now you ask the million-dollar question: “[how] will this ever end?”

Getting to the ideal answer is not easy. Conflict is the primary driver of humanitarian crises today, which are lasting longer and affecting increasing numbers of people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that the number of people in need of assistance has grown by over 60 percent from 2014 to 2018.¹ In the same period, the average length of conflicts has increased from 5.2 years to 9.3 years respectively.² Examples of this are everywhere. The Syrian conflict is in its eighth year, the war in Yemen is reaching its fourth, and the Venezuelan crisis is unfolding right before our eyes. Proving that there is no such thing as a short-term response, “emergencies” are lasting for years, if not decades. Wars today are the consequences of ignored developmental issues such as extreme poverty, social and political discrimination, and unemployment.

The term *violence* is not limited to the loss of human life, but also includes destruction of large infrastructure and institutions, and the world is learning to deal with unsettling new threats posed by violent extremist groups. With the changing nature of conflict and overwhelming levels of people affected, humanitarian action must also evolve to include elements of resilience building and long-term development to help secure viable peace in volatile situations.³ Band-aid solutions to complex crises do nothing to address deeply-rooted grievances or structural weaknesses in societies, thereby leaving already fragile contexts exposed and still vulnerable to further instability.

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It is crucial to remember that humanitarian crises caused by violent conflict require political solutions. However, given the glacial pace at which political developments tend to progress, humanitarian action, as the first line of response to any crisis, must work towards some key goals: alleviating human suffering, ending the need for aid, and creating an environment conducive to lasting peace. This cannot happen if the humanitarian community remains reliant on its siloed approach of responding only to the immediate needs of the crisis-affected. Instead, it must strive to be forward-looking, collaborate with a wide range of actors to work towards collective outcomes, and respect humanitarian principles to not just respond to crises but also prevent their reemergence.^{4,5}

The rising costs of providing humanitarian aid and assistance come hand-in-hand with a sharp dwindling of political will; nations no longer want to remain engaged in increasingly drawn out conflicts. Between 2011 and 2018, global humanitarian response plan (HRP) appeals have increased from \$8.92 billion to \$24.93 billion, marking a 179 percent increase in funding demands.⁶ Given current trends, these numbers are expected to continue rising, with the global humanitarian funding appeal for 2019 expected to be over \$25 billion.⁷ This is making states nervous about the sustainability of such efforts, as they struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing and increasing costs of responding to conflicts for an extended period of time. With aid budgets shrinking and a renewed pressure to utilize funds effectively, investing in diversified partnerships across the humanitarian and development sectors for more comprehensive programming could help lead to greater reform rather than just increasing spending for humanitarian assistance.⁸

For example, the average duration of displacement for a refugee today is approximately 17 years.⁹ In the absence of development efforts, this could mean that a refugee might require aid for 17 years, which is unsustainable. In places where governing bodies lack the capacity to provide basic services—such as food, water, shelter, and education—to citizens and refugees alike, aid actors could usurp the role of service-providers, leaving room for aid dependency to take hold.

Yemen is a prime illustration of where more resilience-focused responses need to be employed. If hostilities end following the recent peace-talks in Sweden, it will not automatically pave the way for peace and stability in Yemen, nor will it end the need for humanitarian actors on the ground.¹⁰ Existing hostilities aside, Yemen has long been an unstable country. Following a very brief stint in the limelight as a success story from the Arab Spring, Yemen quickly descended into chaos as the new leadership failed to consolidate its power.¹¹ Deeply-rooted grievances, a secessionist South, unreliable institutions, and a rapidly collapsing economy proved to be fertile grounds for the Houthi movement to gain traction, and the violence that followed only exacerbated an already looming crisis in the country. What is happening right now in Yemen was predictable far before UN famine declarations and heart-wrenching media coverage of emaciated children, but it took this level of tragedy for it to make the international community's priority list.¹²

Humanitarian response does not end when the violence ends, and the necessary political solutions to protracted crises are hard to come by. Therefore, it is imperative for humanitarian action to incorporate development tools in its programming to better control the negative impacts of crises and to carve a path forward. These tools could include educating women on health and hygiene, providing longer-term medical assistance, or working with civil society to conduct livelihoods training for people affected by crises. This does not mean that humanitarians must take on the role of development professionals but rather need to form meaningful partnerships, exchange knowledge, and use their expertise of working in conflict and post-conflict settings to help build capacities to withstand future shocks.¹³ If partnerships take form in this manner, the road to stability will be less fragile when the political solutions finally arrive.

If the dream of every humanitarian—to have a day where their work is no longer required—is to come true, humanitarian action will have to push its boundaries. The humanitarian agenda must adapt to the changing international landscape in which it seeks to operate.¹⁴ Though emergency assistance is vital, if there is no simultaneous focus on planting the seeds of long-term development within humanitarian programs, humanitarian action runs the risk of producing the exact opposite of its intended result, an outcome which will entrap the international community in a vicious cycle of reactionary (and extremely costly) policies and create huge dependencies on aid. And as for the dream of making humanitarian action obsolete, it will remain a dream.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2019* (United Nations, November 2018), <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf>.
4. A collective outcome is defined as the result that development and humanitarian actors (and other relevant actors) contribute to achieving at the end of 3-5 years in order to reduce needs, risk, and vulnerability. See: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2018/Apr/OCHA%20Collective%20Outcomes%20April%202018.pdf>.
5. Rachel Scott, “Imagining More Effective Humanitarian Aid: A Donor Perspective,” OECD Development Co-Operation Working Paper 18, October 2014, https://www.oecd.org/dac/Imagining%20More%20Effective%20Humanitarian%20Aid_October%202014.pdf; All humanitarian action is guided by four core principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. They help establish and maintain access to affected people and compliance with these principles are crucial elements of effective humanitarian response. See: https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf.
6. Financial Tracking Service, “Appeals and response plans 2011-2018,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), <https://fts.unocha.org/>.
7. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “US\$21.9 billion needed in 2019 as average length of humanitarian crises climbs,” United Nations, December 4, 2018, <https://www.unocha.org/story/us219-billion-needed-2019-average-length-humanitarian-crises-climbs>.
8. A good example of such partnerships is the New Way of Working (NWOW), an initiative under Agenda for Humanity that seeks to bring together humanitarian and development actors, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private-sector actors both from within and outside the UN system to work together towards collective outcomes. See: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/5358>.
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14. Antonio Donini, “The crisis of multilateralism and the future of humanitarian action,” IRIN News, November 30, 2018, <https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2016/11/30/crisis-multilateralism-and-future-humanitarian-action>.