

For the climate, end the distinction between humanitarian aid and development aid

Runa Khan, Marc Elvinger et William Lebedel • Friendship

Can the consequences of climate change on vulnerable populations contribute to rethinking the structure of aid? Drawing on the example of Bangladesh and an innovative partnership with Luxembourg development cooperation, three directors of the NGO Friendship argue just that.

On 3 May 2019, Cyclone Fani struck the east coast of India and the coastal region of Bangladesh. Although it made us fear the worst and led to the precautionary evacuation of nearly 2,5 million people, fortunately, Fani lost some of its strength when it made landfall. But this alone does not explain why “only” seventeen people were killed by Fani in Bangladesh, when in 1991, a cyclone here killed 140,000 people and left ten million homeless and when Cyclone Sidr killed around 10,000 people and left tens of thousands of survivors homeless in 2007.

Since the dramatic death toll of 1991, a great deal of effort has gone into improving early warning systems, increasing the number of cyclone shelters, and more generally into strengthening the resilience of the Bangladeshi populations in the face of natural disasters. These preventive measures have proven to be effective and the return on the investment is incalculable.

The undeniable effectiveness of prevention

The increasing number of disasters related to climate change requires ever greater investments in preventive measures, and any initiatives to strengthen the resilience of communities must anticipate the growing frequency of such phenomena. In Bangladesh, for example, Friendship¹ had to provide emergency aid for people living on alluvial islands in the Brahmaputra river after exceptional flooding just once between 2007 and 2014; since then it has had to do so three years in a row (in 2015, 2016 and 2017).

According to the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Bangladesh is the world’s most vulnerable country in terms of human exposure to flooding and the sixth most vulnerable to cyclones². As ECHO states, “being mostly low-lying and at the confluence of two large rivers (the Ganges and the Brahmaputra), much of the country is also prone to seasonal flooding and is therefore one of the most vulnerable

¹ For more information about Friendship, see Runa Khan, “New models of working and partnership in development: the example of Friendship, a Bangladeshi organisation”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no.2, May 2016, p.112-135, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2016/05/13/new-models-of-working-and-partnership-in-development-the-example-of-friendship-a-bangladeshi-organisation>

² ECHO, Humanitarian Implementation Plan (HIP) Bangladesh (ECHO/BGD/BUD/2013/91000) Year 2013 Version 1, 9 October 2012, p.1, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/humanitarian-implementation-plan-hip-bangladesh-echobgd201391000-year-2013-last>

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countries to the effects of climate change. The frequency, unpredictability and severity of these disasters are likely to be adversely affected by global warming, population growth, environmental degradation and ill-maintained infrastructure.”³

Despite the considerable progress made since the 1970s in terms of prevention, the impact of climate change increases the vulnerability of Bangladeshi communities by affecting their food security and livelihoods, which are already extremely precarious. It is estimated that between 2008 and 2014, almost five million people have migrated because of natural disasters in Bangladesh. The national government predicts that by 2050, one person in seven in the country will migrate because of climate change⁴. Around 10,000 people a day are currently having to migrate to the country’s interior.

Humanitarian aid versus development aid: a counter-productive distinction

The context described above makes the classic distinction between humanitarian aid and development aid obsolete and counter-productive as the two are inextricably linked. Poverty and inadequate preparation are the main reasons why the effects of disasters are amplified – disasters which are increasing in frequency because of climate change. In the same time, development efforts are regularly compromised by the consequences of recurrent natural disasters. This vicious circle must be replaced by a virtuous one.

The mitigation of disaster effects is better served by both specific preparatory measures and general development efforts. Together they will avert the need for humanitarian aid in the strict sense of the term. What better argument for humanitarian aid than to invest in prevention and development unless we take the view that its actors are living with the fear of losing their fundamental purpose... As long ago as 2001, the European Commission wrote :

“Disaster preparedness is the only alternative to putting countries into ‘intensive care’ every time a crisis occurs... The frequency and regular severity of these disasters seriously jeopardise the already fragile development process by undermining and reversing any accrued development gains. Where the population is already intrinsically vulnerable due to prevailing poverty and food insecurity, the impact of these natural disasters is all the more devastating. It is thus evident that any strategy for improving the livelihood of the poorest segment of the population in the most disaster prone areas, such as Bangladesh, must take into account the need to reduce their vulnerability to these disasters.”⁵

A priority: beneficiaries’ needs

Friendship’s experience in one of the countries most exposed to climate change can, in our opinion, serve as an example. The NGO Friendship has been working with the country’s most isolated and vulnerable populations for nearly twenty years through multi-sector community development programmes in healthcare, education, income-generating activities, inclusive

³ European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, *Bangladesh, Facts and figures*, 22 May 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bangladesh_2019-05-22.pdf

⁴ Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan*, September 2009, https://www.iucn.org/downloads/bangladesh_climate_change_strategy_and_action_plan_2009.pdf

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development*, 2001 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52001DC0153>

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citizenship and cultural preservation. Concentrating much of its activity in those regions of the country most exposed to natural disasters and climate change – the alluvial islands of the Brahmaputra river in the north, and the coastal regions in the south – Friendship understandably combines humanitarian aid with development aid.

Having implemented emergency aid programmes in the aftermath of flooding and cyclones on many occasions, it quickly highlighted the need for programmes that were specifically geared towards natural-disaster preparedness, Community Initiated Disaster Risk Reduction programmes (CIDRR). These were subsequently extended by programmes designed to strengthen resilience and move towards sustainable development. The fundamental objective is therefore, over time, to integrate these particularly vulnerable populations into mainstream economic development programmes, since in terms of their nature and working methods, actions with extremely poor and vulnerable communities are not so different from the rehabilitation actions implemented in the immediate aftermath of an emergency aid intervention. In this case, the supposed boundaries between humanitarian aid and development aid disappear, completely and naturally.

The institutional obstacles to the elimination of inappropriate dividing lines

Regardless of the preceding observations, numerous declarations of intent and even the resolutions adopted in recent years⁶, and regardless of the changes to the LRRD approach (Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development) which, admittedly, has come a long way over the last few years, resulting in the “Development-Humanitarian Aid-Conflict Prevention” nexus and the “New way of working” advocated in Istanbul in 2016⁷, humanitarian aid and development aid still have a lot to do before they are more closely integrated. Unfortunately, it would seem that the dividing line between them still has a long future ahead. The institutional framework attests to this whilst simultaneously being a powerful force for the preservation of such a dividing line; almost without exception, the institutions in charge of either type of aid are distinct entities with separate budgets. It is the same scenario at the European Union, with the compartmentalisation of ECHO and the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), and the same dichotomy can generally be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, at State level.

Since the sinews of war are money, even in the fields of humanitarian aid and development, most non-governmental actors are more or less aligned along this dividing line. It is true to say that the cultures, like the operating methods of humanitarian NGOs and development NGOs, often differ significantly, such differences resulting from the conditions governing access to institutional funding which themselves vary considerably.

⁶ In particular the Sendai Framework (see United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Sendai Framework For Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030*, March 2015, https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf) or the European Consensus on Development (see *The new European Consensus on Development “Our world, our dignity, our future”, joint statement by the Council and the representatives of the governments of the member states meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission*, June 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf).

⁷ See in particular Gilles Carbonnier, “Revisiting the Nexus: numbers, principles and the issue of social change”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no.10, March 2019, p.120-133, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/03/25/revisiting-nexus-numbers-principles-issue-social-change> , and Groupe URD, *Le Nexus humanitaire-développement au regard du Grand Bargain*, July 2018, www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AnalyseDoc_1_Nexus_V2.pdf Note, however, that the “localisation” agenda, as presented in Istanbul in 2016, now seems much less advanced in terms of humanitarian aid than it does in the field of development. The direct access of NGOs from the South to institutional funding is, in particular at the level of the European Union, much more open for development aid budgets than for humanitarian aid budgets.

The pragmatic example of Luxembourg development cooperation

If, with regard to eliminating the boundaries between humanitarian aid and development aid, Friendship's experience has been shaped by the actual needs of the populations concerned and structurally exposed to the effects of climate change, it has also been greatly facilitated by the flexibility of the funding instruments provided by Luxembourg development cooperation.

In particular, more than two thirds of the humanitarian aid funding it allocated to Friendship Luxembourg in recent years could be assigned to Community Initiated Disaster Risk Reduction projects⁸. However, at institutional and budgetary level, Luxembourg development cooperation has not completely removed the distinction between humanitarian aid and development aid, but by anticipating the European Consensus on Development and the Council's conclusions on the European Union's approach to resilience⁹, it allowed Friendship Luxembourg to provide full support to the transition and resilience projects implemented by the association in Bangladesh. These projects combine activities with four objectives: to improve the economic situation of the most vulnerable people by building their capacities and diversifying their livelihoods; to improve their food security; to ensure that they have access to the local authorities so that they can benefit from the services allegedly provided by those authorities; and lastly, to mobilise these local authorities to fight the "geographic poverty" specific to the populations living in regions particularly exposed to the effects of climate change. In fact, the new general strategy adopted by Luxembourg development cooperation in 2018 focuses specifically on this approach¹⁰.

This example of a pragmatic approach initiated between a development cooperation body and an NGO demonstrates that when it comes to strengthening the resilience of those populations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, the dichotomy between humanitarian aid and development aid is unsuitable for the actual needs of the populations, and is counter-productive and detrimental to the efficacy of that aid. It is therefore always essential to go that extra mile to adapt aid-funding instruments. More importantly, however, humanitarian and development aid actors (and NGOs in particular) must adapt how they think and operate to fit the new realities.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

⁸ Even though Luxembourg development cooperation's 2013 Stratégie en matière d'action humanitaire [Humanitarian action strategy] states that only 5% of the humanitarian action budget (itself representing 15% of Luxembourg development cooperation's total budget) at least is reserved for preventive and resilience-strengthening initiatives.

⁹ The European Consensus dates from June 2017 and the Conclusions of the Council from November 2017 (*Council of the European Union, A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action*, November 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31519/ccs-on-resilience-in-eu-ea-st14191en17.pdf>), while the Luxembourg development cooperation's conditions governing the co-funding of humanitarian action and formally establishing the funding of resilience-related initiatives were adopted in January 2017 (*Conditions générales régissant les relations en matière d'action humanitaire entre le ministère des affaires étrangères et les organisations non gouvernementales*, 26 January 2017, <https://cooperation.gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/espace-ong/action-humanitaire/action-humanitaire-conditions-generales-action-humanitaire.pdf>).

¹⁰ Luxembourg's General Development Cooperation Strategy, *The Road to 2020*, January 2018, <https://cooperation.gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/politique-cooperation-action-humanitaire/documents-de-reference/strategie/Strategie-MAEE-EN.pdf>

Biographies

Runa Khan • Founder and Executive Director of Friendship, Runa Khan is also the Founder and Chair of Friendship International. She is also the Country Chair of Global Dignity in Bangladesh. She has received numerous international recognitions and awards. She is also the only Rolex Laureate from Bangladesh. She is a published author of eight books, six on pedagogy and two children's story books.

Marc Elvinger • Lawyer and member of the Luxembourg bar since 1985, he has been involved as a volunteer with Development NGOs for almost forty years. Marc Elvinger is the Chair of the board of Friendship-Luxembourg and Co-Chair of Friendship International, the coordination body of the various Friendship entities in Bangladesh and Europe.

William Lebedel • Manages BlueRep, a consultancy firm specialising in providing change-management support for company and foundation leaders. William is actively involved in the NGO Friendship since meeting Runa Khan in 2012, and became Chair, as volunteer, of Friendship France in 2015. He is a board member of Friendship International.

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