

Dutch Humanitarian Assistance

An evaluation

Background

The past fifteen years have witnessed many intrastate conflicts or ‘complex emergencies’ leading to massive human suffering. These emergencies, as well as high impact natural disasters such as the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia, have led to a growing need for humanitarian assistance and to a significant increase in humanitarian aid expenditure. In the period 2000-2004, the Netherlands spent some €1.2 billion on humanitarian aid.

Recent political developments on the world scene, including the ‘war on terror’ following the events on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have created new challenges for the implementation of the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. The Netherlands expenditure on humanitarian aid, and the fact that the aid had not been evaluated for some time, prompted the current evaluation.

The evaluation assesses Dutch humanitarian aid provided in the period 2000-2004 and focuses on complex emergencies. It was decided to exclude humanitarian assistance provided by the Netherlands in the context of natural disasters from the evaluation, since the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department was involved in a multi-agency evaluation of the support provided to the victims of the tsunami that struck Southeast Asia on 26 December 2004. The results of that evaluation have been published separately.

The evaluation reviews policy and administrative procedures and examines the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the aid provided. Case studies were conducted in Afghanistan, the Great Lakes region in Africa (Burundi and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo), Somalia and Sudan. Together, these case studies cover 33 per cent of Dutch expenditure on humanitarian aid in the period at issue.

Main Findings

1. Policy

Dutch humanitarian aid policy, laid down in several documents, is consistent with internationally accepted humanitarian principles. It is also largely in line with the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship. The concentration of aid provision on focus countries and regions is appropriate in view of the humanitarian needs there. Sufficient flexibility is maintained to be able to respond

to disasters elsewhere. The implementation of humanitarian aid policy has been coherent with diplomatic action and the fostering of peace processes in the countries covered by the evaluation.

The policy responds to life-threatening human needs amongst the most vulnerable people in chronic crises or natural disasters. The internationally recognised basic humanitarian principles, namely *humanity*, *impartiality*, *neutrality* and *independence*, are at the heart of the policy. They have not been compromised by particular political interests. Foreign policy regarding countries entangled in complex emergencies is characterised by three different but complementary strands of action: provision of humanitarian aid for immediate relief and early rehabilitation, promotion of peace and security, and the fostering of reconstruction.

Humanitarian aid provision is embedded in a multilateral framework, emphasising coordination, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has engaged in a constructive – and at times critical – policy dialogue with UN agencies. Complementarity is sought by matching support for the UN with that for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

2. Results

The assistance provided in the case study countries took into account the different natures of the crises, was relevant to the needs of beneficiaries and in accord with the main policy objective of saving lives. It has mainly been effective in areas where access was achievable. Lack of access compromised coverage of the population: an unknown but large number of needy people could not be reached. Flaws in the international humanitarian aid system and shortcomings in needs assessments meant that particular needs of specific population groups were not met. At times, as in Darfur, operations were slow to start. Overall the commodities supplied were appropriate, though it was difficult to adhere to minimal standards.

The costs of aid delivery were high, but high costs do not necessarily imply inefficiency since they are determined to a large extent by prevailing contextual factors. Conflict and insecurity were the main determinants of the cost of delivery and also impacted on efficiency. Costs were also determined by distance, terrain, climatic conditions and the way in which the international humanitarian aid system is organised. One aspect of the latter is the aid management chain resulting from sub-contracting among agencies, each with its own overheads. The efficiency of delivery was also affected by the continued absence of the state in Somalia, the absence of functional government institutions in parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, weak institutions in southern Sudan and the lack of full state control in parts of Afghanistan.

3. Organisational Aspects

The emphasis on the coordination of humanitarian assistance by the UN is appropriate. By insisting that all humanitarian actors responding to a particular crisis are coordinated, the Netherlands strengthens the universal response to the humanitarian imperative. In the case study countries, coordination of aid implementation was variable because coordination through the UN does not provide a ‘command and control’ response to disasters. At best, it provides a shared platform of intent, including information on existing and projected humanitarian activities. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there has been sound policy coordination and coordination of interventions. Where needed there was also inter-departmental coordination. In the case study countries the Netherlands was actively involved in donor coordination.

The rationalisation of administrative procedures in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has resulted in more efficient management of humanitarian assistance. This reduced the administrative burden of the Humanitarian Aid Division and of the implementing agencies. The conclusion of Channel Financing Agreements with several UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the streamlining of funding arrangements for NGO projects have improved the predictability and timeliness of Dutch funding. The Channel Financing Agreements have also led to the organisations reporting results at highly aggregated levels, and their reports do not provide details on individual aid activities. Staff of the Humanitarian Aid Division still spend much more time on required administrative tasks than on policy development, international policy dialogue, inter-departmental coordination, and monitoring and evaluation.

The embassies adequately monitor humanitarian situations through contacts with other donors, agencies and the government. Institutional monitoring of different UN agencies and the ICRC is adequately conducted by Netherlands Permanent Representations to these organisations. In contrast, the field monitoring of the results of aid implementation by the embassies in the case study countries has been weak. Factors have been time constraints, other priorities, and the distance between embassies and the localities where the aid activities were being implemented.

The ambitions of Dutch humanitarian aid policy are not sufficiently matched in the setting of priorities in staff deployment. Even though staffing levels have increased and administrative procedures have been simplified, the Humanitarian Aid Division is still experiencing a lack of capacity. Staffing levels in the embassies in the countries covered by the case studies proved critical. Attention to humanitarian aid competed with other priorities such as political work. Finally, the staffing levels of the Permanent Representations proved challenging, given the tasks to be done.

4. Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development

In general, relief, rehabilitation and development have been linked successfully in Afghanistan but less so in the other countries covered by the evaluation. The close collaboration of the Humanitarian Aid Division, the Peacebuilding and Good Governance Division and other units in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been conducive to developing and implementing an integrative approach that links humanitarian aid focused on relief and early rehabilitation with support focused on rehabilitation, reconstruction and development. The ministry has separate budgets for humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities and developmental interventions. This did not prove to be a constraint to linkage.

The decision to include Afghanistan in the list of partner countries in 2003 has been conducive to the provision of substantial long-term support for reconstruction and development. The peace agreement in southern Sudan has led to the Dutch commitment to substantially contribute to reconstruction and developmental activities. The recent prospects for peace in Darfur may lead to support for reconstruction and development. In Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, support is provided to assist rehabilitation and reconstruction, including security sector reform, demobilisation and the reintegration of former combatants. Since the Netherlands has no structural bilateral development relations with Burundi or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, no other major funding mechanisms are available to support economic recovery and development in either country. On the one hand, this may be considered a missed opportunity. On the other, it may be argued that other donors who have traditionally had a bilateral aid relationship with these countries may be better placed to provide such assistance.

Issues

Four issues that need further attention emerge from the evaluation.

1. Policy

Current humanitarian aid policy and strategies are in a variety of policy documents, notes and memoranda. It is worth considering the consolidation of these documents into one document that should include references to adjacent policies.

2. Organisational aspects

Sufficient and adequately skilled staff are needed in order to manage the participation of the Netherlands in costly and complicated humanitarian aid interventions, to safeguard the coherence between the use of political, military, humanitarian and development instruments, and to ensure realistic political analyses of the local contexts. Given the current staffing levels of the Humanitarian Aid Division, the Netherlands Permanent Representations and the embassies in countries in chronic emergencies, it worth considering the prioritisation of tasks and the strengthening of staffing levels.

3. Monitoring and reporting

As mentioned, the embassies' field-level monitoring of the results of aid implementation has been weak. In addition, Channel Financing Agreements with a number of agencies resulted in reporting at a very aggregated level. This in turn, reduced donor overview of the results of individual aid activities.

It is worth to reconsider the role of the embassies' field-level monitoring of the implementation of activities funded by the Netherlands. Such monitoring should also help to determine the quality of reporting by agencies under Channel Financing Agreements.

4. Management chains

The international humanitarian aid system is characterised by UN agencies operating through implementing partners. International NGOs also deliver part of the aid through partners. The result is long aid management chains and sub-contracting, which may lead to cumulative overhead costs. This evaluation did not investigate this issue, nor did it come across any study of this phenomenon. It would be worth considering whether the Netherlands could call upon humanitarian agencies and other donors to commission an investigation of this aspect of aid management.

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