

Responding to Humanitarian Crises and the Needs of Displaced Populations



Introduction

Inter Pares was founded in 1975. Our feminist analysis informs our understanding that unequal power structures are at the root of underdevelopment, and that transformative social change is required for true positive development. The following is a summary of the relevant section of our full submission to the International Assistance Review (IAR).

UNHCR recently reported that over 65 million people worldwide were displaced at the end of 2015 – an increase of almost 6 million in the space of one year.¹ The frequency and scale of natural disasters seem to be increasing, with climate change a growing factor. Land grabs for resource exploitation, land speculation, corporate agribusiness or conservation areas are displacing increasing numbers of people. Armed conflicts are dragging on or resuming, driving and driven by displacement. Increasing global needs are being met by donor fatigue and a lack of political will, as donor countries become more inward-looking and seek to balance domestic budgets and reduce immigration. As crises outnumber the ability to respond, more and more of them become chronic emergencies that seem to elude sustainable solutions. The sheer scale of need created by issues like the Syrian conflict is pulling resources away from other situations, leaving vulnerabilities unaddressed in ways that can reignite conflict and create fresh emergencies. These challenges require a reassessment of how crisis funding is distributed, how decisions are made and how responses are designed.

Inter Pares' Work on this Theme

Inter Pares is a social justice organization, not a humanitarian relief organization. However, we recognize the role that humanitarian aid can play

in enabling displaced people to claim their rights, and the ways that such aid can impact social justice positively or negatively. For over 20 years we have supported refugees from Burma in camps in Thailand with our partner The Border Consortium (TBC), a group of 11 international NGOs (now including Inter Pares) that currently oversees humanitarian assistance to over 100,000 refugees in nine camps. These are some of the only camps in the world to be run by refugees themselves, creating possibilities for civic participation and capacity building well beyond the norm in humanitarian crises. We also support organizations run and staffed by displaced people with medical training who deliver primary health care to over 300,000 people in conflicted-affected villages or internally displaced in conflict zones throughout Burma. All of these interventions follow the principle of supporting displaced people to manage their own responses.

Recommendations:

Let affected people design and manage the response

In our experience, it is not aid itself that creates dependency, but the conventional top-down model of delivering it. The importance of allowing affected people and local organizations to design their own interventions is already recognized in human rights and community

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development, and needs to be applied to humanitarian crisis and displacement.

Affected communities are always the first responders to crises, disasters, and forced displacement, but their power over their own lives is often taken from them as soon as international organizations arrive on the scene. This takes management of the response away from the very people who best understand the needs, and immediately makes aid disempowering. If affected people and their local organizations are engaged to lead the decision making and management from the beginning, receiving relief aid can be a very empowering experience, strengthening local capacities, democratic structures, and empowerment. It gives people ownership, and a sense of identity and partial control over their lives, which is crucial in situations where people may have lost almost everything. This also facilitates a seamless transition from emergency relief to recovery and development.

A growing body of research supports this approach. The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee's *Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons* recognizes that *"IDPs must be consulted and participate extensively in the planning and management of the processes supporting a durable solution. All parts of the IDP population, including women, children (according to their age and maturity), persons with special needs and persons who are potentially marginalized, must be fully included. Local communities that receive IDPs and other affected populations also need to be consulted."*² The same logic can equally be applied to refugee assistance.

By working with refugees who design and manage their own relief and programming, our partner The Border Consortium has gained international recognition for overseeing one of the most efficient and cost-effective refugee programs in the world. The overriding working philosophy is to maximize refugee participation in program design, implementation, monitoring and feedback. Refugees elect their own camp

committees that manage the camps (including justice and education systems), run their own self-reliance livelihoods programs, monitor vulnerability, and oversee distribution of supplies to refugee families. A 2012 joint AusAid/CIDA evaluation of TBC noted that *"enabling refugees to exert as much control as possible over their own lives and livelihoods through self-management is an important affirmation of the essential humanity of refugee populations."*³ Furthermore, *"The building of leadership skills in political decision-making and in public administration through the hands-on experience of camp management could serve refugee populations and receiving communities well... camp management structures have functioned as 'public administration schools.' And, for the broader refugee population on the Thai border, camp management structures have animated an experience of citizenship."*⁴ Now that repatriation appears to be on the horizon, the democratic structures and skills refugees have established will help a great deal with their resettlement and reintegration.

Design responses that respond to root causes

To address humanitarian crises we need to look at root causes rather than simply treating symptoms. Development projects, particularly those involving land grabbing and destructive environmental practices, have frequently contributed to the natural disasters, dispossession and armed conflict that create and prolong humanitarian crises. In Burma we have seen cases where road construction brought in more government military, which preyed on the population forcing them into displacement; forced confiscation of land to set up mines or plantations drove thousands to refugee camps; and the establishment of nature reserves displaced villagers and fueled armed conflict. Most of today's humanitarian crises are demonstrably human-created, so Canada should first and foremost apply the "do no harm" principle⁵ across its trade and foreign policy, to

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ensure that it is not a net contributor to humanitarian crises. Development, trade, and diplomatic policy should be subject to binding rights-based guidelines and review, in line with the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act.

Apply a feminist lens to aid in humanitarian crises

When facing time and logistical constraints in delivering humanitarian aid, it is too easy to ignore the gendered impacts of crises, and the potential for aid itself to exacerbate gender inequality and gender-based violence. Targeting relief aid to women is not enough, and in some cases can even lead to male resentment and domestic violence if not accompanied by mitigation measures. Addressing the gendered impacts of crises and the potential gendered impacts of aid itself must therefore be designed into any intervention from the beginning. These should also be incorporated into ongoing monitoring mechanisms as the situation, and the response, evolve. Beyond gender, a feminist approach also considers power and marginalization based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or other factors.

Responses should therefore work with women's groups and other marginalized groups among the affected population from the beginning. If these groups have been undermined by the crisis, support should be provided to strengthen them, and they should take the lead in designing and managing the response along with other groups from the affected population.

Don't rob development to fund emergencies

Recent years have seen a significant global shift of funding away from development work to fund emergency humanitarian relief, and many Inter Pares partner organizations have been told by international (particularly governmental) donors that funds for development have been taken to cover the Syrian refugee crisis. This is a

dangerous path, because development funding is already well below UN-recommended guidelines. Further reductions will allow increased vulnerabilities to conflict, human-created and natural disasters, which can then lead to fresh crises requiring even greater humanitarian response.

In the past, Canadian government policy limited humanitarian assistance to a specific budget within Overseas Development Assistance, and it is necessary to re-establish a strong separation between development and humanitarian assistance budgets. This could come with higher humanitarian *and* development budgets: at just 0.28% of GNI in 2015,⁶ Canada's overseas aid budget is well below the UN-recommended target of 0.7%, and also below the OECD-DAC average of 0.3%. There has been a significant decline in real Canadian aid dollars since 2011, and in 2015 Canada ranked 14th of 28 OECD-DAC member countries in ODA/GNI ratio.

Displaced people in chronic situations are suffering due to donor fatigue and a tendency to divert funding to the latest emergency grabbing international media attention. Response should be driven by need, not by media attention or political posturing at home. Inter Pares works on long term rights-based partnerships, and as a result we lose some donations when there is a public outpouring to finance the latest emergency. It is demonstrably much easier for charities to raise funds from the public for responses to the latest tsunami or earthquake, to the extent that in some cases they raise more funds for these events than they have the capacity to manage. A large part of the government's role should be a less reactive response, providing essential longer term support to less popular international needs.

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Conclusion

Some of the key issues raised by GAC in the discussion document are as follows:

To ensure that Canadian humanitarian assistance is “needs-driven [and] effective”:

- Canada should support displaced people's organizations to respond to their own needs. They are the first responders, the most locally knowledgeable, and the most cost-effective and needs-aware form of intervention. Supporting them also creates community ownership and capacity, making a seamless transition to recovery and development.

To “better support the protection of vulnerable populations”:

- Canada should identify and support women's rights groups and other marginalized groups among the population and ensure that assistance will increase equality while foreseeing potential negative impacts of aid such as gender-based violence.

To “facilitate more comprehensive and coordinated responses”:

- Canada should reverse the components of its Global Markets Action Plan that place international assistance at the service of Canadian trade and investment interests, and instead place trade and diplomatic policies within a rights-based “do no harm” framework to avoid causing displacement and creating humanitarian crises.

To provide “predictable yet flexible support”:

- Humanitarian assistance should operate from a separate budget from development, and neither should undermine the other; otherwise, the result can be a downward spiral where lack of development breeds new crises.
- Support should be needs-driven, avoiding donor fatigue in chronic situations and not reacting to the latest media focus.

- Multi-year, core and flexible funding should be provided through timely and transparent processes to ensure the survival of local partners.

¹ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*, p. 2 (<http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7>).

² IASC 2010, *Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons*, p. 19-20 (<http://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/IASC%20Framework%20DS%20for%20IDPs.pdf>).

³ E.T. Jackson and Associates Ltd. *Adaptation, Resilience and Transition: Report of the Formative Evaluation of Camp Management in the Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand*, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War*. Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 1999.

⁶ Canada International Development Platform, <http://cidpnsi.ca/canadas-foreign-aid-2012-2/>.