

HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN SPAIN: ELEMENTS FOR REFLECTION

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Introduction

Taking advantage of the opportunity offered by FRIDE us through this project, my aim in this document is simply to touch on those elements which, in my opinion, are the most important and which may become problematic over the next few years conditioning the promising changes being made in Spanish development cooperation in this field. For those aspects not dealt with in this short text, I recommend the reader consult other documents published by the Humanitarian Action Observatory (*Observatorio de Acción Humanitaria*), available at www.iecah.org¹

Additionally, since the aim of FRIDE's project is to stimulate debate, this text is not purely academic, but rather, a more direct and provocative document.

Conceptual Confusion and its Implications

Humanitarianism is the victim of its own success, at least in terms of the widely and incorrectly used humanitarian terminology and its popularity in the media. It could be said that humanitarian concepts are one of the most man-handled and worst-used in Spain, albeit one of the most 'successful'. Factors contributing to this, without a doubt, include the unjust use of the word by many politicians, the little rigor with which the media uses the term or its simplistic perception among the general public. But let us not pass the buck: a lack of clear criteria among the specifically humanitarian actors has contributed to this confusion.

The lack of a standard definition and discrepancies in the use of humanitarian concepts have had all sorts of implications. How can it be explained that in the Preliminary Budget for the Spanish Annual Plan for International Development Cooperation for 2004 (PACI), more than 44 million Euros of the Ministry of Defence were recorded as humanitarian action (HA) when in the PACI Follow-up, just a few months later, the final figure was reduced to 937,741 Euros? The Development Assistance Committee's recent approval of a definition of humanitarian aid has had implications on the calculation of expenses and, of course, on the implementation of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) principles. Though this definition will contribute in the future to clarify the matter, we feel that the conceptual confusion is deeper and will require greater reflection by all the main actors involved.

The conceptual differences and their implications in the calculation of humanitarian action also have significant implications for non-governmental organisations

¹ Especially recommended is the report, '[La acción humanitaria en 2003-2004. Años convulsos, respuesta insuficiente](#)'. More information is available in the preliminary documents of the Spanish Master Plan for Development Cooperation 2005-2008 and the Humanitarian Action Sectoral Strategy draft document, which the author participated in.

(NGOs). Each NGO accounts for expenses in their own way: there are NGOs that believe that all their expenses are related to humanitarian action because all their actions are dedicated to this end (!); NGOs that only include emergency expenses; or those that originate from a specifically humanitarian financial backer such as ECHO.² It seems logical that the same clarity NGOs have demanded of governments in terms of their financial expenditures and data handling also be incorporated within the very NGOs. The simplistic perception among many development cooperation actors and especially among a large number of development NGOs have added to this confusion given their lack of understanding of the specificity of HA and its role within the international context. This role may complement development, but it has its own profile and objectives.

It is thus necessary to move forwards on the debate regarding HA's essential aspects and overcome many of the stereotypes or past simplifications. The fact that the Spanish Master Plan 2005-2008, the GHD, or the Spanish Development Cooperation Strategy for Humanitarian Action are following the same line and dealing with preventative aspects, risk management, emergency response, protection, post-disaster rehabilitation, etc., as components of HA should strengthen this conception of HA. The fact that all these documents emphasise the principles and values framework should make it easier to clarify concepts and terms. In this respect, a reform of the International Development Cooperation Act over the mid-term should not be overlooked, since the definition it includes is confusing and obsolete.

After several years of being somewhat marginalised, HA is beginning to take hold in Spain and we should contribute to consolidate its advancement, starting with essential aspects.

Meeting International Commitments

It is worth simply emphasising that Spain's incorporation into the GHD initiative is something that must be turned into specific results: preparing an Implementation Plan to fulfil the GHD's 23 principles. In addition, this is an opportunity to include other actors in the humanitarian debate and, especially in the case of Spain, among decentralised development cooperation agencies. This would help adapt HA to meet the needs of the different ongoing crises world-wide and, surely, it would help improve Spanish HA and Spain's role as a donor country.

In terms of multilateral actions, Spain should participate more actively in other humanitarian forums and propose reforms within this sector in the United Nations. Aligning the country with other donors would, in this case, be seen as very positive.

From a financial point of view, the country's contribution to the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) should be maintained whilst increasing its contribution to CAP (Consolidated Appeals Process).

Greater Focus on Strengthening Local Response Capacities and Preparing for Disasters

Spanish HA should dedicate more of its efforts and resources to strengthening these capacities in countries susceptible to disasters of all kinds and violent conflict.

² In 2005, IECAH carried out a research project on humanitarian action among Spanish NGOs. In the end, we were able to access the data of a good number of NGOs (the most representative) and we prepared a preliminary analysis. We decided not to publish this report and instead mail it confidentially to the participating NGOs given the enormous diversity and lack of clarity about what was considered 'humanitarian' or not in terms of their projects, thereby preventing a serious comparison of these.

This component should be included in the Country Strategy documents and other planning instruments by means of risk management programmes, mapping vulnerabilities and abilities, amongst others. Latin America as a whole should be considered this way.

Spanish HA should pay closer attention to acting in violent conflict situations and the role of development cooperation in general, and HA in particular in peacebuilding. Putting conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies in place should serve to establish synergies with HA and clarify its role in these contexts.

Advancing on Institutional and Organisational Reform of Spanish Humanitarian Action

This does not only include strengthening the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECI) in this matter and creating the Humanitarian Action Unit contemplated in the government's Master Plan. It is a question of improving coordination between actors, their diverse functions, and making headway on a model which incorporates all of them coherently. Several aspects seem fundamental:

- Define the AECI 'model' for action in this matter: when to act directly, when through others, other types of abilities, human resources, etc.;
- Establish action protocols for emergencies in which AECI, other central government institutions, local governments, and NGOs participate;
- Improve coordination among the different organisms within the central government. Recognition of the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation–AECI in this matter. Clarification of the role of the Ministry of Defence. Similarly, the same should be done with Civil Protection (Ministry of the Interior), the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and others to a lesser degree;
- Establish collaboration systems with NGOs not only in terms of financing, but also in terms of other issues (information, warning systems, training, etc.); and
- Strengthen the abilities of AECI's Technical Offices for Development Cooperation (OTC) and, in general, of actors working in this field.

At the same time, the group of humanitarian NGOs which have consolidated themselves in Spain should be strengthened and define their own profiles. For example, why is it that in the documents or webpage of the Development NGOs Coordinator there is no mention of the international Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Aid³ for NGOs available since 1994? Why is this document not promoted and recommended along with its eventual signing by NGOs that want to work in this area?

Any institutional reform carried out must allow interested actors to contribute their means and abilities on the condition that they respect the ethical, legal, and institutional frameworks, and are specifically within HA. This is not about being corporative, but rather, about maintaining what is distinctive about HA.

In this sense, and with respect to the use of the military and given that the 2005 Law on National Defence incorporates humanitarian aid and reconstruction as part of the Armed Forces' missions, we feel that Spain should be very rigorous with OCHA's Oslo Guidelines and others in this matter, defining and orienting the Armed

³ This Code's complete name is the 'Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief'. It is a fundamental document for NGO commitment in this matter.

Forces' participation.⁴ Civilian leadership in humanitarian action should be respected in any case as is presented in these Guidelines and included in the GHD initiative.

The question of policy coherence is complex and may lead to what has ironically been called 'the incoherencies of coherence'. HA objectives cannot be mere tools of other policies or serve to achieve other ends no matter how legitimate these might be.

Consolidating HA's Quantitative Increase by Improving its Budget

The preliminary data regarding the Spanish Master Plan for Development Cooperation 2005-2008 in terms of its fulfilment so far and future forecasts are promising and should allow for reaching the target of 7% in terms of bilateral Official Development Aid (ODA) for HA. This data is also promising in terms of the allotment of funds depending on the severity of the crises. Nevertheless, there are several other questions which must still be resolved, such as:

- Specific and foreseeable financing mechanisms for NGOs, framework agreements, accreditation mechanisms, follow-up and assessment.
- Joint financing mechanisms with other actors, decentralised development cooperation, funds, etc.
- Would it be possible to create a common fund for emergency relief among various actors or initiatives such as the UK's Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) to coordinate appeals and financing?

Investing in Quality

The world of Spanish humanitarian aid has been fairly isolated from the improvements initiated elsewhere more than a decade ago. Knowledge and use of the 1994 Code of Conduct, the Sphere Project, ALNAP, HAPI, or OCHA processes (clusters, humanitarian system reform) are scarce. Humanitarian aid projects have hardly been evaluated and there is little tradition of publishing yearly accounts (not only financial or descriptive, but also in terms of results), implementing learning mechanisms or defining good practices.

Carrying out evaluations and incorporating the criteria established within the sector should be promoted. The incorporation of other actors who have just recently begun to work on humanitarian aid, in this respect, is fundamental. Only this way will we be able to move beyond an ideological debate, for example, with the Armed Forces, to a discussion on criteria such as effectiveness, aptness, added-value, etc. The General Directorate for the Planning and Evaluation of Development Cooperation Policies (DGPOLDE) should foment this task.

This improvement in quality should work with the growing specialisation of Spanish HA (water and water treatment, health, protection, children's issues, etc.), encouraging each actor to improve their respective know-how and the added-value they offer.

⁴ *Guidelines on the use of Military and Civil Defence Assets (MCDA) in Disaster Relief*, Oslo Guidelines, 1994. Also, *Guidelines on The Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies*, March 2003, and known as *2003 MCDA Guidelines for Complex Emergencies*. In addition, *Civil Military Relationship in Complex Emergency*, IASC Reference Paper, June 2004. All of these are available at the [OCHA website](#)

Human resources are essential in HA and are specific with respect to development cooperation (professional profiles, mission duration, safety, etc.). Once the Statute for the Cooperator is passed by Parliament, this question should be addressed (training, recycling, specific skills, etc.).

Working More on Raising Awareness and Educating the Public

The humanitarian sector, without exception, has neither fomented anything resembling education on development nor has it used informational campaigns to obtain resources. Aware of the public's sometimes simplistic perception of humanitarian matters, initiatives should be fomented to deepen the messages explaining the causes of crises, disasters, the realities of working in the field, the implied difficulties, etc. This would have a mitigating influence on superficial and episodic solidarity in Spain. At any rate, it is an ethical responsibility for humanitarian actors which would also avoid the growing opportunism of inexperienced organisations in this area which appear asking for money after each emergency, an increasingly common phenomenon which will continue in the future.

Fomenting Reflection on and Research in This Area

Linked to many of the aforementioned questions, increasing the community of people contributing to HA improvement is necessary. This can be achieved by analysing, reflecting on, tracking international initiatives, assessing, and training in this area. Public institutions should foment this reflection, systematise experiences, offer criticism, and, in effect, promote those aspects which nourish and are nourished by giving aid.

Foroaod – Spanish Development Aid

FRIDE organised the project "Spanish Development Aid - Mid-term Review and a Proposal for a Participative Consultation" between June 2006 and April 2007. This project aims to develop a consultation process about the current Spanish government's development cooperation policy. We have created a forum for participation and debate, in order to assess the Spanish development cooperation reform agenda and to identify the main achievements and shortcomings in operationalising the initiatives based on the principle of "More Aid, Better Aid". A set of recommendation guidelines were developed, through participative methods, with the objective of putting into practice the aspirations of the Spanish development cooperation policy.

www.foroaod.org

