

Preparing governments for emergencies as a future role for humanitarians

Popular Science Summary

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There is one thing that is constant in this world and that is change. This also counts for the circumstances under which humanitarian organisations work to provide help to people in need. But are mandates of international organisations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which are often older than two centuries, still adequate in such a changing environment? If the answer is no, what are the challenges to go beyond the original activities and how should OCHA's future role in such an environment look like?

The number of disasters in the world is increasing, leading to the loss of lives, livelihoods and development gains, which pushes people back into poverty. To avoid that hazards turn into disasters, countries and organisations need to be prepared, so that people can receive help in an efficient manner during and after an emergency. Today's international humanitarian system is failing to go beyond its own response focus and sufficiently prepare the international system and especially governments. However, the humanitarian landscape changes and a narrow response focus does not align with it. This is why:

Through secondary research it was established that the humanitarian environment experiences several changes. Governments demand to be in lead of emergency operations instead of international organisations. Regional as well as private actors are becoming increasingly important because of their knowledge and resources. Moreover, the financial architecture behind the humanitarian work is changing in general, as for instance the above requires that money is channelled more directly to governments. Eventually, humanitarians also need to accept that the international community urges for better collaboration between the humanitarian and development actors as well as taking a broader approach to improve people's abilities to cope with disasters, also called resilience.

Considering these changes, the study examines OCHA's challenges regarding its advantages in performing emergency preparedness activities and thus in going beyond response. When conducting interviews with OCHA internal staff and external partners working with OCHA on preparedness, it was for instance found that OCHA cannot simply come into a country with an emergency, take over the lead of the response and leave when the emergency is over. Many governments will not allow that anymore and want humanitarian organisations to support them in their own response. Such support is only accepted from organisations that gained the trust of governments in a process of preparing together emergence. For instance, joint simulation exercises in which organisations support governments in developing their abilities to prepare and respond themselves is a future-oriented alternative in the changing environment.

OCHA can add value to preparedness work with its advantages of having considerable expertise in coordination, well-trained staff, and a bird's eye view on the overall international system. When the organisation would overcome its challenges regarding missing leadership prioritisation of preparedness as well as better collaboration with development actors, OCHA could significantly contribute to a future in which governments preparing for and responding to emergencies themselves.

Based on the research results, OCHA is advised to take a future role in lifting emergency preparedness capacities of governments. Instead of hesitantly adjusting bits and pieces of its work in its transition year 2017, OCHA could become a driver of change in humanitarian action. More partnerships with the private sector, academia, regional and national NGOs, and civil society organisations are also recommended. OCHA could use its year of change as an opportunity to overcome its reoccurring challenges, modernise its approach to a more than twenty-five-year-old mandate, and become a future-oriented role model in a changing humanitarian environment. The study explains why and provides some recommendations on how to initiate the change.