

Humanitarian Aid Overview

This provides a brief overview of humanitarian aid. To find out more, download the critical thinking activity and presentations, and look at the action guide to see what more you can do to help.

TAGS

Humanitarian aid

Introduction

Humanitarian aid is based on four universal principles: humanitarianism, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Its purpose is to save lives, reduce suffering and protect human dignity during an emergency. It is usually short term, provided by international agencies and foreign governments, and is distinct from development aid, which is ongoing and addresses the underlying causes of a crisis or emergency.

Humanitarian aid may be required following a natural disaster (e.g. a drought, a flood or an earthquake), human activities (e.g. armed conflicts) and/or a health epidemic. It may also be required because of a mix of these causes.



*A boy in northern Syria contemplating the ruins of his town. Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH) have recently worked there, providing support to local communities and internally displaced people.
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In 2015, 76 million people from 31 countries required humanitarian aid, of which 51 million people were displaced by conflict. In 2014 there were 400 natural disasters, which led to the loss of over 17,000 lives and cost over \$82 billion in damage.¹

What should we know about humanitarian aid?

People's natural reaction in an emergency is to help others. However, every emergency is different, just as the needs of people living through emergencies are different.

Is sending food parcels across the world helpful when local farmers are able to feed people in a disaster area? Are medicines with instructions in foreign languages really useful to people in Syria or Somalia?

¹ See the United Nations' basic information on humanitarian assistance for more information: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/priorities/humanitarian-assistance/>

Even though people want to help, we should make sure that our help is well organised and meets the needs of the people experiencing the emergency. This is one of the big lessons the global community learned as a result of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia. If we want aid to be effective, it must be thought through. By identifying the most important needs of the victims of a humanitarian emergency, we will avoid sending inappropriate donations, as this might lead to unnecessary warehousing, long hours of sorting and the need to dispose of superfluous things. Good help is help that's coordinated by specialist groups that know and can involve the local community, giving them hope for recovery.

We should also remember that not everyone is affected in the same way by a humanitarian emergency. There will be some people who are not affected at all, and others who even benefit from an emergency (e.g. organised crime groups in a conflict).

If you want to help, being passionate about what is happening in the world and conveying this to others is a good start. You can also show your solidarity by signing relevant petitions, supporting events to raise funds for those affected, and by promoting and getting involved in the efforts of humanitarian organisations providing support on the ground. The more you know, the more you can do!

How can I help?

You will be used to seeing humanitarian organisations provide help immediately after an emergency occurs. Some organisations also try and support countries that are continually at risk of emergencies occurring (e.g. recurring natural disasters such as floods) by helping them apply long-term prevention strategies to increase their resilience to a disaster.

If a humanitarian emergency forces people to migrate, the aid needed may have to cover a large geographical area. This aid will be provided in the form of short-term support. Once peace is restored, humanitarian aid will be replaced by development aid, which aims to help develop the social and economic stability of a particular country or society.

All aid provided by humanitarian organisations is carefully planned. Think of images you have seen in the media of long lines of trucks full of food, clothing and medical supplies making their way to countries in need. All of these actions follow a planned approach, which includes assessing the situation, ensuring the most pressing needs are met and planning for the rebuilding of vital facilities such as hospitals and schools.

It is especially important to ensure coordination between international and local organisations and to consult the people who are affected by an emergency. When a humanitarian emergency suddenly occurs, there is often total chaos. Organisations and agencies work together and reach more people by dividing their responsibilities into different 'clusters' (e.g. water, shelter, medical help, etc), with different organisations responsible being for different ones. This makes humanitarian aid more effective.²

² Sources of information from [Polish Aid](#); [Polish Humanitarian Action \(PAH\)](#); and PAH's 2015 report '[Humanitarian Aid and Humanitarian Crises in a nutshell](#)'.