

Conference Report

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2012

sef:

International Disaster Relief The challenges posed by fragile states and climate change

Sara Zschiesche

International disaster relief has not had an easy time in recent years. Disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 have painted a picture of often uncoordinated and therefore frequently ineffective and, above all, largely unsustainable aid. It has long been recognised, however, that when disaster strikes, a rapid and efficient response is the basis for a country's sustainable recovery. In a much-needed effort to ease the increasingly pressing problems posed by natural disasters, the United Nations designated the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. And yet globally, the problems appear to have worsened since then. At the Berlin Summer Dia-

logue on 13-14 September 2012, the Development and Peace Foundation (SEF) therefore explored two specific challenges which currently present particular difficulties for international disaster relief: ongoing climate change and the increase in fragile statehood.

The challenge: climate change

Weather-related natural disasters are putting international disaster relief under growing pressure. Thomas Loster, Chairman of the Munich Re Foundation, set the scene for the audience: an increase in heavy rainfall and droughts, tropical cyclones and hurricanes in previously unaffected regions, stronger and more frequent convective events such as thunderstorms and hail, and weather-related disasters on a generally larger scale. But how much influence is climate change having on these events? In response to this question, he used the example of a loaded dice: numbers 1 to 5 stand for different climate events and, when the dice is thrown, the numbers appear with varying degrees of frequency. But number 6 – representing extreme weather events and disasters – is now appearing more and more frequently as a result of human activities and climate change. Dealing with this uncertainty and its still unpredictable effects is already a major challenge for international disaster relief and is likely to increase in future. The aim, said Thomas Loster, must therefore be to build people's capacities to cope with the impacts of climate change at the local level so that they can build their own resilience.



In his opening speech, Thomas Loster, Chairman of the Munich Re Foundation, talked about weather-related natural disasters: future scenarios.

Local resilience consists of two factors: firstly, the ability to respond to disasters and adopt damage limitation measures, thus safeguarding survival, and secondly, the capacity to adapt to environmental changes at an early stage. “Disaster risk reduction” also means reducing states’ vulnerability. By tackling



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2012: Lothar Brock, Ulrike von Pilar, Christian Wilhelm Meyer, Hans-Joachim Heintze, Atta Muhammad Durrani (l.t.r.).

the fundamental causes of vulnerability, such as poverty, communities are empowered to respond more effectively to the possible consequences of climate change and, above all, to the associated social consequences (the “consequences of the consequences”), according to Professor Mo Hamza, Director of the Global Climate Adaptation Partnership (GCAP) in his keynote speech.

All the participants agreed that when setting up programmes, organisations must step up their efforts to identify what the affected community actually needs in order to be able to implement disaster preparedness measures effectively. International relief should take local capacities into account and aim to strengthen these capacities on a sustainable basis. However, the international community should mainly play a supportive role. But this kind of approach has not always worked in the past. It is “a scandal,” said the co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières Germany, Ulrike von Pilar, that to this day, local structures have not been established in Haiti to prevent a renewed outbreak of cholera, or at least to mount an adequate and effective response.

This point led on to the second major topic addressed at the Conference: the challenge posed by fragile states. Of course the affected state itself is the “best first responder” in the event of a disaster, said Janani Vivekananda from International Alert, “but what if the government is part of the problem?”

The challenge: fragile states

There is no direct connection or causal relationship between climate change and fragility. However, if a state lacks the capacities to mount an adequate response to natural disasters, the impacts of climate change can lead to further fragility which can affect individual regions or the country as a whole. Hamza and Vivekananda therefore called for the “consequences of the consequences” of climate change to be considered in disaster relief and reconstruction. For example, economic problems and reduced government revenue can worsen ethnic or religious tensions, force people to migrate, thereby causing resource problems in host regions, or drive up spending on adaptation at the expense of social services. In fragile states, adaptation must therefore pursue a highly integrative and conflict-sensitive approach. A willingness to listen to local people, develop an understanding of their needs and take account of their specific life circumstances is essential. However, to ensure that humanitarian organisations can negotiate with all parties in a conflict setting, the fundamental principle of independence must always be upheld.

But what if instability puts the lives of aid workers at risk and jeopardises their work? Is military assistance a possible solution, and if so, how does this impact on the principle of independence? These were the questions which aroused particular controversy and strong passions in the discussions at the Berlin Summer Dialogue.

The only point of consensus was that the concept of humanitarian relief is interpreted very differently according to whether it is viewed from a military or a civilian standpoint. Three positions emerged during the discussion. Christian Wilhelm Meyer, a Colonel in the General Staff, played “Devil’s advocate” with his contention that for people affected by a natural disaster, it is a matter of complete indifference which particular uniform the relief workers happen to be wearing, as long as help arrives quickly. None of the participants doubted that this would be the likely response from the people affected – but they disagreed about its implications. Some critical voices argued that while the presence of the military might save lives, it could make the situation for further aid provision more hazardous and fraught with tension. What’s more, the growing politicisation and militarisation of international relief have robbed it of its reputation for impartiality, posing a growing threat to the safety of aid workers – especially in countries where the security situation is already poor. In order to do justice to the claim that aid is delivered “according to need”, there must be strict compliance with the principles of neutrality and impartiality by governments and NGOs alike. By emphasising this principle, the majority of critics therefore rejected Meyer’s contention that “artificial distinctions and

the insistence on [separate] responsibilities” – for example, between the UN, governmental and non-governmental relief agencies, and the military – are now obsolete and should give way to a pragmatic, case-by-case approach, which according to Meyer would in any case require practical exercises aimed at building cooperation in advance of deployment. Between these two positions, a number of participants felt that this form of cooperation is particularly useful and necessary if the military can provide heavy equipment and transport. But even then, according to the majority view, military contributions must be subject to civilian control.



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2012: Mike Wiggins, Maarten van Aalst, Dennis Tänzler, Janani Vivekananda, Wolf Dombrowsky (l.t.r.).

Results and recommendations

“The answer to climate change is not a simple either or one. What is needed is a mix of approaches, a mix of reaction and adaptation,” urged Maarten van Aalst, Director of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre. From his perspective, the greatest challenge for disaster relief is adopting a longer-term view and moving towards the institutionalisation of humanitarian relief. However, this could cause problems by further blurring the distinction between humanitarian aid and development assistance. Participants expressed a range of views on this issue, prompting a lively debate which highlighted the different definitions of emergency relief and humanitarian aid, notably as regards timeframes and approaches. For example, many disaster relief organisations are increasingly claiming that they not only provide initial assistance but also lay the foundations for long-term recovery. However, this is essentially a political process and incompatible with the principles of impartiality and neutrality. The agencies concerned should therefore not only acknowledge that they perform different tasks but should also make it a priority to engage in dialogue, said Andrew Wyllie from UNOCHA. What is needed is better coordination, along

with the exchange of best practice. One solution, in order to move away from a discussion of terminology and definitions, is to adopt the approach which was the subject of intense discussion during the Summer Dialogue, namely identifying what the local community actually needs.

Overall, the Berlin Summer Dialogue made it very clear that disaster relief must increasingly respond to the twin challenges of climate change and fragile states with flexible solutions, not with large-scale, rigid and pre-defined frameworks. As part of this process, however, the search for a common language for all stakeholders must continue far beyond the parameters of the Berlin event itself.

Berliner Sommerdialog 2012 Cooperating partners:



adelphi, Berlin



Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Berlin



German Committee for Disaster Reduction (DKKV), Bonn



State Office for Development Cooperation at the Senate Department for Economics, Technology and Research (SENWTF), Berlin

Further information on the Berlin Summer Dialogue 2012

In addition to the conference report please find more results of the Berlin Summer Dialogue 2012 on our website.

- [Detailed conference programme](#)
- [Speeches](#)
- [Video interview with Janani Vivekananda, International Alert](#)
- [Video interview with Professor Mo Hamza, Global Climate Adaptation Partnership](#)

Also available on our website is the 5th issue of this years [Foreign Voices series](#). In the paper Atta Muhammad Murtaza Durrani informs about “Linking emergency aid with long-term development in Pakistan: From response to preparedness”, published on the occasion of the Berlin Summer Dialogue.

Further more other publications such as the new edition of the [Global Governance Spotlights](#) can be found on our website. There, you will also be able to [subscribe](#) to our newsletter and our online publications.

Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. As a cross-party and non-profit-making organisation, the SEF provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on urgent peace and development issues.

The conference reports highlight the most essential results of the latest events organised by the Development and Peace Foundation.

Published by
Development and Peace Foundation/
Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (SEF)
Dechenstr. 2 : D-53115 Bonn : Germany
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 : Fax -99
sef@sef-bonn.org : www.sef-bonn.org

Editor
Sabine Gerhard

Translation
Hillary Crowe

Design Basic Concept
Pitch Black Graphic Design
Berlin/Rotterdam

Layout
Gerhard Süß-Jung

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.