

Roundtable on the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative: Ten Years On

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INTRODUCTION

This event was held as part of ‘Strengthening Principled Humanitarian Response Capacities’, a Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) project funded by the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department of the European Commission (ECHO) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with the support of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG). The project examines how humanitarian principles are operationalised in the field and how performance can be improved, including with respect to strengthening principled humanitarian funding.

The roundtable framed this work within the larger context of good humanitarian donorship, and asked the question: ten years after the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative began, is it still relevant? If not, what can be done to put principled humanitarian funding back on the top of donor agendas?

Origins and evolution of the GHD

Participants began by looking at the origins of the GHD in 2003, and examining its objectives and role within the international system. Experiences in Rwanda and elsewhere, and the subsequent lesson that ‘good intentions are not enough’, led to an increased focus on the impact of aid in conflicts. Combined with increased levels of humanitarian funding, this underscored the need for a new approach to humanitarian donorship, and gave rise to the adoption of the GHD in 2003. It was emphasised that, ten years ago, donors had very little to guide them and provide consistency with regard to humanitarian funding; as such, the GHD needs to be reflected on in this light.

The GHD is seen as embodying four core principles and 19 operational decisions flowing from these principles. The principles themselves were seen as critical to further defining and regulating humanitarian aid and the ways in which donors allocate and manage it. They have brought greater coherence among aligned donor governments and have discouraged ad hoc arrangements. Further, they defined humanitarian action as distinct and provided tools and frameworks that did not exist before.

The GHD has empowered those who seek to defend humanitarian principles and helped justify a principled approach, even when seemingly in contradiction with political objectives. They have provided useful guidelines which humanitarian donors can use in engaging with political and security counterparts, especially in the face of changing political trends and policies and pressures on funding. While some felt that the principles as articulated in the GHD were too vague and imprecise, others saw them as a useful tool, for example in training with the military on humanitarian operations. Unlike a decade ago, they are now reflected in many donor policies, with one donor highlighting that the GHD was specifically used to draft its humanitarian legal frameworks and policies. A forthcoming study highlights that seven of eight donors studied have policy frameworks guided by commitments to humanitarian principles.

Participants also saw the regular GHD meetings convened in Geneva as a useful forum for discussion among members. These meetings focus on information sharing, with coordination and coherence among donor policies and approaches seen as a central objective. However, the meetings themselves, and the platform they provide for communication amongst donor representatives, are seen as equally important. Donor participants felt that there was no other forum in which to put pressure on one another, share research and experiences and engage with aid agencies on these issues. It was also emphasised that the GHD could be an important donor counterpart to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

Impact and relevance of the GHD ten years on

The GHD group of donors has significantly expanded in recent years, from 17 members at its inception to 41 today. While there was a sense that the GHD has ‘achieved a lot’, participants struggled to quantify the impact of these achievements. Although the principles are now reflected in policy and rhetoric, some participants questioned whether they actually influenced decision-making. There was criticism of the GHD meetings as a top-down policy forum with few links to the field. Others felt that without significant commitment to implementing the principles in practice across government (and not just in humanitarian departments), the GHD was little more than a ‘box-ticking’ exercise.

Participants also questioned its relevance at field level in terms of practical application and guiding decision-making. While there are now three GHD groups at country level, donors highlighted the need for more local engagement. The GHD group in the Democratic Republic of Congo was seen as a positive model: where donor common funds appeared to be distributed in an imbalanced way, the group was able to successfully advocate to correct this.

The transparency and accountability of the GHD was questioned, with measurement of adherence to the GHD seen as particularly weak. With no mechanism for monitoring compliance and no arrangements for clear and collective decision-making, there are limits to harmonisation. Within countries, funding allocations are generally seen as based on need, but the unreliability of needs assessments and lack of dedicated humanitarian staff to inform funding choices are obstacles to needs-based funding. Different funding mechanisms, a reduction in donor humanitarian staff in field locations and the increased use of pooled funding can reduce operational flexibility and donor oversight.

Aggregate measurement of GHD adherence tends to obscure both those countries performing poorly and those performing well. The Humanitarian Response Index, which looks at individual donor performance, was highlighted as a more sophisticated way of evaluating performance. It attempts to look at a variety of levels, evaluating the quality of funding and distribution (a vital issue unrecognised within the GHD principles) as well as the relevance of the principles in the wake of crises. Additionally, some donors are introducing more systematic quality measures that emphasise adherence to principles. Many fora also exist within donor countries for discussing and reconciling the principles with practice.

There was extensive debate over the relevance of core principles of the GHD. Some participants felt that they were too exclusive and reflective of a Western approach, rendering them less relevant for emerging donors. 'Tactical humanism', whereby all moral claims are not necessarily equal and values are identified through debate and engagement, may be more relevant. Others felt that the principles were open enough to include all and were at the very core of what constitutes humanitarianism. Another topic of discussion focused on how the principles have become almost an end in themselves, with some losing sight of the fact that they are based on a legal framework and are a tool meant to achieve better outcomes for affected populations.

Others were critical of excessive donor focus on performance and measurement. They felt that this placed an undue burden on operational agencies and overshadowed concern for outcomes for affected populations. While participants acknowledged the need for reliable data they were concerned that the heavy donor focus on reporting, evaluation and monitoring may lead donors and agencies to forget the actual objective of good humanitarian action.

GHD in a changing world

A theme explored throughout the day was the role of emerging donors. Many have also been, or continue to be, aid recipients, and their views on aid are often shaped by this. Many find it difficult to reconcile the principles espoused publicly by traditional donors with the reality of how they have experienced aid. This was paralleled by discussion of state sovereignty and an acknowledgment that host governments are much more assertive about what humanitarian assistance they will accept. One participant felt that the GHD does not currently have the right tools to engage emerging donors or an adequate understanding of how to effectively draw them into dialogue.

It was emphasised that the GHD has dramatically expanded its membership over the past decade and that there are numerous encouraging examples of engagement among new or emerging actors. ECOWAS adopted the four basic humanitarian principles, but also added 'sensitivity' as a core principle. Possible ways to improve engagement focused on building greater links with local organisations and supporting civil society to hold donors accountable and demand principled humanitarian engagement.

Some felt that the GHD was not well placed to adapt to new contexts. The GHD group lacks the day-to-day practical awareness required to fully understand pressures on aid structures. This is exacerbated by the fact that the GHD is often not as strongly represented on the ground. While a surge of political commitment helped the GHD to start forcefully, its influence has waned over the past ten years. Amid growing and potentially contradictory donor commitments and policies, from Paris, Accra and Busan to stabilisation and resilience, participants highlighted the need to put good humanitarian donorship back on the agenda.

Additionally, political and foreign policy concerns increasingly affect adherence to principles. Combined with cuts in the humanitarian departments of donor countries, it has become difficult to ensure that the principles remain a priority. In terms of greater influence, one participant suggested seeking to influence OECD/DAC discussions, adding a humanitarian perspective on stabilisation policy and transition financing. Participants also pointed to the need to reflect more

on how simultaneous donor commitments can be met or reconciled in a way that does not leave the GHD behind.

What it means to be a good humanitarian donor in these circumstances is also changing, and the GHD needs to reflect this. Many agreed that the core definition remains important: to support principled humanitarian action and defend organisations that work within these principles. It is not just about humanitarian funding but also about wider diplomatic support for principled humanitarian action.

Participants concluded by noting the need for a 'refresh' – both in technical and operational terms – of the GHD. Some participants felt that the lines between humanitarian and development aid were increasingly blurred, and a 'refreshed' GHD could help reassert the core principles of humanitarian donorship. Changes in structure, such as the establishment of a secretariat or regional hubs, were also mentioned. While the core principles remain relevant and the GHD has clearly positively impacted humanitarian donorship, more needs to be done to ensure it remains a relevant and effective tool in improving assistance to affected populations.