

Royal Society submission to the House of Commons International Development Committee inquiry into the global humanitarian system

Summary

1. DFID places considerable emphasis on the use of evidence to inform development policy. It has also been effective at bridging the divide between humanitarian response and longer term development (focusing on protracted and cyclical crises as well as one-off shocks), and at bringing climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction into its development work. In addition, the UK has strong expertise in providing and using science advice in emergencies. In this context, DFID is well placed to prioritise a number of issues at the World Humanitarian Summit:
 - a. Promote an evidence-based humanitarian system that draws on the best available science.
 - b. Enable internationally coordinated pre-emptive resilience-building by bringing together the humanitarian, development, disaster risk reduction and climate change sectors, and by better co-ordinating funds.
 - c. Adopt a resilience approach to humanitarian work that will ease the strain on the humanitarian sector. This should include long-term planning and proactive investment in measures to reduce the future risk of disaster and limit the costs of disaster response and recovery.

Introduction to the Royal Society

2. The Royal Society is the national academy of science in the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists. The Royal Society draws on the expertise of the Fellowship to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to decision-makers in the UK and overseas.
3. The Society has a long history of policy work concerning environmental change and sustainable development. This includes policy reports on building resilience to extreme weather¹, population and consumption², and climate change³. The Society has also contributed to a joint statement with 14 other national science academies, calling for governments to engage the national and international scientific community in efforts to build resilience to disasters⁴.
4. The Society's 2014 report on 'Resilience to extreme weather' considers the latest scientific evidence concerning the risk of extreme weather – river and coastal flooding, droughts, and

¹ Royal Society (2014) *Resilience to extreme weather* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/resilience-extremeweather/>

² Royal Society (2012) *People and the planet* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/people-planet/>

³ Royal Society and US National Academy of Sciences (2014) *Climate Change Evidence and Causes* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/climate-evidence-causes/>

⁴ G-Science Academies (2012) *Building Resilience to Disasters of Natural and Technological Origin* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/publications/2012/resilience-disasters/>

heatwaves – for people throughout the world. The report emphasises that increasing numbers of vulnerable people are likely to be exposed to these hazards in the coming decades, and assesses actions that can help prevent disasters and reduce suffering. It shows how, with forethought and planning, societies can do more than simply cope with extreme weather, and can instead adapt, progress and develop even in the face of the increasing risks. However, this will not be achieved without a step change in the planning and implementation of resilience-building measures.

5. This submission highlights issues that DFID should be prioritising at the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in order to help shape a global humanitarian system that is fit for the future. It also suggests how humanitarian assistance can evolve into longer term development support – by transforming funding mechanisms and adopting a resilience approach.

Priorities for the World Humanitarian Summit

Evidence-based humanitarian action

6. Policymakers and practitioners should draw on the best available evidence and engage with those at the forefront of excellent science to inform policy decisions. Natural and social scientists have a vital role in developing a full picture of environmental and sustainable development challenges, uncertainties and the efficacy of potential solutions. Other factors, such as moral values, also play a legitimate role in shaping policy.
7. The humanitarian sector should draw on the best available evidence, including science. DFID is well placed to prioritise this issue at the World Humanitarian Summit, given DFID's emphasis on research for development and the UK's wider expertise in providing and using science advice in emergencies. The World Humanitarian Summit provides an opportunity to identify ways in which evidence-based decisions can be embedded across humanitarian work in the future, and links between the humanitarian sector and international science community can be strengthened.

Bringing together humanitarian response and longer term development

8. Although emergency preparedness is a core feature of most efforts to manage disaster risks, investing in pre-emptive resilience-building still represents a major transformation. It requires the traditionally separate domains of humanitarian response and longer-term development to be brought together. This in turn requires transforming existing funding mechanisms, and better co-ordinating funds across the proactive-reactive continuum nationally and internationally.
9. A resilience approach should be adopted throughout the humanitarian sector. Long-term planning and early investment in resilience-building measures will be essential for ensuring that future demographic and climatic changes do not increase the risks people face from extreme weather, and put increasing strains on the humanitarian sector. Effective resilience planning should involve early, pre-emptive investment in measures to reduce future risks, in addition to tested emergency plans. This has been shown to be cost-effective in many instances. In order to limit the need for costly disaster response and recovery, more national and international funds will need to be directed to pre-emptive measures that build resilience. The barriers to early investment need to be identified, prioritised and tackled through public and private action.
10. DFID has considerable experience of working on protracted and cyclical development challenges as well as one-off humanitarian shocks. It should therefore encourage the World Humanitarian Summit to identify ways of bringing together the humanitarian response and development sectors, including through transforming funding mechanisms.

Long-term planning and national resilience strategies

11. Actions taken in the immediate aftermath of a disaster tend to be reactive, and the need for rapid recovery and rebuilding can overwhelm more well-considered policies. The reliance on reactive rather than proactive approaches contributes to an international humanitarian system that is stretched beyond its means.
12. National governments have a responsibility to develop and resource resilience strategies. These should include, but also go beyond, emergency plans which can be put into effect when hazards are forecast. They should consider all the factors – the whole system – likely to be affected, including areas not directly impacted and effects over decades. They should integrate multiple sectors (water, energy, climate change, land use, biodiversity, transport, housing, economic development etc.) and should attempt to arbitrate among competing local interests. Bringing competing agendas under a coherent strategy is preferable to a piecemeal project-by-project approach to building resilience.
13. Strategic resilience planning should draw on expertise from a range of sources, including the scientific community, the private sector, Non-Governmental Organisations and local communities, and a range of relevant disciplines.
14. Infrastructure development is key for long-term planning. Disasters affect many aspects of infrastructure – including transport, energy, water, buildings and communications – and cause major disruption to societies and economies. Building resilient infrastructure requires taking a long-term view and planning ahead for future hazards.
15. Systems thinking is also central to the planning, design and maintenance of resilient infrastructure. It involves taking a holistic approach and recognising that vulnerabilities or failure in one sector can affect the whole system, potentially leading to a cascade of failures.
16. The most critical components of an infrastructure system should be prioritised when building resilience. The goal should not be to completely avoid failure (which would be very difficult and prohibitively expensive) but rather to minimise the consequences of any failure for people and the economy.
17. The World Humanitarian Summit provides an opportunity to place long-term resilience planning at the heart of activity to address future humanitarian challenges. DFID should explore how all national governments, including the UK, can be encouraged to develop and resource resilience strategies that look at the whole system, draw on a range of expertise and prioritise critical infrastructure.

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