

Partnerships, actors and humanitarian aid

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Over the last few decades, there has been a significant shift in the language of development cooperation, which now includes terminology such as “participation,” “empowerment,” “poverty reduction” and, most recently, “partnership.” Partnership has become a key concept in development cooperation since the mid-’80s, as development theories have evolved widely around ideas of aid, cooperation, partnership and solidarity.

The term partnership became particularly prominent in relation to development in the report, “Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Cooperation,” developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1996.

The rise of the “partnership approach” has been juxtaposed with a focus on the role of “development actors” in the design, mobilization and contribution to the development aid agenda.

Within that framework, on April 24, 2019, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Embassy in Lebanon organized a seminar titled “The Role of Donor Contributions and Actors in Humanitarian Work,” under the patronage of Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

Many agreements were signed during the conference between the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief) and the Lebanese government, international agencies as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide assistance programs in several areas such as food supply, medical accessibility, the emergency sector and other relief services supporting both Lebanese citizens and Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. In the opening of the seminar, Abdullah al-Rabeeah, supervisor-general of KSrelief, stated that “KSrelief is highlighting the fact that [regarding refugees] it is the responsibility of the humanitarian community, both donors and implementers, to reduce the burden on host countries taking in such groups.”

Today, actor-centered approaches and partnerships enjoy a “popular appeal.” They are highly presented in a wide range of development cooperation policy documents and funding strategies.

At the same time, they induce much sensitivity with their embedded implications of sharing and trust. While aid and charity may indicate a more uneven aid relationship, the term “partnership” suggests parity, respect, exchange and ownership.

Despite that fact that KSrelief is newly established, it has already played a significant role in providing relief to many countries. Emphasizing that building partnerships in humanitarian aid increases positive impact, Rabeeah added that “the time has come for implementing agencies to reconsider their methods” in order to enhance outcomes and maximize available resources.

For nearly five years, KSrelief has been an impactful agency, relentlessly delivering lifesaving and transformative humanitarian aid and development projects to more than 37 countries over four continents.

Working through international and local partnerships in a principled way, KSrelief provides the humanitarian sector with good practices in development cooperation to be shared across the humanitarian sector by managing and coordinating relief activities on the international level to ensure the provision of external aid in line with national interests.

Today, the center is determined to accelerate the pace of its humanitarian activities to ensure that its efforts reach as many recipients as possible worldwide.

Localization of funds, building strong partnerships and establishing long-term relationships built on trust are the strategic objectives of KSrelief.

Partnership, capacity strengthening and localization of aid are becoming progressively prominent issues within the humanitarian sector.

Appeals for building partnerships are particularly strong in regions prone to crisis where governments are struggling to respond to humanitarian needs.

In that sense, KSrelief’s model of humanitarian partnerships is a model that deserves analysis and discussions with the purpose of extracting lessons on the role of different development aid actors in humanitarian relief.

The fact of the matter is that the grand bargain in humanitarian responses confirms a commitment from the largest humanitarian donors and aid organizations toward supporting development cooperation that involves national partners in the processes of decision-making.

This shift toward greater development cooperation has led many international stakeholders to reflect on their approaches and responses to building partnerships and capacity strengthening with the aim of adapting to the rapid changes of the humanitarian sector.

It is true that every development experience is unique and that there are multiple approaches to humanitarian assistance.

However, there is no doubt that partnerships empower humanitarian and disaster response plans, helping deal with emergencies in a more effective manner. The need for more interaction between humanitarian agencies is a significant recommendation.

Today, “partnership,” understood mostly in a positive manner, is associated with other terms including “cooperation,” “collaboration,” “participation,” “shared decision-making” and “long-term relationship built on trust.” However, the term itself still lacks clarity, especially regarding the principles that inspire a partnership approach.

A joint commitment to developing common long-term objectives, bonded by establishing common visions and shared responsibility, can help distinguish “partnership” from other relationships. In several contexts, partnership, when embraced by a range of bilateral and multilateral agencies, can be used as a strategic and political term to redefine development cooperation.

It is with great importance that the concept of partnership has emerged as the “new big idea” in development discussions.

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