

Unlocking aid's potential

A focus on poverty and a dynamic civil society are critical to aid effectiveness and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals

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What is aid for? It's a timely moment to ask ourselves the question, as the coronavirus pandemic forces the world to re-examine many assumptions and offers the opportunity to radically reimagine our futures. In addition, as we enter the critical decade of action to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it's clear that the way in which aid is designed and delivered has a crucial role to play in their outcomes.

Strip away the politics and debates over foreign policy objectives, and at its heart aid is about helping the world's poorest, most vulnerable, people. What that looks like in practice has come a long way over the years, but in the SDG era I would argue that aid's primary focus should be on reducing poverty. It is welcome, and important, that the range of goals represent interlinked aims to create a safer, healthier planet and more equal societies.

However, there are many non-aid factors such as government, corporate and consumer behaviour, as well as other forms of finance such as tax revenues and state spending choices, that will determine our collective progress on the wider agenda. Aid can help on all the SDGs but it has a particularly important role to play on poverty-related goals, and I believe that civil society holds an important key in unlocking that potential.

A large part of the success, or failure, of the SDGs will depend on the ability of civil society to embed change that is durable and sustainable. Aid, spent wisely and well, could be the really important resource that tips the balance, by making countries and communities more resilient and self-

sufficient. Aid alone will not conserve the oceans, for instance, but aid used by civil-society groups to promote more sustainable fisheries that local communities fully support could make a huge difference.

To take another example: tackling mosquito-borne diseases will take more than supplying bed nets. We also need empowered citizens and civil-society formations that can hold governments to account when interventions are not available, and to push for free, universal health care as a basic human right.

Yet the investment required to build, nurture and sustain strong civil societies is currently not prioritised by funders. Only 1 per cent of all official aid and around 0.2

the communities we exist to serve. As an aid sector, that requires us to be prepared to let go of control and resources. At Oxfam we're in a process of transformation that we hope will mean we live up to this aspiration. We're moving from a traditional confederation model, where headquarters in wealthy nations fund life-saving work in developing countries, to a more balanced, global network of organisations working together as equals with allies.

We have learned from past failings that how we work is as important as what we do, and so our core commitments are to be safe, feminist and led by partners. That includes investing heavily in safeguarding, determined efforts to ensure our culture

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per cent of humanitarian assistance goes directly to local organisations in the Global South. That is woefully inadequate. Not least because the pandemic and ensuing lockdown restrictions have underlined once more the vital role of local, bottom-up action. Initiatives and commitments to prioritise funding of locally led humanitarian responses such as the Grand Bargain and the Charter 4 Change are welcome, but the pace of change remains painfully slow.

If we're to have a chance of achieving our shared goal of lasting, transformative change that ensures no one is left behind, then all of us – international NGOs, governments, UN agencies and donors – need to do much more to truly shift power and resources to

matches our values, strengthening feedback mechanisms to improve accountability, and redoubling efforts to fight gender inequality. It means prioritising local humanitarian leadership and working through local partners wherever possible. In some countries, this will be our only way of operating.

At a time when estimates suggest that half a billion more people could be pushed into poverty by the pandemic's economic fallout, we have been working out how to use our limited resources to be most effective. We plan to focus our efforts in some of the most complex and difficult environments – places like Yemen and Democratic Republic of the Congo – where communities face



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multiple risks and where safe, high-quality programming costs more but can make the biggest difference to people's lives.

Around the world, we will work to tackle the key underlying causes of poverty such as conflict, climate change and inequality, and to push for structural changes beyond aid such as debt relief, progressive taxation and investment in public services that are the best ways to deliver change at scale.

As we progress on this journey, with all its challenges, it's crucial that we remember to lift our sight to the horizon. In today's hugely unequal world, where the Global North controls so much wealth and resources, I believe there is still a need for some kind of official aid system. Yet,

ultimately, I hope that when that system is no longer needed, its legacy is twofold: a more rapid decline in extreme poverty than would otherwise have happened, and myriad powerful, dynamic civil society networks and social movements that are able to bring together people everywhere. These will be people united by their outrage against what increasingly look like universal struggles against inequality and injustice, whose compassion for others extends beyond national borders.

I remain inspired by the words of Lilla Watson, a long-time campaigner for Aboriginal rights in Australia, who said: "If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. If you have come because your

▲ Building a bridge in Rutshuru, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, part of an aid project designed to reintegrate young people previously involved in armed conflict. As one of the most difficult and complex environments, the DRC remains a focal point for aid efforts

liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

The coronavirus has triggered a paradigm shift in how we think about our world, by laying bare how our fates are bound together. Solidarity is not just a noble aim. Until all of us are safe, none of us are safe. Or to flip that concept on its head: when the world is a more equal place, everyone wins. This is what aid is for. ●