Equity in Donor Aid Allocation to Iraq

Two short articles in a recent issue of the Lancet question the overall level of aid given and pledged to post-conflict Iraq. One author (Singh) highlights the uncritical appraisal of the 33 billion dollars allocated and pledged at the US-driven, and UN endorsed, Madrid donor conference in October 2003. He argues that many countries in Africa, South America and Asia are beset by lower levels of human development, deadlier pandemics, higher infant mortality rates and greater social instability than Iraq. Like Iraq, Rwanda and Sierra Leone are wracked with continuing political instability and strife, yet the international community failed to react with the swiftness and urgency it has shown in the case of Iraq. Singh asks if the threat of terrorist opportunism in Iraq is being cited as a reason for the urgency in donor aid to that country, then why is the same reasoning not being used to rally massive aid to Somalia, where lawlessness is just as bad and the country offers a likely centre for terrorist activities? Furthermore, life expectancy and child mortality in Somalia paint a grimmer picture than in Iraq. Singh asks whether other countries are being sidelined for strategic reasons, i.e. the mounting casualties incurred in Iraq by troops, and the draw on workers from developed countries. In July 2003, the total amount pledged to the Global fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, since its creation in January 2002, stood at 4.7 billion dollars. Inexplicably, some countries pledged more to Iraq in 2 days, at the behest of the USA, than they have contributed to the fund since its inception.

Singh suggests that rich donor countries do not have infinite funds and that an inequitable or disproportionate allocation to Iraq now, could beget and exacerbate donor shortfalls to other needy nations in the future.
Conversely, if future aid to other countries in need will not be affected by the pledges to Iraq, another disturbing question is raised; why have such swiftly pledged and generous funds not been raised for other needy countries in the past? Is it because the world's most powerful country was not doing the soliciting?

A piece written in response to this article by staff from the World Health Organisation (WHO) broadly agrees with these points. The authors draw attention to the June 2003 Sweden convened meeting, entitled 'Good Humanitarian Donorship'. This meeting endorsed a series of principles of good practice amongst donors. One of these principles was identified as the need to ‘allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessments'. The WHO piece argues that donor pledges at the Madrid conference were generous but necessary. However, support for Iraq's recovery and reconstruction should not be provided at the expense of other crises. They further conclude that it would be excellent if the UN system and World Bank were to be in a position to undertake a cross-sectoral, standardised needs assessment, similar to the one done in Iraq, for every post conflict nation, followed by a high level Madrid-style reconstruction conference. Such an approach will make good donorship a reality, hasten the repair of vital systems that bring lifelines to crisis-affected people, and accelerate progress towards fulfilment of the millennium development goals.


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