What Triggers Humanitarian Intervention?

Summary of published paper

It is commonly assumed that massive media coverage of a humanitarian crisis will lead to increased allocations of emergency funds. This is often referred to as the 'CNN effect'. A recent study has examined the validity of this assumption.

The hypothesis of the study is that three main factors, working either in conjunction or individually, determine the volume of assistance. These are the intensity of media coverage, the degree of political and security interests that donors have in a particular region or country where a crisis occurs, and the institutional framework and strength of the network of humanitarian organisations involved in the country or region concerned.

In the study, four case-study comparisons are made. The first examines the Indian cyclone of October 1999 and the Mozambique floods of late-January 2000. The remaining three comparisons deal with complex emergencies and involve Angola, Sudan, the Balkans, the Democratic People's Republic (DPR) of Korea, and Afghanistan.

Data on the level of media coverage and volume of emergency assistance were collected for each case study. Media sources were two major television channels in Denmark, as well as 23 leading newspapers; United Kingdom (5), Germany (3), France (3), Italy (2), the United States (7), Spain (1) and Denmark (2). Financial data were derived from OCHAs and ECHOs databases. Data on level of media coverage were collected for selected periods of time, namely at three month intervals during the central years.

Data were also gathered about the scope and severity of the unfolding emergency situation and the need for outside assistance. Attempts were made to judge the number of people affected and/or the need for food assistance. For the India and Mozambique comparison, figures were compiled from the CRED/OFDA database. For the other situations, figures were derived from the relevant UN consolidated interagency appeals (CAP) and mid-year CAP updates. Other sources of data included World Food Programme /Food and Agricultural Organisation food aid needs estimates. It was not possible to derive any quantifiable indicators for level of stakeholder commitment to a given crisis, thus this part of the analysis is built upon qualitative judgements.

Apart from the India - Mozambique comparison, none of the other cases lead to an 'unambiguous confirmation' that media attention is the most significant explanation as to the amounts of emergency aid going to specific crises. For example, the conspicuous differences in aid allocations to Angola, Sudan and Kosovo in 1999 were undoubtedly also a result of immense vested European political and security interests in Kosovo. The authors of the study claim that the massive international emergency assistance to Kosovo became one of a number of crisis management tools used by Western powers in their warfare against the Serbs. They make the same claim about Afghanistan after September 11th where here, security concerns were at the forefront so that the sudden massive level of international assistance became an instrument for crisis management. Similarly in North Korea, donor interests - or more specifically security concerns - were paramount. In the words of the authors, "it seems difficult to explain the relatively high level of emergency assistance to a Communist one-party state with extremely limited media access and very meagre possibilities for aid evaluation".

The authors also assert that even crises that are largely ignored by the media may very well uphold a substantial, albeit insufficient, level of emergency assistance - either because there are significant donor interests in the area or because the stakeholder commitment is long-lived and strong. Sudan and Angola are held up as examples of this, where humanitarian networking and continuous lobbying by well co-ordinated United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations are prevalent.
The study concludes that media attention is no more crucial than donor interests in mobilising international resources for humanitarian crises. Rather the case seems to be that the media play a crucial role only when there are no vital security issues at stake, namely when a humanitarian crisis occurs in a place of little strategic importance to aid-funding governments.

The authors also suggest that natural disasters and complex emergencies have a greater tendency to become 'forgotten crises' when major aid donors have no particular security interests vested in the afflicted regions. In such cases, two factors may very well determine the volume of emergency aid that is allocated - the presence and strength of humanitarian stakeholders in the region, and the curiosity and persistence of the international press.


2 Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

3 European Commission Humanitarian Organisation (ECHO)

4 Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)/Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)

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