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Improving the effectiveness of international aid during natural disasters

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## Introduction

International aid in times of natural disasters or environmental crises is becoming increasingly important for a globalized world. Increasing collaboration between international communities allows for support to each other's populations, resources, and infrastructure. It is a necessary step in ensuring connections between nations, specifically the relationships between more economically developed countries [MEDCs] and less economically developed countries [LEDCs]. International aid is defined as any assistance given from one group to another in an international context, typically provided by governments of countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or international organizations such as the International Red Cross, the World Health Organization, and Doctors Without Borders.

International aid is especially important when a natural disaster or environmental crisis occurs. Natural disasters are sudden hazardous events caused by environmental factors. Natural disasters include events such as tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, floods, or snowstorms, and all disasters can range in terms of scope and severity. Certain issues faced when attempting to implement international relief are receiving consent from the host countries in which the crisis is occurring, where to prioritize the allocation of funds and resources, assistance and access to trained professionals, as well as coordination between governments, the UN agencies, and other NGOs / international organizations.



Fig. 1: Red Cross assisting in Nepal after earthquake

## Definition of Key Terms

### Development banks

Financial institutions and banks provide capital for improved efficiency of investments in developing nations. They can be privately or publicly owned but are often contributed heavily to by governments through, e.g., loans.

### International aid

Assistance from one group, government, or organization to another group, government, or population. Typically, rich and developed states give aid to developing countries, though this is not always the case. The aid may be in the form of loans, grants, resources, or manpower, among other things, and the donors may be governments, NGOs, development banks, and international organizations.

### Lower economically developed countries [LEDCs]

"Defined by three main factors: low income; little access to good nutrition, healthcare, and education; and the country survives on primary industries such as agriculture or mining." (Britannica)

### More economically developed countries [MEDCs]

This usually applies to countries with strong economies, with a good standard of living (access to good nutrition, quality education, healthcare, and employment), and having secondary industries (manufacturing) and service industries (banks, insurance). (Britannica)

### Natural disasters

Major extreme and sudden hazardous events are caused by environmental factors varying in severity and impact and outside the control of humans. The events may result in loss of life, injuries, damage to infrastructure, etc.

### Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Group of individuals or organizations operating independently of governmental bodies, generally to provide services to people or advocate for a cause (typically one of political or social issue).

## General Overview

International aid has been provided both in a modern and historical context. The earliest form was seen through the provision of military assistance from allied nations or groups against enemies or attackers. In the 19th and 20th centuries, some European nations with colonial possessions also assisted in funding projects for infrastructure and development. Whether this can be considered aid is contested, however, due to the incentive often being to further their own economy. During the Second World War (1939-1945), the implementation of the American "Marshall Plan" is a good example of how aid was given in the past to "rehabilitate the economies of 17 western and southern European countries". The founding of the United Nations in October 1945 also furthered the future capabilities for international aid, especially in times of natural or environmental disasters. LEDCs have always been disproportionately affected by natural disasters due to the lesser quality of infrastructure and economic capability to support a suffering community. Additionally, corruption in many developing nation's governments has made the response to disasters lacking at best.

### History of aid for natural disasters

Foreign aid when a country is facing an environmental crisis has been historically prevalent in many African, Asian, and Caribbean countries, which are provided with relief from MEDCs located in Europe and North America, NGOs such as the Red Cross, and international organizations such as UN agencies and the World Bank. Notable examples include the Bengal Famine of 1943, where many Bengalis were struggling due to wartime factors. The British mass exported food from the Bengal region in order to feed their soldiers in the Middle East and Europe and inhibited much of the commerce that the citizens of the region relied upon, such as fishing and local trading of goods. In response to the ensuing famine, the British and other allied nations, such as the USA and Canada, provided aid in the form of free meals, medical aid, and necessary goods. However, the effort of response was not nearly enough to respond to the intensity of the disaster, leaving many people still starving and lacking in resources due to the prioritization of wartime efforts.

Another example includes the East Pakistani (now Bangladesh) Cyclone, or Bholá Cyclone of 1970. This cyclone is one of the deadliest in recorded history, causing the deaths of between 300,000 to 500,000 residents and entire villages being depleted. The Indian government provided monetary aid as well as relief supplies, but the East Pakistani (now Bangladesh) government allegedly made the transportation of the resources difficult. The East Pakistani government's



response to the crisis was heavily criticized, both by regional and international media. This disaster highlights the importance of cooperation and collaboration to ensure the safety of all citizens and the rebuilding efforts post-crisis.

There was also international aid brought in during the droughts in Ethiopia in 1999-2000. The widespread drought led to "some 10 million people estimated to be in need of food assistance...loss of life and the destruction of livelihoods" (*Hammond, Laura, and Daniel Maxwell*).

An international response came in the form of aid from countries including the USA through their USAID program, providing food supplies and logistical support to the Ethiopian government; China, who also provided resources such as food, technical assistance, and agricultural projects (around the beginning of China's increasing funding of development projects in Africa); and the World Food Program (WFP), which delivered nearly one million tons of emergency food supplies to the citizens facing food shortages. There were also severe challenges faced in implementing aid during this crisis, namely the lack of funding and logistical obstacles due to insufficient infrastructure, remote communities, and failure in collaboration to properly distribute the resources.



Fig. 2: Newspaper article during Bhola Cyclone



Fig. 3: World Health Organisation response in aftermath of Türkiye-Syria Earthquake

**Current prevalence of aid for natural disasters**

More recent examples of international aid being given and received in times of crisis include the widespread response to the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria in 2023. In February of 2023, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit the Türkiye-Syria border, causing disastrous impacts all across the region. "Tens of thousands of people have been killed, and many more have been

injured. Thousands of buildings have collapsed...Schools and hospitals have been destroyed.", according to the United Nations official report. The immediate response was to coordinate search and rescue missions and ensure the provision of emergency supplies such as food, medical equipment, blankets, and clothing. The UN WFP contributed by "delivering food assistance," the World Health Organization [WHO] provided health assistance, and collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] and both countries' governments was set up to support the aftermath of the crisis. The CERF also released \$50 million USD in support of the response, with more requested from fundraising in the international community. However, though over "105 countries and 16 international organizations pledged support...provided search and rescue dogs, and monetary support," there was inequity observed between the response for Türkiye versus Syria. The response in Syria was described as "less enthusiastic," primarily due to the international sanctions on Syria and the government's limitations on humanitarian organizations' work outside their control.

Another example is the international response during the Amazon forest fires in 2024. The fires in 2024 had reached a record, with the highest number since 2005 and over 37 million acres burden from January till October, an increase of approximately 114% from 2023. The escalating situation has left damage to the environmental and humanitarian communities and is furthering the already prevalent climate crisis. In August, the Brazilian Amazon became the largest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> worldwide - the potential implications for the climate becoming immeasurable. The need for effective collaboration between the governments of the countries the Amazonian forest spans across (namely Brazil, Bolivia,



Fig. 4: Fires throughout the Brazilian Amazon in August 2024

Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana (France)), NGOs, local Indigenous groups, and the international community has become increasingly important. The environmental crisis has highlighted the challenges that both local and international governments, organizations, and populations face when attempting to implement foreign aid and has emphasized the need for more effective frameworks to be established to ensure the future effectiveness of international aid during natural disasters.

### Challenges faced when implementing aid

Certain issues with the implementation of aid have already been outlined when pertaining to the specific crisis, but the most frequent issues faced are the coordination between the local government and the international community, establishing frameworks of safety and security, and equitable distribution of resources and aid.

The coordination and cooperation of the local governments in the disaster area with international organizations and foreign governments is an essential part of ensuring the effectiveness of aid. The local governments must be willing to allow support from the international community in order to support their population and the rebuilding in the aftermath of a natural disaster. This will allow for more effective aid to come from NGOs, UN agencies, and other countries as it will not inhibit the distribution of resources and emergency supplies, will assist the speed and efficiency of response, and will overall ensure that the disaster is brought under control as soon as possible. An example of a mishandling of the situation and failure of cooperation was during the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005, where the Pakistani government's poor handling of the crisis led to severe gaps in coordination with the international world. This led to delays in the response from foreign governments and NGOs, slowing the delivery of food supplies, medical equipment, and other emergency goods.

The establishment of safety and security frameworks is also an essential component of foreign aid, especially in times of environmental crises. This is due to the immense disruption the natural disaster causes to a nation's infrastructure, jobs, society, and governing. It can also lead to unrest and resorting to violence amongst the public due to unhappiness with the response, lack of resources, or general distress. For example, the lack of effective security during the Haiti Earthquakes led to the stealing of essential resources such as food and medical equipment, delaying their distribution to the public. This also falls under the previously stated point of cooperation between the local and foreign governments and organizations, as the sovereignty of states must not be infringed upon even in times of crisis, causing issues with nations facing heavy humanitarian violations.

Further, ensuring the equitable distribution of resources and aid between the affected communities and/or countries is imperative to the effectiveness of an international response. This must also be done with communication and collaboration between all aiding parties and with the proper measures in place to ensure no supplies are stolen or misplaced. It is also necessary to ensure the safe and efficient transportation of all goods, especially if road infrastructure is damaged or

beyond immediate repair. The equity of resource allocation has often been called into question, for instance, during the Türkiye-Syria Earthquake of 2023. Allegedly, due to the strained political relations between Syria and the aiding nations, as well as the lack of willingness from Syria’s government to allow foreign aid freely into the country, Türkiye was far better provided for and given more emergency assistance and international aid. Especially in times of natural disasters, ensuring all people gain equitable access to supplies and resources is imperative to strengthening the effectiveness of international aid.

## Timeline of Key Events

Notable examples of foreign and international aid given in times of natural disasters

*\*Certain events were explained in the General Overview; refer there for further information*

Date	Event
<b>Bengal Famine of 1943</b>	Major lack of food and support for communities in Bengal (now Bangladesh and India).
<b>Founding of United Nations 1945</b>	Post World War II agreement to create an international organization comprised of member states from around the world.
<b>Italy Vajont Dam Disaster 1963</b>	Most catastrophic landslide in Italy and led to the death of ~2000 people; limited foreign aid but NGOs such as the Red Cross provided assistance.
<b>Bhola Cyclone 1970</b>	Deadly cyclone in East-Pakistan (now Bangladesh), limited aid due to the governments unwillingness to work with Indian government and aid offers.
<b>Peru Earthquake 1970</b>	Mass earthquake which led to ~400,000 casualties and damages of infrastructure and livelihoods; international aid was quick and widespread from over 60 countries and organizations.
<b>Mexico City Earthquake 1985</b>	Severe earthquake leading to “widespread death and injuries and catastrophic damage in Mexico’s capital” ( <i>Britannica</i> ); initially denied

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foreign aid but quickly changed and accepted supplies and funding from international community.

**Chernobyl Disaster  
1986**

Destruction of a nuclear power plant in Ukraine, aid was only allowed by Soviet government in 1990 and led to mass aid from UN agencies and countries around the world.

**Ethiopian drought  
1999-2000**

Reason for major food crisis in Ethiopia, led to the involvement of foreign aid notably from the USA, China, and the WFP as well as other countries.

**Haiti Earthquake  
2010**

Mass earthquake, widespread aid especially from the USA but faced challenges of resource allocation due to lack of proper security measures.

**Japan Earthquake and  
Tsunami 2011**

Earthquake leading to tsunami, received assistance offers from over 160 countries and 40 international organizations and softened historically harsh acceptance of foreign aid in order to support the public welfare.

**Bosnia and  
Herzegovina Floods  
2014**

Major floods affecting Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as neighbouring nations, large contribution of funding from CERF and other UN agencies to support especially the women and children.

**Türkiye-Syria  
Earthquake 2023**

7.8 magnitude earthquake causing mass destruction, led to major implementation of international aid and raised the question of equitable distribution of aid between nations.

**Amazon Fires 2024**

Fires in the Amazon reached a record high in 2024, need of international assistance stressed and highlights the discrepancies in the effectiveness of international aid.

## Major Parties Involved

### Ethiopia

Ethiopia has been a major recipient of international aid for decades, especially due to its long history of droughts and natural disasters. Historically, the aid given has not seemed to create long-term change in preventing the prevalence of disasters, though recent years have seen a change in the trend. Additionally, they have also worked in collaboration with international organizations and the UN to create the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) to ensure the provision of food supplies and financial aid during a crisis.

### European Union

The European Union is “the largest donor of development aid in the world,” taking acts to ensure social, economic, and political development and support is in place. They help to aid people in poverty, donating a minimum of 0.7% of their annual GNI to development aid. The EU generally focuses on the European countries and citizens, though support for external communities is still given.

### Germany

Germany is a major provider of international aid, being the second largest donor of humanitarian aid, with \$2.7 billion USD donated to various causes and organizations globally. Germany works closely with organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations agencies, as well as NGOs like the Red Cross, to support humanitarian development and social welfare in countries worldwide.

### Japan

Japan is another major donor of foreign aid, being one of the largest donors to the Official Development Assistance (ODA), a UN support program focusing on governmental aid and economic development in LEDCs. In 2023, the Japanese government provided the ODA with \$19.6 billion USD, supporting communities across the globe.

### Syria

The Syrian Republic is another recipient of major international aid from various governments and organizations, such as the UNOCHA and UNICEF. Between 2012 and 2018, the UNOCHA provided Syria with \$32 billion USD to support humanitarian efforts during the civil war. Further,

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90% of the aid deliveries for food, medical equipment, and other emergency resources are supplied and supported by countries and governmental bodies such as the USA, EU, UK, and Canada.

### Türkiye

Türkiye is in the top 15 largest recipients of foreign aid in 2023, exasperated by the major destruction caused by the earthquake. However, they have received major assistance from donors such as the USA, which has provided food assistance since 2012. The EU also gave the Turkish government €2.4 billion in humanitarian assistance between 2016 and 2019 and €1.02 billion between 2020 and 2023.

### UNDRR - United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

The UNDRR is determined to support the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in times of natural disasters. They typically provide risk reduction strategies and the funding of systems to reduce the impacts of disasters and build resilience in the communities, infrastructure, and societies. The UNDRR "envisions a world where disasters no longer threaten the well-being of people and the future of the planet," working towards a globally resilient Earth ("*Our Work*," *UNDRR.org*).

### UNOCHA - The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA] is the UN body that aims to "mobilize aid, share information, support humanitarian efforts, and advocate for crisis-affected communities," attempting to strengthen the response to international crises and emergencies (*UNOCHA.org*). They collect donations for and fund the UN Crisis Relief, under which both the Central Emergency Response Fund [CERF] and Country-Based Pooled Funds [CBPF] were established to support humanitarian organizations and country-based crises, respectively ("*We Fund*" *UNOCHA.org*).

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is a large supporter of global development and humanitarian aid organizations, providing the ODA with £12.7 million in 2022 as well as sending resources and materials into areas affected by natural disasters (such as during the Türkiye-Syria Earthquake). However, recent economic developments in the UK have led to a shrinking of their expenditure on global aid, falling to "the lowest level since 2007," with only 0.36% of the GNI being budgeted towards international aid (*Wintour, Patrick*).

**United States of America**

The United States of America is the largest provider of international aid annually, supporting communities and organizations through programs such as the USAID and Foreign Assistance groups. The USA has historically provided areas and countries affected by natural disasters with monetary aid, trained personnel, and emergency resources such as food and medical supplies. In 2022, the USA provided 210 countries or regions with over \$70 billion USD, supporting humanitarian development, economic strength, and rebuilding post-disaster.

**World Food Program (WFP)**

The World Food Program helps to support over "80 million people in around 80 countries each year", providing direct aid through food assistance and indirect aid by building communities' nutrition and resilience against disasters ("WFP," United Nations). They are the largest non-governmental organization dedicated to protection during times of emergencies and aims to use "food assistance to build a pathway to peace, stability, and prosperity, for people recovering from conflict, disasters and the impact of climate change" ("UN World Food Program").

**World Health Organization (WHO)**

The World Health Organization is an international NGO that promotes healthcare and provides vulnerable communities and nations with better access to and better quality of healthcare. They provide equipment, trained personnel, and financial protection to ensure equitable access to healthcare worldwide.

**Possible Solutions**

The possibility to improve the effectiveness of international aid during natural disasters is heavily centered around improving the efficiency and communication between various countries and organizations and recognizing the times of crisis above political disagreements. This means stressing the allowance of foreign aid into a country by the local government and the importance of providing aid to those who need it from foreign governments. Additionally, the effectiveness of NGOs, UN agencies, and other international organizations must be addressed. Ensuring proper funding, availability of trained professionals, and sufficient resources to help the people affected by the disasters is imperative in the effectiveness of aid. Further, raising the question of equity and choices in the allocation of resources and emergency supplies is especially important in the current

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world of nuanced politics and international relations. The provision of resources must be done without any bias to ensure all people are given the proper care in the aftermath of a crisis.

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