

*The Times Tuesday November 12th 2013*

# Aid is missold. Little is spent on emergencies

## Britain could do far more for Typhoon Haiyan victims if it didn't fund questionable long-term projects

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**T**yphoon Haiyan has blown a huge swath of destruction through the Philippines, but it has also opened a hole in the debate over Britain's aid budget. How much harder it becomes to question the coalition's commitment to increase British aid spending to 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) when British planes are taking off from Dubai full of plastic sheeting to provide temporary shelter for the hundreds of thousands made homeless by the 200mph winds.

How petty it seems to fuss that international aid takes a couple of pounds a week out of the pocket of the average British taxpayer when those on the receiving end are in grave danger of joining the 100,000 already killed unless they receive food and shelter fast.

Yet there is a wide gulf between this, the public image of aid, and the reality. While it is easy for supporters of an increased aid budget to point to starving children fed with British food, and injured people treated with

British-funded doctors and medicines, the sort of aid that is going to the Philippines represents only a tiny part of the budget. We could run a bigger and better response to emergencies while cutting overall spending by re-evaluating the longer-term projects carried out in the name of development.

The Philippines disaster is the first big test for Britain's Rapid Response Facility, set up by the Department for International Development (DfID) in March last year to increase the speed at which Britain can react to disasters. It is too early to judge how effective it has been, although yesterday's interview with Justine Greening on the *Today* programme, in which she spoke of two NHS professionals being

### Development cash has turned Haiti into a zombie nation

flown out to the Philippines, does not quite suggest the Rolls-Royce operation befitting a country that boasts a higher aid budget relative to GNI than any other major country. It is unfair to compare the British response with that of the US, which has a large military presence in the region, but hours before British planes took off from Dubai the BBC was showing pictures of US aid aircraft already in the Philippines.

If Britain does lead the world on aid it is not in humanitarian aid, which made up only 8 per cent of last year's £8.7 billion spending, but in the amount that goes on long-term projects. The £6 million pledged to the Philippines by David Cameron on Sunday pales beside, for example, the £26.3 million spent on forestry around the world last year, or the £131 million spent on banking and financial projects such as micro-lending. Last year's aid spending even included £2.5 million for promoting tourism in developing countries.

Besides disaster relief, vaccination of children features very highly in the public conception of aid. Yet overall spending on medical-related projects accounts for only 20 per cent of the overall budget. The bulk of spending is made up of hundreds of projects aimed at what might fall under the general term of nation-building.

There is, for example, the £105 million spent on advising the Kenyan Government on how to set up a welfare state for the poorest 10 per cent of its population. There is £6.9 million "to enhance secure land tenure and natural resource rights of communities" in Gaza, Manica and Cabo Delgado. There is £17 million for "promoting pro-poor opportunities in service and commodity markets in Nigeria", £341,000 on "improving the livelihoods for small farmers" in Brazil, and £300,000 for "promoting gender equality and sustainable livelihoods in Afghanistan".

I don't know enough about these individual projects to judge whether they achieve anything or are a complete waste of taxpayers' money. But I do know that they are not the kind of projects that tend to be quoted by ministers and others while defending an increase in the aid budget. Moreover, unlike humanitarian efforts to feed, clothe and provide shelter for the victims of a typhoon, they are projects whose

### We don't debate what to achieve, only how much to spend

objectives divide opinion.

Why, for example, should we seek to promote a peasant-based agricultural sector in Brazil when policy in Britain for 200 years or more has been to encourage more industrialised, less human-intensive farming? Freeing people from the land, after all, was the whole basis of the industrial revolution, which made the rich world rich. It is perverse, and not a little twee, to spend money, trying to hold back that process in Brazil and Tanzania. It would be far better for developing countries if we broke down the agricultural tariffs that prevent developing countries enriching themselves by exporting food to the West.

This is the sort of debate we should

be having over international aid — what do we want to achieve? Instead, we seem to have a debate only over how much we want to spend. Since 2010 the main target of government aid policy has not been to reduce hunger by a certain percentage or to eradicate malaria by a certain date, but simply to spend 0.7 per cent of GNI by this year. When your target is simply to spend a large pile of money by a given date, the quickest and easiest way to achieve it, of course, is to waste it.

The target of spending 0.7 per cent of GNI has long been an anachronism — it was set by the UN General Assembly in 1970 when absolute poverty was a much bigger issue than it is now. Since then international aid has some achievements to its name, such as eradicating smallpox. It has also helped to create zombie nations such as Haiti, where gifts of food and textiles have undermined two industries in which that country ought to have a comparative advantage.

Few begrudge spending money on humanitarian aid such as that going to the Philippines. On the contrary, we could spend more on that kind of work if only we could bring ourselves to rein in spending on development projects of dubious worth.

Last week Ross Clark was awarded the Reason Foundation's 2013 Bastiat Prize

Hugo Rifkind is away