

# A NEED FOR AN AUTONOMOUS AGENCY FOR OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

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India was among the first responders to the February 2023 earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people in Türkiye and caused widespread destruction. India's quick response to the humanitarian crisis in Türkiye and Syria reinforced its demonstrated capacities to deliver humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) beyond its region. India has become a net provider of development assistance and has become a first responder in many a humanitarian crises, while at the same time declining offers of overseas aid or assistance for disasters within the country.

The country has great capacities in some of the essential machinery needed for such humanitarian interventions and development assistance. It has an extremely responsive and capable armed forces who have proved their competence in terms of quick and timely delivery of aid, in natural disasters at home and abroad. The grouping of the navies of four countries viz. US, Japan, Australia and India, collectively responded to the crisis when the Asian tsunami struck in December 2004. This grouping of countries was subsequently recognised as the QUAD by late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007.

It is not just in humanitarian assistance or food programmes that India has the capacities. India's pharmaceutical industry responded remarkably during the COVID-19 pandemic and the intent to assist the poor and needy was evident in the Vaccine Maitri initiative. It is worthwhile to recall Indian pharmaceutical industry's role in the delivery of medicines worth less than dollar a day for treatment for AIDS with a dash of defiance against the global pharma industry wedded to patent and profit.

As the economy grows and India's armed forces grow in their logistics and strategic reach, this capability will be further enhanced. There is a vast pool of trained doctors and paramedical personnel and a strong pharmaceutical industry backed by research and development. India has proven reputation in forecast and information technology. This has tremendous potential in the context of managing preparedness, inventory, logistics and actual delivery of aid. It also contributes to communication and rolling updates from the field.

Above all, India has desisted from needless aggression towards others and has been a proponent of peaceful global co-existence. This gives it the right pedigree to intervene and assist. There is an adherence to international rules-based order respecting the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality in all its humanitarian assistance programmes. There have been only two instances when India violated the national sovereignty of the recipients—in East Pakistan in 1971 and Sri Lanka in 1987, when India air dropped humanitarian aid to the besieged Tamil population in Jaffna.

Humanitarian aid and development assistance is an acknowledged soft tool in international relations and diplomacy. Much of India's development assistance and aid pertains to its neighbourhood, with recipients being Bhutan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. India has committed over US\$ 3 billion to Afghanistan which continues beyond the regime takeover by Taliban. India has built a fully functional hospital, a huge dam, all-weather roads connecting the ends of Afghanistan and even the Afghan Parliament.

Humanitarian/development assistance can provide sufficient power of recall in the public eye and add value to bilateral ties. There is no doubt that when things are done correctly, the goodwill generated for the donor nation is tremendous. Very often, the country intervenes with the best of interests at heart. But the mechanism of delivery is entrusted with recipient governments and depends on the efficiency of their agencies. This is also a delicate balance and one that requires careful handling, for excess intent and recall can spoil the principle of humanitarian engagement, and too little of intent and recall can make it mere charity devoid of any practical value. A case in point relates to how the media overplayed the aid assistance in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Kathmandu in April 2015. There has to be a planned management to achieve specific or desired outcome.

For a country of its size and stature, India surprisingly does not have a dedicated aid agency. As early as 1952, India deployed the Indian Aid Mission in Nepal which became Indian Cooperation Mission. The India Development Initiative (IDI) had a short life-span from 2003 to 2007. Currently, the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of Ministry of External Affairs set up in 2012 handles both Development Assistance and HADR. Lines of Credit (LOCs) are disbursed under the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS) set up in 2005. Capacity-building training programmes are conducted under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme set up in 1964 and through grants and loans as well as bilateral grant assistance projects.

Given this background, India had a first mover advantage which perhaps needs to be recouped. China created its own version of the EXIM bank to finance overseas initiatives based on India's model and today that agency has far greater overseas reach. A specialised India International Development Cooperation Agency (IIDCA) was announced in the 2007 budget speech by then Finance Minister P. Chidambaram. However, this didn't take off subsequently. It is pertinent to note that in 2018, the China International Development Cooperation agency became operational.

There is a need for India to establish an autonomous agency on the lines of US Agency for International Development (USAID) to execute overseas development assistance programmes. There is a need for cross-cutting cooperation and collaboration and supervision for such initiatives. An autonomous agency can also move beyond government-driven engagements and become more plural and diverse to include private sector medical and educational services, philanthropic organisations and civil society, more effectively.

The proposed Indian aid agency can also effectively engage, cooperate and collaborate with international humanitarian organisations. Such cooperation can also help develop expertise, and enhance best practices and insights. India currently collaborates bilaterally with other agencies like World Food Programme and countries like US, Japan and EU. There have been rare instances when India has delivered aid through agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

There is no doubt that achievement of developmental goals for poverty and health, tackling terrorism/environmental concerns/pandemics is possible only through collaboration with multilateral agencies like World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Western agencies also can learn from India's experience in tackling its myriad problems and from its domestic initiatives like AADHAAR, Ayushman Bharat, CoWin app and UPI.

Most Western nations, OECD countries, Japan and China have annual allocations to international agencies. India also contributes to over 150 international bodies, which has been rising steadily. India has adopted a strictly non-political and principled approach

to humanitarian assistance. The government must focus on how India can play a leadership role in reshaping the global order and define its role in the evolving humanitarian regime in keeping with India's core belief expressed in the G-20 theme—One Earth, One Family, One Future—as expressed in the ancient verse.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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