

## **The French humanitarian system : reforme, but how much real change?,**

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## **French humanitarian assistance has undergone a series of reforms since the 1980s. François Grünewald asks whether these changes are more than skin deep**

France is not a major donor of emergency assistance. In 2000, French bilateral humanitarian aid stood at less than \$200 million; the largest aid donor, the US, gave nearly \$1.2 billion, and the next two, the Netherlands and the UK, gave just below \$400m each. Emergency assistance also accounts for a relatively small portion of overall French aid: 6% in 2000. By comparison, 40% of development aid goes on education and health, and over 20% on debt relief. Overall aid allocation is heavily skewed towards French overseas possessions and former colonies; the largest recipients of development aid in 2000 were French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Other major recipients include Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Senegal, Cameroon and Mayotte. The only non-francophone countries in the top ten of development aid recipients in 2000 were Poland and Egypt. However, the distribution of humanitarian aid was more opportunistic than anything else. In 1999, Kosovo got the lion's share while in 2001 it was Afghanistan.

The relatively marginal position that emergency aid occupies in France's overall aid architecture is reflected in the haphazard way in which it has traditionally been organised within the government. In 1982, the Secretary of State for Human Rights, former president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Claude Malhuret, was put in charge of some aspects of humanitarian aid, with an inter-ministerial mechanism called the Cellule d'Urgence (CELLUR) acting as the operational body. This system was later revised, and another ex-MSF man, Xavier Emanuelli, became Minister of State for Humanitarian Affairs, attached to the Ministry of Health. The move was the first real sign of a willingness within the government to get involved in humanitarian action. Emanuelli's successor, MSF founder Bernard Kouchner, spent three years as Minister of State for Humanitarian Action, from 1988 until 1991, and proved himself a dynamic and high-profile figure. Yet he also created tensions within the administration, and with NGOs. These tensions stemmed primarily from the increasing confusion between politics and humanitarian aid. Kouchner found himself in dispute with the key ministries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Cooperation.

In the late 1990s, the institutional position of humanitarian aid was reformed again. The Ministry of Cooperation was folded into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a Deputy Minister in charge of cooperation and francophone affairs. Humanitarian affairs were brought back into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a twin structure was created, comprising the low-profile Service de l'Action Humanitaire (SAH), and the still inter-ministry CELLUR. This meant that decision-making was essentially centralised at the MFA level, and implementation spread between departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other interested

ministries, such as defence, agriculture (for food aid and seed mobilisation), etc . There were also administrative difficulties, as standard procedures were not adapted to the particular demands of emergency situations; urgent procurements were affected by lengthy tendering obligations, for instance, and complex recruitment procedures failed to fill vacant positions in time.

**Post-Kosovo change**In the wake of the Kosovo crisis, the French government, like others, took a hard look at its emergency assistance architecture. An audit by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance was strongly critical of the current structure and, after lengthy debate, further reforms were introduced. The High Council for International Cooperation, a wash dog and advisory body of the French civil society ([www.hcci.org](http://www.hcci.org)) prepared a long report and made recommendation to the Prime Ministry. The ensuing changes were announced at an international conference in June 2001 attended by representatives of development departments in European Union states, as well as by NGOs. By early 2002, the changes were in place. A new body, the Delegation à l'Action Humanitaire (DAH), was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which combined the functions of the SAH and CELLUR.

The administrative and financial system under which the DAH functions has by and large been made more efficient, although only time will tell what impact the change will really have. The DAH is currently headed by an experienced diplomat, Gildas Lelidec, who has worked in, among other countries, Cambodia and the Congo and has thus been frequently confronted with both crises and NGO work. For early warning, the DAH is supported by a body connected to the Ministry of Defence and the French intelligence network, the Secretariat General à la Défense Nationale (SGDN). This arrangement is supposed to help in analysing developing crises. The SGDN is also in charge of coordinating the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and civil–military relations in the post-crisis reconstruction period. Civil–military relations are high on the policy agenda in the wake of Bosnia and Kosovo.

The 1999 reforms also overhauled the wider development architecture, establishing the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) as the core French agency for development aid, and the main actor in the post-crisis period. The AFD, which is co-managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, has only lately become involved in post-crisis situations, most recently in Afghanistan, and has also been active in zones of instability, such as in Burundi and the Horn of Africa. It is still in the early stages of developing its strategy vis-à-vis these new contexts, and will need to grapple with some difficult questions around the relationship between humanitarian aid and rehabilitation. The will seems to be there, but whether these issues can be adequately resolved remains to be seen.

### **Progress, but could do better?**

The 1999 reforms mark a real step forward in the organisation of official French aid. Some coherence has been brought to what was a messy arrangement, with little consistency between diplomacy and aid and very little input into the kind of theoretical and philosophical debate that characterises the Anglo-Saxon aid world.

However, the DAH is badly under-resourced, both financially and in terms of human resources. The regular budget is around €10m a year, equivalent to around \$9m, to be supplemented from other cooperation funds if required. Although the French contribution to humanitarian efforts is largely channelled through ECHO, NGOs and multilateral actors are nonetheless concerned at the extremely limited means available to the DAH, and it is unclear whether the reforms will signal a larger financial commitment to emergency aid from the French government.



How the DAH positions itself within the wider debate on state humanitarianism is

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still to be clarified (which of course is understandable after just a few months of existence). Yet its relations with the Ministry of Defence, the SGDN and the armed forces and its position vis-à-vis humanitarian principles will be under close scrutiny from NGOs. While French NGOs recognise the importance of strong political support from States in establishing independent and impartial humanitarian space, they also resent negative political interference in humanitarian action. Clarification on where the DAH fits within the wider changes in humanitarianism under way within Europe, with the changing role of ECHO and the emergence of a European foreign policy, security and defence identity is still to come.

Although the creation of the DAH could mark real progress in French official aid, compared to the past set-up, its value will only become clear through its performance in real crises. The head of the DAH and his deputy have welcomed debate and evaluations to improve their work, and have called for reinforced, more inclusive and regularised exchanges with NGOs, academics and other centres of excellence. They have also highlighted the importance of working closely with their European counterparts, and acknowledge that their best allies in the fight for resources are the NGOs and civil society. This is at least a good start.

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