

## Humanitarian action does not depend on media coverage

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By Ruth Gidley

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**(AlertNet)** - Humanitarian specialists and journalists attending a meeting in Denmark last week challenged the widely-held view that media attention is the strongest factor in determining levels of aid, while technology is making more information available faster.

Representatives of humanitarian agencies, often critical of the mainstream news agenda for ignoring crises, and delegates from media organisations attended a conference in Copenhagen on "Forgotten Humanitarian Crises" organised by the Danish Refugee Council.

Nik Gowing, a BBC presenter who has written on the role of the media in humanitarian emergencies, said: "It is a self-perpetuating myth that increasingly there is less media coverage of humanitarian emergencies.

"It's a mindset and a paradigm that doesn't represent reality."

Gowing cautioned against the temptation to regard the media as a monolith, adding: "It's wrong to assume that the ten o'clock news is all of it."

He reminded delegates that there were websites devoted to providing information for humanitarian actors. "IRIN, AlertNet, ReliefWeb -- it's out there."



**North Korean cooperative farm workers transplant rice in Kilju county, North Hamgyong province.**

File photo

He said: "The revolution in information technology and low-cost, lightweight means of recording and transmitting means more reporting than ever from even the most remote, tense and dangerous theatres of conflict and natural disaster."

He said that the new spectrum of "information doers" included people who would be classified as advocates rather than journalists.

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"It is a myth that there is less coverage of emergencies"  
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According to Gowing, the tension between reality and real-time reporting could lead to less balanced, less accurate reporting.

"Those of us lucky enough to work for a massive, well-resourced news machine like the

BBC, which seeks at all times to report accurately, objectively and impartially by double-checking and not rushing to judgement, face a major challenge as other players rush to report, rather than check.

"In real time, even the sources can be wrong."

He continued: "It's a question of how it's being filtered. You have to know what it means. There's a gap between the collection (of information) and how it's delivered.

"It's up to us to filter that in a way you trust.

"How do you distinguish the news from the rumours, because the rumours can steal the high ground more easily than the actual facts?"

Despite the good reputation of the BBC, not everyone was prepared to trust its filters.

Sorious Samura, a Sierra Leonean journalist, said it was difficult to persuade international news organisations to transmit "Cry Freetown", his graphic exclusive film coverage of brutalities in his home country in 1998.

"Why are we scared of reality?" he asked.

Gorm Rye Olsen, one of three researchers who examined what

determined the level of emergency assistance in crises, said media coverage was not the most important factor.

Olsen, from the Centre for Development Research in Copenhagen, carried out the task with Nils Carstensen, information officer with Dan-Church-Aid, and Kristian Høyen of the Danish Refugee Council.

They found that media coverage of floods in Mozambique in late 1999 had led to greater assistance than floods in the Indian state of Orissa the same year, even though the number of people affected was greater in the Indian case.

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Olsen said there was a common perception that media attention could persuade governments to respond to crises in poorer countries. His group's research found evidence that media coverage had increased assistance in some instances, such as Western intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring of 1991 and humanitarian intervention in Somalia in December 1992, but it was more common for governments to use the media to communicate their message to the public.

"According to 'aid motivation literature'," the researchers found, "the allocation of development aid from big donors... tends to be motivated by donor interests, whereas small and middle-size donors, like the Scandinavian countries, are mainly motivated by the needs of the recipients."

This was confirmed by a comparison of aid to North Korea and Angola and Sudan, when North Korea continued to receive large amounts of aid, despite a dearth of media access or coverage.

The researchers examined the impact of media attention and donor security interests, and a third hypothesis of the significance of what they labelled "stakeholder commitment", by which they meant the existence of specialised humanitarian agencies, donor administrations, early warning systems and rapid reaction units, codes of conduct, specialised information structures and coordinating networks.

In their analysis, this was one of the most important factors in attracting and maintaining humanitarian assistance.

"The widespread conviction in the aid community that the Kosovo crisis 'stole' or diverted emergency assistance from Africa to Europe (the Balkans) is difficult to substantiate," they said.

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They came to this conclusion after finding that, although Kosovo received a great deal of media attention and humanitarian assistance, Angola and Sudan also received ongoing assistance, despite not featuring in the mainstream media.

This was attributed to pressure from a well-informed aid community in the African countries, lobbying for their needs.

The researchers said that in the absence of donor security interests, the presence and strength of humanitarian stakeholders in the region, and the persistence of the international press, could determine the volume of emergency aid allocations.

"In relation to the allocation of emergency aid, media attention is no more crucial than donor interests are, and certainly not as important as the so-called CNN effect would have it. Rather, the case seems to be that the media play a crucial role in influencing decision-makers only when there are no vital security issues at stake," the report said.