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The future of aid and what nextgen aid jobs might look like

Duncan Green explores the future of the aid sector and the prospects for nextgen aid workers at LSE and beyond. He argues that such is the scale of the devastation, recent graduates may be best advised to identify the more resilient players, like private foundations, or look for jobs outside the sector that will give them relevant experience for whatever system emerges from the wreckage.

Last week a bunch of professors joined anxious students wondering if they had made a terrible mistake in studying international development to read the tea leaves on the future of aid. **Chatham House rule**, and definitely no certainty in the fog, but here is what I put together from reading and speaking to dozens of senior aid people, augmented with some of the insights from the conversation.

Scenarios: Will the current upheaval most resemble a tsunami, a change in ocean current, or a tide? A tsunami sweeps all before it, leaving a devastated landscape from which new life emerges; a current change means that the aid sector may find itself permanently swimming against the flow – exhausting, but possible; a tide means that the pendulum (to mix my metaphors) will swing back in a couple of years. Just hang in there.

My best guess is that this is a tsunami. What is most surprising is not the butchering of USAID, but the domino effect – Western governments of all political persuasions have immediately jumped on the bandwagon, cutting aid often in contravention of their political promises.



100117-N-6247V-155 PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (Jan. 17, 2010) At the airport, Sailors from USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) and soldiers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division prepare for transit. The U.S. military is conducting humanitarian and disaster relief operations as part of Operation Unified Response after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake caused severe damage in Haiti Jan. 12. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Candice Villarreal/Released)

What happens next? The world is still there, disasters and emergencies will still happen, people will get sick and new diseases will emerge and spread. So some form of human solidarity is likely to rise from the ashes. What might it look like?

Contemporary humanitarianism has been formalized as a global project, with global (soft) law and global institutions like the UN. That is now looking very fragile. Conversations with senior aid insiders began with the premise that "the UN is dead". That may be just the product of dismay, but I fear they may be right.

Resources and political capital are likely to switch to regional, national and local institutions, as the UN and other global bodies such as the World Bank or WTO either regionalize or go into decline.

Silver linings? Perhaps the long promised (but seldom delivered) localization of aid will emerge from the bottom, rather than be conceded from the top, but it will be much worse resourced than the top-down version – more like community self-help than tidy little (or sometimes large) NGOs delivering services.



Implications for Students and early career aid people

If you are nextgen and remain committed to a job in International Development, then it may be worth thinking about:

Finding jobs outside the aid sector and watch how the cards fall/what emerges from the ashes. Eg if the UN goes down or regionalizes (following the [World Bank](#)), that will shape who it employs (if anyone). As for government donors, if aid is being “weaponised” as an unabashed foreign policy tool, as the [Economist expects](#), will you still want to work for them?

When deciding where to look for jobs, it may be worth thinking about:

- which activities in international development are more advanced than in domestic politics in the North? My MEL friends and relatives tell me that monitoring and evaluation is one such area, perhaps because it is more allowable to critique funding to another government than to your own.....
- Conversely, where does international development trail domestic politics, e.g. comms?
- What are likely to be the target institutions for whatever future aid agencies emerge? One such is finance, where aid is increasingly being talked of as a way to leverage private capital flows, rather than a significant source of funding on its own. Countries will still want to drill and mine, so find out how the extractives sector works while you’re waiting for the dust to settle.

Alternatively, target the more resilient bits of the current ID sector:

- institutions: Foundations will still have their endowments, and will play an even more prominent role – not just the big beasts like Gates, but thousands of smaller family foundations are doing

some really interesting work. Then there is the booming field of social enterprises, which are likely to fill some of the gaps. Non-aid dependent NGOs such as faith-based organizations, or the Red Cross and Red Crescent, will be less affected too.

- functions: the case for humanitarian response seems the strongest in whatever aid phoenix emerges from the ashes. I also think the case for advocacy and influencing becomes stronger, as reduced aid dollars are directed towards trying to improve the accountability and performance of states and others, rather than delivering services on their own. The weakest link is long-term development – infrastructure, core funding for governments etc, work on norms change.
- What I would avoid, at least in the short term? donors, “beltway bandits” – the huge, massively aid dependent contractors such as Chemonics, highly aid-dependent NGOs

If thinking of applying for a job, do your research and follow the money. Find out how the organizations is financed, because that is now going to matter more than ever for whether it is going to be a good bet.

About the author

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