

Distribution and Emergency*

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THERE is not enough international aid available to assist everyone whose governments have failed to protect them from serious harm or provide them with access to basic resources.¹ How the aid that is available is distributed is therefore a matter of life and death for millions of people. Political theorists and philosophers have tended to focus on prior questions, such as what obligations wealthy individuals and groups have to assist distant others, and how international aid compares to other strategies for improving human welfare. Yet, especially when considered from the perspective of a person who is denied aid for a bad reason, how international aid is distributed is as weighty as these other concerns.

The two main categories through which non-military international aid to poor countries is currently conceptualized are “development” aid on the one hand, and “emergency” aid (also known as “humanitarian” aid or “relief”) on the other hand. For example, Development Initiatives reports that in 2005, 13% of overall Official Development Assistance from the 22 Development Assistance Committee countries went to humanitarian aid, while 87% went to development aid.² Responding to such statistics, commentators have debated whether too many resources are being allocated to emergency aid at the expense of development aid, or vice versa. For example, Mark Duffield wrote in 1994 that “[f]ollowing the stagnation of development assistance, there is a concern that increased expenditure on relief is at the expense of development.”³ Conversely, James Morris, director of the World Food Program, stated in 2006 that while international development aid has doubled in the last few years, international donors “are not putting victims of humanitarian crises like Darfur first on their list.”⁴

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¹Pogge 2002. Unlike Easterly (2006) and de Waal (1997), I assume here that international aid significantly benefits recipients.

²Development Initiatives 2006, p. 8. Not all of this development aid is used to address basic needs.

³Duffield 1994.

⁴Lydia Polgreen, “Darfur Food Rations Cut as Donations Lag,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2006.

Non-specialists also tend to conceive of international aid in these terms. On the one hand, emergency aid is often seen as preferable to development aid because victims of emergencies are perceived as worse-off than people who are “merely” desperately poor. Emergency-affected people are also often seen as less blameworthy for their plight than recipients of development aid. Finally, emergency aid is sometimes seen as less likely to actively cause harm than development aid. (These beliefs help to explain why failure to provide emergency aid is often perceived as more blameworthy than failure to provide development aid, even when neither is seen as strictly morally required.)⁵ On the other hand, development aid is often taken to be more cost-effective and far-sighted than emergency aid, as the well-known maxim, “give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day, teach him to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime,” suggests.

The argument that I shall offer here is not that too many resources are being allocated to emergency aid at the expense of development aid or vice versa, but rather that this is the wrong debate to be having: as widely used as these categories are, they undermine principled distribution of international aid.⁶ After describing the distinction between emergency aid and development aid (section I), I defend two claims: first, these categories are mutually constituted in ways that make them likely to have negative causal effects on aid distribution (section II). Second, they provide little useful guidance for normatively evaluating distributive outcomes (section III). I conclude that, for these reasons, the categories of emergency and development should have as little effect on aid distribution as possible. It does not follow from this, however, that the categories should be eradicated: while they undermine principled distribution of international aid, they enhance aid provision in other respects.

This argument is broadly relevant to donors (governments, individuals and foundations), NGOs and international organizations based in North America and Western Europe that distribute aid primarily in other places. By “distribute,” I mean the large-scale allocation of resources among activities or programs (including solicitation of and competition for contracts), as opposed to the implementation of aid programs after resources have already been allocated. Because the distributive decisions discussed here are large-scale (for example, among countries or regions) they cannot be made by aid recipients or potential recipients themselves.

One might think that the emergency/development distinction’s main effect on aid distribution would be to divert resources from development aid to emergency aid. I argue, in contrast, that the primary effect of this distinction is to distort aid distribution among emergencies. More specifically, the emergency/development distinction links, within the concept of emergency, “event-like” features and

⁵Opinion polls in donor countries “show conclusively that support for aid is strongest around short-term humanitarian issues” (Development Initiatives 2003, p. 54).

⁶I assume here that principled distribution is beneficial.

normative unacceptability: all else equal, the more event-like features a bad situation has, the less normatively acceptable it is and the more of an emergency it is. Yet, event-like features, while psychologically compelling, are morally irrelevant to aid distribution—or so I shall argue. In this respect, event-like features function analogously to how cosmopolitans claim that physical proximity functions. While some situations that lack event-like features are labeled as emergencies (in particular, as “chronic emergencies” or “protracted crises”), these situations seem to receive less aid than emergencies that have event-like features. I argue that this prioritization of emergencies with event-like features over those without them is inconsistent with several widely accepted distributive principles, such as those based on need, desert, “do no harm,” maximizing overall benefit, and responsiveness to special obligations.

This argument helps to explain the widely held suspicion (evident in the “give a man a fish” maxim) that prioritizing emergency aid over development aid is impulsive or shortsighted: there is something about some emergencies, connected to them being emergencies, that tempts us to give them unjustified priority. But because the primary effect of event-like features is to misallocate resources among emergencies, the appropriate response to this temptation is not simply to re-emphasize development aid at the expense of emergency aid. Rather, it is to de-emphasize the emergency/development distinction itself.

De-emphasizing this distinction is doubly important, because even if event-like features are removed from our conception of emergency, the emergency/development distinction *still* undermines principled aid distribution. This is because the fact that a given distributive scheme allocates a particular proportion of resources to emergency aid as opposed to development aid tells us little about how well that scheme complies with the aforementioned distributive principles. Some actors are more in the grip of the emergency/development distinction and its effects on the concept of emergency than others; some actors cannot or should not allocate aid on the basis of general principles. But insofar as such principles are a good basis for aid distribution, the categories of emergency and development are a misleading basis for evaluating distributive outcomes.

I. EMERGENCY AID VERSUS DEVELOPMENT AID

The terms “emergency aid,” “humanitarian aid” and “relief” have different histories and connotations, but they are usually treated as synonyms.⁷ In particular, development aid is usually treated as one half of a dichotomy, with emergency aid, humanitarian aid or relief as the other half. While I shall focus on the concept of emergency, my argument also applies to humanitarian aid and relief insofar as they occupy the same conceptual space *vis-à-vis* development.

⁷Development Initiatives 2003, pp. 69–70. Humanitarian aid is more closely associated with violent conflict.

According to its proponents, emergency aid is meant to protect people's lives while preserving their dignity.⁸ Emergency aid involves the provision of goods and services such as food, water, sanitation, medical care, shelter and (sometimes) protection, during and soon after "natural" and man-made disasters. In contrast, development aid is meant to promote "sustainable improvement in living standards."⁹ Development aid "is the provision of support for the construction of physical infrastructure, the funding of education, health and population programs and so on. . . ."¹⁰ Correspondingly, while emergency aid usually requires independence from governments, particularly in contexts of violent conflict, development aid often entails close cooperation with governments. While emergency aid can be long-term or short-term, development aid is usually long-term. While emergency aid has operating principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, development aid does not.¹¹ Given these differences, some NGOs, government agencies and multilateral organizations provide only emergency aid, others provide only development aid, and others (for example, Oxfam and CARE) provide both but distinguish between the two activities.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the "aid system" had a "bifurcated architecture" and "conceptual, managerial, and organizational divisions" between emergency and development aid.¹² Even as of 2006, "the management, administrative and accounting lines drawn between 'humanitarian need' and 'developmental need' tend to be pretty rigid."¹³ As a result,

The way in which situations are classified [for example, as an emergency or not] will determine the source of funding, the scale of resources allocated, the form of response, the planning time frame, and the way in which organizational roles are determined. *All of this has an important bearing on who actually receives what assistance—which may be for them a matter of life or death.*¹⁴

Nonetheless, the firmness and comprehensiveness of the emergency/development distinction should not be overstated.¹⁵ Some activities undertaken by aid organizations, such as rehabilitation and advocacy, do not fit neatly into either category. Although emergency aid and development aid can conflict in the short term, development aid can help to avoid future emergencies, and emergencies can provide a "window of opportunity" to jump-start development aid. Finally, beginning in the 1990s, some donors and aid organizations sought to "link" or create a "continuum" between emergency and development aid. Denmark, for example, created a category of "development-oriented emergency relief."¹⁶ While

⁸Sphere 2004, p. 6.

⁹Darcy and Hofmann 2003, p. 19.

¹⁰Hoddinott 1999, p. 3.

¹¹Pictet 1979.

¹²Harmer and Macrae 2004, pp. 3, 9.

¹³Development Initiatives 2006, p. 28.

¹⁴Darcy and Hofmann 2003, p. 14. My italics.

¹⁵Slim 2000.

¹⁶Development Initiatives 2003, p. 63.

these efforts continue, primarily from the development side, they have had limited effects and have met with some resistance, primarily from the emergency side. Most importantly for our purposes, criticisms of the emergency/development distinction have tended to focus on the need to provide a steady stream of aid *over time to a single community* recovering from a disaster; much less has been said about the effects of the emergency/development paradigm on aid distribution *among different groups* in different places.

The emergency/development paradigm affects how aid resources are distributed in several ways. Most fundamentally, the institutionalization of the two categories creates entrenched constituencies for both emergency and development aid. These constituencies support and are supported by the belief that both activities are intrinsically valuable. This belief, in turn, helps to generate debates (such as those cited at the outset) about the overall allocation of resources between the two categories. The entrenchment of both categories also helps to support institutional arrangements for distributing resources equitably *within* each category (for example, the United Nation's Consolidated Appeals Process, the allocation of resources by single-mandate NGOs) which can constrain the free movement of resources *across* the two categories.

A. EMERGENCY VERSUS NORMAL SITUATIONS

The distinction between emergency and development *aid* is constituted in part by a roughly parallel distinction between “emergency” and “normal” *situations*. Like the former distinction, the latter has also come under fire from various sources, but remains largely intact.¹⁷

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines an “emergency” as “a state of things unexpectedly arising, and urgently demanding immediate action.”¹⁸ The first part of this definition suggests that emergencies are unusual and hints at the argument I will make below: that situations that are called emergencies often have event-like features. The second part suggests that to call a situation an emergency is to claim that it is normatively unacceptable and that there is a duty to respond to it rapidly. The problem with this definition for our purposes is that *defining* an emergency as a situation that demands immediate action provides no foothold for evaluating whether emergencies should be prioritized over non-emergencies. For analytic clarity, we need a more objective definition. I will therefore define an emergency as “a situation of urgent need.” By “urgent need,” I mean *severe need that must be met soon in order to avoid serious harm*. Although urgent need is to some extent socially and politically constructed, defining emergencies as situations of urgent need enables us to ask when they should receive priority. (I will therefore use the term “emergency” to refer to

¹⁷Kent et al. 2003; see also Calhoun 2004.

¹⁸*Oxford English Dictionary*, available at <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed Nov. 27, 2006).

situations of urgent need, but I will do so in order to discuss the ordinary usage of the term “emergency” in its full complexity.)

Like the ordinary usage of “emergency,” the ordinary usage of “normal” is also complex and multifaceted: it means both “usual” and “normatively acceptable.”¹⁹ So as we did with “emergency,” we need a more objective definition of “normal.” I will define the “normal” situations in which development aid occurs as “situations characterized by needs that are always less urgent and sometimes less severe than the needs addressed by emergency aid.” (While a group’s predicament is not entirely normatively acceptable to those providing it with development aid, its predicament is far more acceptable than an emergency would be.) This distinction between normal and emergency situations applies at the collective rather than the individual level: while individuals in “normal” (that is, development) contexts might have urgent needs, rates of, for example, morbidity and mortality are lower than they are in emergency situations. At least, that is the idea.

B. EMERGENCY AID VERSUS EMERGENCY POWERS

It is worth pausing here to compare my definition of “emergency” as a situation of urgent need, to another definition: emergency as an imminent threat to the survival of a political regime. While the former type of emergency raises questions about the distribution of aid, the latter raises questions about the use of emergency powers. There are some striking similarities between emergency aid and emergency powers. For example, both are widely seen as more harmful the longer they go on. Both generate incentives for emergency-claims to be deployed strategically. In the context of international aid, what is at stake in the use of emergency-claims is the distribution of resources (and in some cases, the power that accompanies those resources); in the context of threats to regimes, what is at stake is the extent of executive power.²⁰ As we shall see, however, there is also a significant dissimilarity between emergency aid and emergency powers, such that thinking about the former through the lens of the latter is likely to be misleading.

II. EMERGENCIES’ EVENT-LIKE FEATURES

Numerous factors help to determine the quantity of international aid (that is, emergency aid and/or development aid) that particular groups receive. These factors range from those that are widely seen as morally relevant, such as how badly off a group is; to those whose moral relevance is disputed, such as group members’ blameworthiness for their plight; to those that are widely seen as morally irrelevant, such as group members’ race or ethnicity.

¹⁹Definitions of “normal” include “usual” and “free from any disorder; healthy”; *Oxford English Dictionary*, available at <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed Nov. 27, 2006).

²⁰Rossiter 1963; Ackerman 2004; Keen 1994.

Does emergency status—that is, whether or not a situation is an emergency—fall into this last category (of morally irrelevant factors that nonetheless influence aid distribution)? I think not. We defined “emergency” as a situation of urgent need, and urgency is morally relevant to aid distribution—or so I shall argue. However, as I also noted above, ordinary usage of the term “emergency” is multifaceted: among other things, emergencies are “unexpected.” Expanding on this idea, I now want to suggest that situations that are called emergencies often have event-like features. That is, they often involve a rapid, negative divergence from (what the speaker takes to be) a normatively acceptable state of affairs. Situations that have event-like features are more obviously and paradigmatically emergencies than situations that lack them, even though the latter are sometimes called emergencies.

It is event-like features—*not* emergency situations—that, I will argue, ought to be on our list of morally irrelevant factors that nonetheless seem to causally affect the distribution of international aid. Event-like features characterize some (but not all) emergencies, to a greater or lesser degree. They are also to some extent subjective. As I noted above, while situations of urgent need that lack event-like features are sometimes designated as emergencies (for example, as chronic emergencies or protracted crises), situations of urgent need that *have* event-like features seem more likely to be socially recognized as emergencies, and to receive additional resources for that reason. While calling malaria an emergency is perfectly comprehensible, calling a flood an emergency is much more intuitive.

Situations of urgent need that (seem to people in donor countries to) have event-like features include some natural disasters (for example, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and 2005 earthquake in Pakistan), some large-scale industrial accidents (for example, Chernobyl, Bhopal), and some violent conflicts (for example, the Rwandan genocide and, arguably, the genocide in Sudan). Examples of situations of urgent need that lack event-like features include protracted crises (for example, ongoing severe food scarcity and/or ongoing or sporadic violent conflict) in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Tajikistan in the 1990s.²¹

Because of the institutional divide between emergency aid and development aid described above, the primary effect of event-like features is not to divert resources from development aid to emergency aid, but rather to distort resource distribution *among* emergencies (that is, among situations of urgent need) from chronic emergencies to event-like emergencies. The fact that some event-like emergencies, such as the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, receive relatively little aid does not disprove this claim. Event-like features are just a few factors among many that are likely to causally affect aid distribution; they can be overridden by other factors in a given case.

²¹Development Initiatives 2003, p. 38; Development Initiatives 2005, p. 23. While insufficient aid is sometimes part of what makes an emergency chronic, it is usually not the main factor (particularly in contexts of violent conflict).

A. EVENT-LIKE FEATURES, THE CONCEPT OF EMERGENCY AND INTERNATIONAL AID

Before discussing how event-like features affect the distribution of international aid, it is worth noting their centrality to the concept of emergency more generally. This is evident in phrases such as “emergency powers” and “emergency room.” The logic of emergency powers reflects an underlying conception of emergencies as event-like. As Ferejohn and Pasquino write, “[e]mergency powers in modern constitutions are to be employed to deal with temporary situations and are aimed at restoring the conditions to a state in which the ordinary constitutional system of rights and procedures can resume operations.”²² Thus, the more event-like features a situation has—that is, the more it is characterized by a rapid, negative divergence from a normatively acceptable state of affairs—the more justified the use of emergency powers is. Likewise, emergency rooms are places where a patient’s condition is stabilized so that health can eventually be restored. In both contexts, the appropriate response to an emergency involves putting things back to the way they were. In this respect, the concept of emergency is highly conservative. This can also be seen by comparing “emergency” to “crisis.” While “emergency” implies a need to return to the status quo, a crisis is “a state of affairs in which a decisive change *for better or worse* is imminent.”²³

While event-like features are integral to the concept of emergency in general, they play an especially prominent role in the context of international aid, in particular. As noted above, development aid is provided in (what are taken to be) “normal” situations, where “normal” means both “usual” and “normatively acceptable.” Correspondingly, emergency aid is provided in situations that are unusual and normatively unacceptable. The emergency/development dichotomy thus helps to link unusualness and normative unacceptability within the concept of emergency. As a result, unusual situations—that is situations with event-like features—are seen as less normatively acceptable than usual situations, even if the usual and unusual situations are otherwise alike.

We have now arrived at the dissimilarity between emergency aid and emergency powers mentioned above. Linking normative unacceptability and unusualness within the concept of emergency makes sense in the context of emergency powers: according to its proponents, the use of emergency powers is only justified if the status quo ante is normatively acceptable and the use of emergency powers will effectively return things to the status quo ante. In contrast, linking normative unacceptability and event-like features is highly problematic in contexts in which normatively unacceptable conditions are usual and ongoing, rather than unusual and event-like.

²²Ferejohn and Pasquino 2004.

²³*Oxford English Dictionary*, available at <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed Nov. 27, 2006). My italics.

Here is an example. A leading set of technical indicators used by aid organizations state that in the Middle East and North Africa, a crude mortality rate (CMR) of .3 deaths per 10,000 people per day constitutes an emergency, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa, it takes a crude mortality rate of .9 deaths per 10,000 people per day to constitute an emergency. This is because the usual CMR in sub-Saharan Africa (.44) is almost three times higher than the usual CMR in the Middle East and North Africa (.16).²⁴ Having different standards makes sense, if the question is simply which type of response to provide in a given location (that is, an emergency response for unusual situations, versus a development response for usual conditions). However, when emergency aid is the only type of aid that is available or appropriate, the “emergency threshold” no longer determines what type of aid is provided in a given place: it instead determines whether any aid at all will be provided. A baseline standard meant to demarcate what is usual from what is unusual thus functions instead to distinguish what is normatively acceptable from what is normatively unacceptable: because a CMR of .44 is usual in Sub-Saharan Africa, it comes to be seen as normatively acceptable. It is the change from the usual, not the objective level of need, that makes a situation seem normatively unacceptable. As one report states,

the situation may remain critical for so long that the norm is in effect redefined: what would, in other circumstances, be a situation so severe as to demand an exceptional [emergency] . . . response is judged not by any absolute standard, but in relation to what has become the norm for that context.²⁵

Nor does the official adoption of universal standards necessarily prevent this from happening. In South Sudan and Somalia, “20% global acute malnutrition (GAM) or higher has become accepted as normal, even though 20% GAM is 10% above what is considered acceptable by international standards.”²⁶

This dynamic is also visible at larger scales. Alertnet’s list of the “top 10 ‘forgotten’ emergencies” of 2005—as determined by a poll of 100 professionals—consists entirely of non-event-like emergencies (eight protracted crises and two diseases).²⁷ Development Initiatives also reports that due to “political priority, communication or public attention, some emergencies are ‘forgotten’ or unprioritised.” These “forgotten emergencies” are almost exclusively chronic emergencies in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Eritrea and Sierra Leone.²⁸ In contrast, examples of emergencies that are prioritized, according to DI’s analysis, include the Indian

²⁴Sphere 2004, p. 261.

²⁵Darcy and Hofmann 2003, p. 15. The authors do not identify the standard to which they refer.

²⁶Darcy and Hofmann 2003, p. 15.

²⁷Alertnet 2005.

²⁸Development Initiatives 2003, pp. 35–38. See also Development Initiatives 2006, p. 28.

Ocean tsunami, postwar Southeastern Europe, Honduras after Hurricane Mitch, post-genocide Rwanda, and Sudan during the genocide—all situations with event-like features. (Aid to Sudan increased significantly after the situation in Darfur was labeled a genocide.) Given these tendencies, it is no surprise that officials seeking to generate interest in non-event-like emergencies (and non-emergency needs) often compare them to event-like emergencies. For example, malaria's effects have been compared to “a jumbo jet crashing every day” and a “silent tsunami.”²⁹ In contrast, no one called the 2004 tsunami a silent malaria epidemic.

Proving that increased aid to one emergency helps to cause decreased aid to another is tricky. Lanzer argues that even though it generated significant donations, the 2004 tsunami “diverted some funds and caused delays to money reaching programmes in other crisis regions”—such as, again, chronic emergencies in places such as Chad, Somalia and Chechnya.³⁰ This is noteworthy because, while it was unique in many respects, the response to the tsunami was also typical, in that international emergency aid is usually concentrated on a few high-profile emergencies. While resource allocation is not strictly zero-sum, it seems likely that some resources are diverted from chronic emergencies to these more high-profile emergencies.

As I discuss below, there are many plausible reasons for a given actor to choose to aid victims of a particular event-like emergency rather than victims of a particular chronic emergency. What I have been arguing, however, is that part of what informs this choice is an emergency/development paradigm that equates unusualness with normative unacceptability, and in so doing, diverts aid from non-event-like emergencies to event-like emergencies.

A main reason why this happens seems to be that event-like features are psychologically compelling. Situations with event-like features are easier to visualize, and their victims easier to sympathize with, than situations without event-like features. Moreover, because wealthy foreigners have the means to escape slow-onset emergencies, they are more likely to be affected by rapid-onset emergencies. This makes it easier for other wealthy foreigners, watching such emergencies at a distance, to think “that could have been me.” Rapidity of onset and the presence of foreigners also make situations more newsworthy to Western media outlets. There might even be biological or evolutionary reasons why people pay more attention to new events than to ongoing circumstances.³¹

²⁹Dugger, Celia. “Push for New Tactics as War on Malaria Falters,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2006. The auditory emphasis of these analogies is noteworthy. See Longhurst (1994) on “loud” emergencies.

³⁰Lanzer 2005; Also see Development Initiatives 2005, p. 26. For a conflicting view see Development Initiatives (2006, p. 8).

³¹Shoemaker 1996.

B. EVENT-LIKE FEATURES AND PROXIMITY

In that they are psychologically compelling but (I will argue) morally irrelevant, event-like features function analogously to how cosmopolitans claim that physical proximity functions. Just as the suffering of people who are physically proximate is (with some exceptions) easier to sympathize with than the suffering of people who are physically distant, the suffering of victims of event-like emergencies is easier to sympathize with than the suffering of victims of chronic emergencies or those with non-emergency needs. Correspondingly, just as we are (often) tempted to prioritize aiding those who are nearby over those who are far away, we are also tempted to prioritize victims of event-like emergencies over those with other kinds of needs. Just as cosmopolitans argue that proximity is irrelevant to our obligations to assist others, I will argue that for those who subscribe to one or more of several plausible distributive principles, event-like features are morally irrelevant to aid distribution. Yet, just as most cosmopolitans acknowledge that physical proximity is intertwined with other factors that (arguably) *are* morally relevant to the obligation to assist others, such as participation in shared political institutions and the ability to provide effective assistance, event-like features are intertwined with—but ultimately, I will argue, distinct from—the aforementioned distributive principles.³²

An examination of the relationship between the substantive argument and examples in Peter Singer's seminal article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" illustrates the proximity-like appeal of event-like features. On the one hand, Singer seems to endorse the maximal prevention of suffering, regardless of whether that suffering is caused by an emergency. On the other hand, all of his examples are not only emergencies, but event-like emergencies. Some of the intuitive and rhetorical force of his argument seems to rest on his use of these examples, even though complying with his normative argument might well entail providing development aid or aid to victims of chronic emergencies.

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer acknowledges the distinction between emergency and development aid, but he denies that it is important for his argument. He writes,

[t]he Bengal emergency is just the latest and most acute in a series of major emergencies in various parts of the world, arising from natural and from man-made causes. There are also many parts of the world in which people die from malnutrition and lack of food independent of any special emergency. I take Bengal as my example only because it is the present concern. . . .³³

This statement implies that Singer could have used a non-emergency situation (for example, severely poor Indians) or a non-event-like emergency (for example,

³²Nussbaum 1996; Tan 2003; Singer 2004.

³³Singer 1972. *Why* was it "the present concern"? In part because it was an emergency with event-like features. The other references to Singer in this section are to this article.

chronic high rates of malnutrition in Niger) as his example, rather than Bengali refugees fleeing a cyclone, civil war and poverty.

In addition to the Bengal refugee situation, Singer also invokes another emergency: a child drowning in a pond. Singer writes, “if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out.” Insofar as we intuitively agree with this argument, Singer has gone some way toward persuading us of the validity of his more general principle that “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” But if the distinctions among 1) non-emergencies, 2) non-event-like emergencies, and 3) event-like emergencies do not matter, which is what Singer’s substantive argument implies, then he could have offered examples of the first two types to illustrate his general principle. For instance, he could have written, “if I learn that many children will likely drown in a pond unless a fence is built around the pond, I ought to build the fence,” or “if I learn of an impoverished child with HIV who will die soon if she does not receive inexpensive medicine, but who can live many happy years if she receives the medicine, I ought to pay for the medicine.” These are examples of Singer’s principle, because they involve someone preventing something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Yet, they are less compelling than the drowning child and Bengali refugee examples. By invoking the drowning child and Bengali refugees examples, Singer relies at least in part on the intuitive force of their event-like features, even though these features are not morally relevant according to his utilitarian argument (or, I will argue, according to several other normative perspectives).

When one reads Singer’s article focusing on the issue of proximity, the drowning child and the Bengali refugees look very different: the child is near and the refugees are far. Logical consistency is meant to force us to acknowledge that our belief that we are obliged to aid the nearby child applies with equal force to the far-off Bengalis. In contrast, when one reads the article focusing on the issue of emergency, the drowning child and Bengali refugees look far more similar: both are affected by event-like emergencies. Singer’s argument implies that the intuitions sparked by *both* the drowning child *and* the Bengalis ought to be extended even further, to situations of which Singer offers no examples: non-event-like emergencies and non-emergency needs.

Singer writes that “we”—he and his readers—“ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can.” This implies that, given insufficient resources, we should prevent suffering as cost-effectively as possible. But while Singer proposes that we donate to the “Bengal Relief Fund,” a fund that presumably only assists those affected by the Bengal emergency, it is possible that, for reasons I discuss below, more suffering could have been prevented if donors provided development aid elsewhere and/or emergency aid to victims of a chronic emergency. In other words, Singer’s empirical example (“donate to the Bengal relief fund”) might not

have been the best way to carry out his normative objective (“prevent as much suffering as possible”). My point is not that Singer’s substantive argument is wrong, but rather that the potential mismatch between his argument and his examples illustrates the strong intuitive appeal of event-like features.

C. THE MORAL IRRELEVANCE OF EVENT-LIKE FEATURES

Despite their intuitive appeal, prioritizing event-like emergencies over non-event-like emergencies is inconsistent with several well-known principles that are likely to elicit broad support as guides for the distribution of international aid. These include principles based on need, desert, minimizing harm, maximizing overall benefit, and responding to special obligations. In other words, insofar as one endorses one or more of these principles, event-like features are morally irrelevant to aid distribution.

Many NGOs, in particular, explicitly claim to provide aid on the basis of *need* with priority to the worst-off.³⁴ It might initially appear that victims of event-like emergencies are systematically worse-off than victims of non-event-like emergencies. One reason for this perception is that, as noted above, the suffering of victims of event-like emergencies is often easier to imagine and sympathize with than the suffering of victims of non-event-like emergencies. Victims of event-like emergencies might also appear to be especially badly off because they have experienced a rapid decline in their standard of living. However, while such a decline might be more traumatic than a slow decline or a persistently low level of well-being, victims of rapid-onset emergencies are not systematically worse-off than victims of slow-onset emergencies. In particular, if well-being is conceptualized in terms of capabilities rather than suffering, rapidity of onset appears less important than it otherwise would. Likewise, if duration of suffering is taken into account, victims of rapid-onset emergencies will often be better-off than victims of chronic emergencies, because they will have been suffering for a shorter period. Finally, even people with a low but seemingly predictable level of well-being often lack meaningful stability in their lives, because even a minor disturbance can have calamitous effects. Thus, contrary to initial appearances, providing aid based on need is inconsistent with prioritizing event-like emergencies over non-event-like emergencies.

While they endorse aid based on need, many NGOs and international organizations eschew *desert* as a basis for distributing international aid. Some theorists, however, have viewed desert as a potentially plausible distributive principle for international aid.³⁵ It might initially seem that, as with need,

³⁴Principles of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes, available at <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/code.asp> (accessed Nov. 29, 2006). Some NGOs officially endorse this principle only for choosing *among* emergency projects. Also see Parfit 1997.

³⁵Miller 2004.

providing aid on the basis of desert is consistent with systematically prioritizing event-like emergencies over chronic emergencies. But while events such as earthquakes and tsunamis are no one's fault, the extent of the harm that they cause is often at least partly attributable to identifiable actors, for example, governments that fail to set up early warning systems and corrupt building inspectors. Conversely, even though chronic emergencies are often largely the result of human choices, many potential aid recipients (for example, children, the elderly, women, disenfranchised minority populations) affected by such emergencies often play little or no causal role in perpetuating them. For these reasons, the relationship between providing aid based on desert and prioritizing event-like emergencies is far weaker than it first appears.

At least since the publication of Mary Anderson's book of that title, many NGOs and governmental donors have sought to "*do no harm*."³⁶ It might appear that actors who wish to do no harm are better off assisting victims of event-like emergencies than victims of chronic emergencies. Indeed, aid to victims of chronic emergencies often causes some harm. However, aid to victims of event-like emergencies can also cause significant harm (although the baselines against which such harm should be measured are sometimes unclear).³⁷ Nonetheless, that both types of aid can be detrimental makes sense if one considers that both involve a rapid infusion of large quantities of resources into unstable, resource-poor areas.

Yet another widely endorsed distributive principle is a principle of *maximizing aid's overall benefit*. To be plausible, a principle of this kind would have to incorporate several limits, for example, a cap above which further increases in well-being would not be deemed morally significant. Prioritizing event-like emergencies over chronic emergencies might *seem* consistent with maximizing overall benefit, insofar as the former type of case seems to involve merely putting things back to the way they were, fixing what was broken. Indeed, the effects of some event-like emergencies can be ameliorated relatively cheaply, because victims are not that badly off to begin with, and/or they retain a significant capacity to rebuild their lives on their own. Providing aid in these cases might not be cost-effective, however, precisely because people are not that badly off and/or they can recover on their own or with assistance from other sources. In other cases, however, victims of event-like emergencies *are* profoundly badly off. In these cases, external assistance might be highly beneficial, but it will not necessarily be inexpensive—especially if it must be provided for years, and especially if the damage caused by the rapid-onset emergency has auxiliary causes that are entrenched in the affected society and will slow recovery (for example, endemic corruption). Perhaps most importantly, even if it fails to ameliorate the

³⁶Anderson 1999.

³⁷Terry 2002; de Waal 1997.

underlying problem, aid to victims of chronic emergencies can generate significant benefits and positive externalities, including increased pressure on political actors to solve the underlying problem.

Finally, various actors take themselves to have *special obligations* to aid recipients and other vulnerable groups. Special obligations are obligations that certain actors have to certain other actors in virtue of a particular relationship or connection (in contrast, general duties are owed by all actors to all other actors).³⁸ A particularly important type of special obligation that aid organizations often take themselves to have is to current aid recipients. As one aid organization states, “[t]he decision to continue an intervention is weighed by different standards than the initial decision to intervene. Once we are working in an area and engaging a population we develop responsibilities to those people. . . .”³⁹

Aid organizations that wish to avoid having unfulfilled special obligations to those they assist therefore have two options: they can refrain from initiating projects that are likely to generate extensive special obligations in the future, or they can make initial distributive decisions on the basis of other considerations, and incorporate responsiveness to special obligations into decisions about whether to continue providing aid to populations that they are already assisting.

The second of the two strategies does not seem likely to entail systematically prioritizing event-like emergencies over other emergencies. NGOs do generally have a stronger reason to provide extra aid to groups that they are already assisting (for whatever reason) that have been hit by a rapid-onset emergency than groups that they are already assisting that are simply continuing to suffer due to an ongoing chronic emergency. But the reason for this is one of utility—disaster-affected people need help fast—not special obligations. Special obligations are forged in ongoing relationships, regardless of whether the context is an event-like or chronic emergency.

The first strategy, in contrast, might well entail systematically prioritizing event-like emergencies over chronic emergencies. For example, one worry voiced by aid organizations about applying international standards in Sudan and Somalia was that it “would lead to emergency targeted feeding interventions in many areas, with little prospect of them ever being closed” (that is, because special obligations would develop).⁴⁰ What this probably suggests to most actors, however, is that a strategy of preemption puts too much weight on avoiding special obligations at the expense of other more important considerations.

³⁸Scheffler 2001, pp. 49–50.

³⁹*Médecins Sans Frontières*-Holland, Middle-term policy, 1/2003–12/2005, p. 11.

⁴⁰Darcy and Hofmann 2003, p. 15.

III. EMERGENCY AID, DEVELOPMENT AID AND DISTRIBUTIVE PRINCIPLES

I have argued that the emergency/development paradigm creates a link within the concept of emergency between unusualness and normative unacceptability. This link contributes to the prioritization of event-like emergencies over chronic emergencies, even though this prioritization is inconsistent with several widely accepted distributive principles. (I did not attempt to defend these principles.) For anyone who endorses one or more of these principles, the correct response to this state of affairs is not to re-emphasize development aid at the expense of emergency aid. One reason for this is that (as I have already argued) event-like features seem to primarily misallocate aid *among* emergencies.

As I will argue in this section, however, there is also a deeper problem: the emergency/development distinction is an incoherent basis for normative debate about the distribution of international aid, *even when the distorting effects of event-like features are removed from the picture*—that is, even when emergencies are defined only as situations of urgent need. In other words, the distinction between emergency aid (understood as aid in response to urgent need) and development aid does not track the distributive principles that I have been discussing. Making distributive decisions on the basis of the emergency/development distinction therefore entails *not* making them on the basis of these principles, and vice versa. Anyone who accepts even one of these principles will therefore be poorly served by evaluating aid distribution in terms of the emergency/development paradigm.

This claim is not obvious. To the contrary, when one considers the relationship between emergency aid and development aid, on the one hand, and the aforementioned distributive principles, on the other hand, the initial conclusion that one is likely to come to is that emphasizing need, desert and/or avoiding harm are likely to entail prioritizing emergency aid, while maximizing overall benefit is likely to entail prioritizing development aid. None of these conclusions, however, holds up to scrutiny. (Special obligations do not yield strong intuitions either way.)

A. DISTRIBUTIVE PRINCIPLES

Need. As just noted, one might think that the more weight a distributive theory places on providing aid based on need with priority to the worst-off, the more resources it would allocate to emergency aid as opposed to development aid. After all, emergencies are situations of urgent need, and urgency (on our definition) entails severity—and what is prioritizing the worst-off if not prioritizing those with the most severe need? But this conclusion is too hasty.

One reason why prioritizing the worst-off does not entail prioritizing emergency aid is that, while development needs are less urgent than emergency

needs, they are not necessarily less severe than emergency needs. For example, both emergency efforts to control cholera outbreaks and development efforts to fight tuberculosis help to stave off involuntary premature death. In addition, development aid is generally provided in response to usual conditions, while emergency aid is provided in response to unusual situations. Yet, as I noted above, usual conditions in some places are often worse than unusual situations in other places. As a result, development aid is sometimes provided in contexts that are, according to many measures, worse than situations that trigger emergency responses elsewhere.

Finally, different ways of conceptualizing and measuring need—for example, in terms of suffering, primary goods, vulnerability or capabilities—are likely to generate different conclusions about which needs addressed by development aid are as severe as, or more severe than, needs addressed by emergency aid. For example, a Rawlsian might view needs associated with protection from sexual violence as more severe than needs related to material deprivation, while a virtue ethicist might argue that needs associated with poverty are as severe as those associated with physical security.⁴¹ In short, while there are many approaches to conceptualizing and measuring need, few are likely to lead to a result in which prioritizing those with the most severe need would necessarily entail systematically prioritizing emergency aid over development aid—or, for that matter, development aid over emergency aid.

Nonetheless, it might still seem that if two people have equally severe needs, but one person's needs are more urgent than the other's, that the person with the more urgent needs is worse-off. I don't think that this is the case, however. Imagine two hostages being held in situations that are in all ways identical, except that one will be shot in an hour and the other will be shot in a day.⁴² These hostages are equally badly off, except that one's situation is more urgent than the other's. Aside from niggling about whether it is better to be dead than to be alive but held hostage, I don't think that we have a strong feeling about which hostage is worse-off. As a result, if only one hostage can be saved, we lack a strong intuition about which one it should be. However, if there is even a small chance that more help might be forthcoming, then we suddenly *do* feel strongly that the person who will be shot sooner should be saved. But the reason for this is utilitarian—saving the hostage with the more urgent needs increases the chances of saving both hostages. The reason is *not* that the hostage with more urgent need is worse-off.

Likewise, imagine that in one town, 30 people trapped by a flood have a 95% probability of dying unless they receive aid in five days. In another town, there is a 50/50 chance that 200 people will die from waterborne parasites over the next year unless the town's water supply is improved. The cost of both projects is the same. Only one aid organization exists. What should it do? If resources are

⁴¹Sen 1993; Rawls 1971; Nussbaum 2000.

⁴²Adapted from Unger 1996, p. 45.

unlimited, it should aid the flood victims first, followed by the people who need clean water. But what if the organization can do only one project? Given the probabilities, numbers of people affected, and time horizons involved, one might think that the organization should fix the water supply. However, if there is a chance that more resources will be forthcoming, then the organization might reasonably choose to assist the flood victims, and hope that there will be more resources available later to assist the town with dirty water. Again, the reason to prioritize the flood victims is not that the urgency of their need makes them worse-off, but rather that aiding them is at least potentially conducive to generating more benefit overall.

Desert. I suggested above that at first glance, providing aid on the basis of desert seems to entail prioritizing event-like emergencies over chronic emergencies. It also seems to entail prioritizing emergency aid (in general) over development aid. But would-be recipients of emergency aid are, as a group, no more or less deserving than would-be recipients of development aid, for many of the same reasons that victims of non-event-like emergencies are not less deserving than victims of event-like emergencies. In both contexts, harm and suffering can usually be traced in part to the actions or culpable inaction of identifiable actors. But the set of blameworthy actors often does not overlap significantly with the set of potential aid recipients.

Do no harm. I also suggested above that emergency aid in the context of chronic emergencies is not more likely to cause harm than emergency aid in the context of event-like emergencies. Likewise, emergency aid in general is not less (or more) likely to cause harm than development aid in general. Development aid—in particular, large-scale development projects—can have negative effects.⁴³ While emergency aid might have fewer negative effects than large-scale development projects, small-scale participatory development projects might have fewer negative effects than both emergency aid and large-scale development projects. With regard to avoiding harm, one category is not better than the other.

Maximize overall benefit. The point of the flood example above was that, when future resource flows are uncertain, prioritizing urgent situations can be conducive to maximizing aid's overall benefit. However, when one considers *all* of the factors that are likely to influence aid's overall benefit, one's initial intuition is likely to be that maximizing overall benefit entails prioritizing development aid over emergency aid. Thomas Pogge makes an argument along these lines: he endorses a highly consequentialist distributive theory for international aid and implies (though he does not use these terms) that distributing resources in accordance with his theory would entail prioritizing development over emergency aid. Pogge writes,

Other things being equal, an INGO [international non-governmental organization] should govern its decision making about candidate projects by such rules and

⁴³Easterly 2006.

procedures as are expected to maximize its long-run cost-effectiveness, defined as the expected aggregate moral value of the projects it undertakes divided by the expected aggregate cost of these projects.⁴⁴

This formula is not entirely utility-maximizing. As Pogge states, “[i]t does not instruct us simply to maximize the good, defined as harm reduction, but instead gives greater weight to protecting from harm those who are worse off.” The formula thus includes a principled commitment to assisting the worst-off, but this commitment can be overridden when groups are especially expensive to assist. As Pogge writes, “INGOs ought to discriminate in favor of badly off people who can be cheaply protected from harm and thus against badly off people whom it would be expensive to protect.” This entails a willingness to prioritize the second-worst-off group over the worst-off group if the gains in overall utility (or in Pogge’s terms, “harm reduction”) would be significant.

Pogge suggests—in an appropriately tentative and qualified way—that complying with his theory would likely entail focusing aid in a small number of stable countries with “good policies” and large numbers of poor people living in close proximity to each other, such as Ethiopia and India. The requirements of stability and good policies would seem to exclude aid in contexts of ongoing violent conflict and aid to authoritarian regimes. The focus on a small number of countries would also seem to exclude emergency aid to victims of natural disasters in countries other than those in which resources were being concentrated. Together, these suggestions imply that maximally reducing harm would likely entail prioritizing development aid over emergency aid.

There are, however, five reasons to doubt that development aid in general is more cost-effective than emergency aid in general. First, while the number of deaths caused by violent group conflict and other emergencies is less than the number of deaths caused by severe poverty alone, the difference is not as great as Pogge suggests. Pogge writes that in 1998 there were 588,000 deaths due to war and 18 million due to starvation and preventable diseases.⁴⁵ However, the first figure only includes deaths caused directly by war; it does not include deaths from disease and hunger caused indirectly by war. The International Rescue Committee undertook a study that concluded that 3.3 million people died “due to war” in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone from 1998–2002. “Of these deaths, 86% were caused by communicable diseases and malnutrition.”⁴⁶ While the IRC study is imperfect, it suggests that the indirect effects of violent group conflict surpass the direct effects by orders of magnitude. Therefore, while violent conflict might not cause as many deaths as hunger and disease unrelated to conflict, the difference is less drastic than

⁴⁴Pogge 2006, p. 241. Unless otherwise noted, references to Pogge are to this chapter.

⁴⁵Pogge 2001.

⁴⁶International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2003, ch. 7.

Pogge suggests, and addressing these problems might be more cost-effective than he supposes—especially if aid to conflict victims is accompanied by advocacy on their behalf.

A second issue involves counterfactuals. The effects of aid provision should be calculated not by comparing aid recipients' situation at T_2 to the way things were when aid provision began at T_1 , but rather subjunctively, by comparing aid recipients' situation at T_2 to the way things would have been at T_2 had aid not been provided. If aid is not provided in a given case, conditions might improve on their own or due to other external factors, they might stay the same, or they might get worse. Conflicts and epidemics—that is, situations that are usually deemed emergencies—often fall in the category of cases that are likely to get much worse if no aid is provided. In such cases, even if aid cannot make things better, it might help to prevent things from getting much worse.⁴⁷

Pogge writes, with reference to development aid, that “there is so much severe poverty in so many different countries that one can find plenty of places where money can be effectively spent.”⁴⁸ A third consideration is that this might not be true. Even if emergency aid is more expensive than development aid, it could still be more cost-effective than development aid if development aid does not work. While there have been some successful development projects, “stories about so-called ‘white elephants’—expensive projects that for some simple reason fail to work—are legion.”⁴⁹ I cannot resolve the debate about the effectiveness of development aid here; I only note that such a debate is ongoing among people sympathetic to the world's poor.⁵⁰

A fourth reason why development aid might not be more cost-effective than emergency aid involves incentives. Pogge supposes that most governments want international aid, which is why he thinks that providing aid in countries with “good policies” will motivate other governments to adopt such policies. Some governments, however, appear unresponsive to such incentives. These unresponsive governments include some “failed states,” totalitarian regimes, and/or severe human rights violators. More importantly, because development aid entails actual or apparent support for recipient governments, many donor governments resist providing development aid to these kinds of states anyway. Donor governments do, however, sometimes offer emergency aid, because emergency aid provides less material and symbolic support to the regime in power. While providing emergency aid to residents of countries with “bad policies” is often not cost-effective if viewed as mere service provision, it appears much more cost-effective if its positive externalities—for example, contact with aid recipients and a better understanding of their situation—is taken into account.

⁴⁷Anderson 1999.

⁴⁸Pogge 2001.

⁴⁹Jakobsen 2000.

⁵⁰Easterly 2006.

A fifth reason why it might be inefficient for NGOs, in particular, to do only development aid is that some donors are only willing to fund emergency programs.⁵¹ NGOs have strong utilitarian reasons to retain the capacity to effectively use the resources provided to them, while also urging donors to fund what they (NGOs) take to be the most worthwhile activities. In addition, as Pogge points out, providing emergency aid (particularly to victims of event-like emergencies) can enable NGOs to raise money that they can then use in lower-profile contexts.

Finally, adjusting Pogge's theory to accommodate a potential objection would also lessen the degree to which abiding by it would entail prioritizing development aid over emergency aid. While Pogge argues that aid organizations should not distribute aid fairly among groups if doing so would undermine cost-effectiveness, he acknowledges that his "general rejection of distributive fairness constraints seems least plausible in cases where the fact that some people are harder to protect is a result of injustice suffered by these very people." What Pogge does not acknowledge as explicitly is that there is a systematic relationship between being intentionally and violently persecuted and being expensive to assist.⁵² This correlation supports Pogge's claim that distributing aid on utilitarian grounds would entail prioritizing development aid in peaceful places, but it also suggests that if his distributive scheme were modified in the direction of fairness between "victims of [violent] injustice" and people who are not victims of such injustice, dramatically more resources would go to emergency aid (in particular, to victims of violent injustice).

I have been questioning the idea that distributing aid on (largely) utilitarian grounds would entail prioritizing development aid over emergency aid. What about the opposite claim—that emergency aid is systematically preferable to development aid on utilitarian grounds? As already noted, if development aid does not work, but emergency aid works, then emergency aid is preferable to development aid on utilitarian grounds. There is, however, no consensus that development aid does not work.

Special Obligations. I argued above that there are two strategies that actors can use to avoid having unfulfilled special obligations: they can avoid providing aid in contexts in which extensive special obligations are likely to develop, and they can fulfill special obligations after they arise. Neither of these strategies is likely to entail systematically prioritizing emergency aid or development aid. NGOs that wish to avoid providing aid in situations where special obligations are likely to develop might avoid chronic emergencies, but they would not avoid emergencies in general. Likewise, while the special obligations that arise in the course of an ongoing relationship with aid recipients can lead an NGO to provide

⁵¹Carens 2006.

⁵²Minear and Weiss 1995, p. 80.

additional aid, special obligations are no more or less likely to develop in emergency situations than in development contexts.

B. IMPLICATIONS

Insofar as principles based on need, desert, avoiding harm, maximizing overall benefit and responding to special obligations capture the moral reasons that should inform the distribution of international aid, the emergency/development distinction should have no moral weight in determining distributive outcomes.⁵³ To the contrary, efforts to achieve distributive outcomes framed in terms of the emergency/development distinction serve only to displace the aforementioned distributive principles.

In light of what I have said so far, one might think that the categories of emergency and development should simply be jettisoned. But in addition to being infeasible in the short term, this would likely be highly detrimental: alongside their negative effects on aid distribution, the categories of emergency and development also generate significant benefits for aid provision more generally. In particular, they promote the recognition and institutionalization of on-the-ground practices that are effective for negotiating particular political contexts, such as operational principles of independence and impartiality in emergencies. Likewise, retaining the category of emergency aid might increase the total quantity of aid that is available, by enabling aid organizations to capitalize on the intuitions in favor of emergency aid that are widespread among donor publics.⁵⁴ As these examples suggest, the existence of the categories of emergency and development aid can actually *help* actors—NGOs in particular—comply with the distributive principles that I have been discussing. However, this is only possible if the two categories are treated as potential *means* for complying with distributive principles, not as proxies or replacements for them.

The challenge, then, is to reframe the debate about the distribution of international aid from one that is shaped largely by the emergency/development paradigm to one that is focused largely on distributive principles. The categories of emergency and development could be excluded from distributive decisions as much as possible, but retained for those aspects of aid provision for which they are useful (such as identifying effective operational principles). Efforts along these lines would necessarily be messy and incomplete, but they are at least arguably

⁵³This argument does not cover all potentially plausible distributive principles: a principle of prioritizing victims of direct and brutal violence would likely entail systematically prioritizing emergency aid over development aid; a principle of prioritizing contexts in which aid recipients can participate as fully as possible would entail prioritizing development over emergency aid.

⁵⁴NGO incomes tend to decline after emergencies, but they often remain above pre-emergency levels (Development Initiatives 2003, p. 54).

superior to misrecognizing the normative status of emergency and development aid.

In addition to facilitating fairness among potential aid recipients, this focus on distributive principles would force donors and outside observers to confront the effects of aid scarcity more directly than current practices demand. In particular, a focus on distributive principles highlights the disjuncture between, on the one hand, one or more seemingly acceptable distributive principles, and on the other hand, the losses and sacrifices (in the form of incomplete compliance with and forced choices among those principles) that scarcity imposes. In this way, a focus on principles connects questions about aid distribution more directly to broader questions about the total quantity of aid that governments, intergovernmental organizations, corporations, individuals and other actors make available.

IV. CONCLUSION

We live in a world of unimaginable suffering and deprivation. It would be better if no one needed international aid—or, at least, if there was enough such aid to go around. Unfortunately, people still do need international aid, and it matters a great deal how that aid is distributed. I have suggested that the categories of emergency and development aid are deeply misleading in this regard, for two reasons. First, by conflating normative unacceptability and unusualness within the category of emergency, the emergency/development distinction seems to skew aid distribution away from chronic emergencies and toward event-like emergencies. This prioritization of event-like emergencies is inconsistent with several widely accepted distributive principles. Second, despite appearances to the contrary, even when event-like features are excluded from the concept of emergency and “emergency” is defined only as a situation of urgent need, the categories of emergency and development still do not track the aforementioned distributive principles. Therefore, insofar as these principles are valid, the emergency/development distinction does not provide a useful basis for normatively evaluating the distribution of international aid.

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