Making Aid Work

How to fight global poverty—effectively Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee

By the fourth day after the October 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, the world had woken up to the fact that something very big had happened. The government was estimating that 50,000 or more people had been injured or killed, and many survivors were likely trapped somewhere without water or food. The reaction was immediate and life affirming. Everyone showed up to help: international and local NGOs, the United Nations, and groups of college students with rented trucks full of food and other necessities. Money flowed in from everywhere. The Indian government, reversing a policy of many years, announced that it would open the highly sensitive border between the two Kashmirs so that aid could flow more easily.

In the middle of all this excitement, a small group of economists based primarily in the United States started worrying about how the aid would get to the right people. There were thousands of villages in the area, including some that were a hike of six hours or more from the road. How would aid workers find out which ones among these were badly hit? No one seemed to know. To work efficiently, the workers would need a map of the area with the geographic coordinates for all the villages—then they would be able to figure out the distance between the villages and the epicenter of the quake. But no one in Pakistan seemed to have such a map, and no one in charge seemed to feel the need for one. So the economists, Tahir Andhrabi of Pomona College; Ali Cheema of Lahore University; Jishnu Das, Piet Buyss, and Tara Vishwanath of the World Bank; and Asim Khwaja of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, set about finding one and making it available.

Without such a map, there was an obvious danger that most of the aid would end up in the villages that were closer to the road, where the damage was more visible. There would be places that no one among the aid givers had heard of: who was going to get aid to them? To make matters worse, no one was coordinating the hundreds of aid groups. No one was keeping track of where the aid had reached and where it was yet to reach. As a result, some villages were ending up with many trucks from different donors while others were left waiting for their first consignment.

Improving coordination would not be hard, the economists realized. All that was needed was an office or a Web site to which everyone could report the names and locations of the villages where they had sent aid and the amounts sent. It would then be easy to build a database with reliable information about where the next consignments should go.

So, with the help of some contacts in the IT industry and some students at Lahore University, they designed a simple form and approached donors with a simple request: whenever you send out a consignment, please fill out one of these. There were paper copies available as well as a Web-based form and a call center.

The reaction, when it was not actually hostile, tended to be derisive: “Are you mad? You want us to spend time filling out forms when people are dying? We need to go and go fast.” Go where? the economists wanted to ask. But nobody seemed to care.
The Edhi Foundation, perhaps the most reputable Pakistani NGO, did not fill out a single form. The United Nations team filled out a few. The Pakistani army corps eventually agreed that the project was a good idea, but not before rejecting it completely for several days. Many smaller NGOs were eventually persuaded to join the effort, but the biggest players, for the most part, went their own way.

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In many ways this episode captures very well one of the core problems with delivering aid: institutional laziness. Here many of the standard problems were not an issue: the donors and the intermediaries were both genuinely trying to help. It is true that filling out forms is less gratifying than handing out aid; but no one was trying to deprive the aid workers of that moment of satisfaction. All they had to do was to wait the extra few minutes it would take to fill out a simple form and learn about where aid had reached and where it had not. But no one could be bothered to put in the time it would have taken to think harder about what they were doing. Aid thinking is lazy thinking. . .

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