

'We ask too much of humanitarianism'

Chris Herlinger | Jan. 20, 2012

When it comes to development work, organizations like Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service are widely seen as having a better record and certainly more credibility among residents in areas like Machakos, Kenya, than have East African governments. But that, some say, puts too much pressure on nongovernmental agencies.

"We ask too much of humanitarianism," said Alexander van Tulleken, a senior research fellow at Fordham University's Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs in New York City.

"A humanitarian crisis is always a political problem," he said, adding that aid and development agencies and networks -- like CRS, Caritas and others -- are, in effect, asked to solve or at least ameliorate problems that ultimately require, or should require, the attention of governments.

That does not mean, of course, that humanitarian action can be put aside, but in the case of Somalia, "I take the point that there is not a humanitarian solution [to that crisis]," Sibi Lawson-Marriott, a spokeswoman for the World Food Program, said during a recent Columbia University forum on the Horn of Africa situation. "We need to keep the politics and humanitarian response separate and focus on helping those who need it."

Indeed, in a situation like Somalia's, where "it's not just a drought or famine but a confluence of both" as Lawson-Marriott said, it falls to humanitarian agencies to respond -- though that has proven difficult, with the Islamic group al-Shabab's expulsion of aid groups in areas it controls and the United States not permitting assistance into Somalia for much of 2011 because of al-Shabab's alliance with al-Qaida.

Aid groups can only do so much, van Tulleken said.

"To use a medical analogy, you can't expect the emergency room doctors to engage in preventative medicine," van Tulleken said, adding that he believes Somalia was the "emblematic" humanitarian event in 2011. And with various elements at play -- drought, famine, insecurity, the "war on terror" and inadequate media coverage of what is happening within Somalia -- you may have a somber peek at the humanitarian crisis of the future.

Somalia, van Tulleken added, could be "the event that shapes the thinking of aid workers for years to come."

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