

3 December 2007, IRIN  
<http://www.irinnews.org>

JOHANNESBURG: A unique new benchmarking mechanism that looks at the performance of humanitarian aid donors has put Sweden in the lead.

Developed by DARA International, an evaluation agency based in Madrid, Spain, the Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) is the first of its kind to focus on the quality and quantity of humanitarian aid by individual members of the group of 23 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

"Sweden responds predictably and swiftly to complex emergencies," said Augusto López-Claros, Project Director of the HRI. "Its funding tends to be more focused than that of others on forgotten emergencies and on those sectors that receive low-profile media coverage." Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands follow closely on the heels of Sweden.

The countries have been appraised against the Principles and Good Practices of Humanitarian Donorship, endorsed in Stockholm in 2003 and considered a code of conduct for donors. The Stockholm Principles urge countries to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity, besides stressing the need for transparency and accountability in dispensing aid.

The HRI study polled over 800 humanitarian actors in eight crisis-torn countries - Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, Haiti, Lebanon, Niger, Pakistan and Sudan.

Humanitarian agencies were asked whether: donors were sticking to the Stockholm Principles; their funding decisions were swayed by political, economic, military or other strategic considerations; they worked effectively with other humanitarian partners; how actively they were integrating their relief efforts with broader development objectives.

According to DARA, the HRI will help strengthen progress towards conformance with the Stockholm Principles and accountability, but above all provide an opportunity to assess individual donor performance, a feature that other evaluation mechanisms do not offer.

Humanitarian donorship is usually evaluated by the Peer Review Mechanism of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, and while countries also appraise their performance through their own monitoring systems, these have limited scope, the authors of the HRI study commented.

The key issue is that donors should take account of the findings and try to improve their aid mechanisms, said David Roodman, a research fellow of the Centre for Global Development, a think-tank based in Washington. "It is only the Nordic countries who will study the findings and try to improve their systems."

Nordic countries top the list of the Centre for Global development's annual Commitment to Development Index 2007, which also has an aid component. "Non-governmental organisations could be instrumental in pressurising donor countries to improve, but that would perhaps only work in countries like France, the UK and Germany - not in the US, where the systems are very rigid," Roodman said.

DARA's López-Claros said, "My own experience with indices as international benchmarking tools is that countries can benefit from them if, instead of being annoyed at getting low rankings, policymakers ask themselves what improvements can be made to the policy framework to ensure improved performance."