Abstract. This paper studies India as a humanitarian donor against the backdrop of the country’s recent emergence in the international aid architecture. Has India grown to match its global potential in the area of humanitarian action? This paper finds that the country’s humanitarian action lacks strategic direction and remains a subsection of its development cooperation. This may partly be explained by India’s undersized and fragmented foreign aid infrastructure. New Delhi’s strong verbal support for the multilateral humanitarian system has thus far not resulted in marked action. Lacking a global vision, India’s modest humanitarian contributions are strongly focused on its neighborhood and mostly denote in-kind relief materials (food, medicines). Other strategic goals, such as trade and New Delhi’s bid to become a permanent member of the UNSC, do not seem to play a significant role. All things being equal, current investments in human resources to overcome fragmentation and growing participation in global policy fora will only pay long-term dividends.

Keywords: India, United Nations, humanitarian, aid, emerging donor

– Please do not cite or circulate without the author’s permission –
1. Introduction

The Indian Finance Minister dismissed British aid to India as “peanuts” in the midst of the heated debate over Britain’s overseas expenditures last year.\(^1\) This cheeky remark signposts that India’s transformation to a net donor, first announced in the 2003-2004 budget speech,\(^2\) has drawn to an end. Prompted by growth and global aspirations,\(^3\) Indian ministries and agencies disbursed $1 billion for overseas projects in 2007.\(^4\) In 2011, India ranked as the second largest emerging donor after China with an estimated $1.5 billion overseas disbursements.\(^5\) In the meantime, foreign aid projects managed by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) alone more than doubled, from $300 million in 2007 to over $700 million in 2012.\(^6\)

Manifestly emerging as a donor country,\(^7\) India’s humanitarian contributions have nonetheless idled in the past 10 years. The country’s humanitarian budget, averaging at $40 million, corresponds roughly to that of Luxembourg.\(^8\) As New Delhi actively bids for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the limited resources it devotes to humanitarian action is striking. After all, the coordination and implementation of humanitarian aid is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the United Nations system.

Idle humanitarian contributions, on the other hand, are increasingly characterized by a shift from bilateral to multilateral, albeit dominantly earmarked financing. India provided over $20 million through a United Nations appeal in response to the 2010 floods in Pakistan and has dispatched more than 100 thousand tons of high-energy biscuits to Afghanistan through the World Food Programme (WFP) to date.

Has India grown to match its global potential in the area of humanitarian action? Most research on India’s emergence as a donor has focused on development cooperation.\(^9\) Only a few studies, notably Price (2005) and Meier and Murthy (2011),\(^10\) analyzed India’s humanitarian assistance in detail. In answering the above question, this paper (i) examines the setup and recent changes in India’s foreign aid infrastructure; (ii) analyzes the country’s integration in the global humanitarian system; and (iii) gives a detailed account of India’s humanitarian portfolio in the last ten years based on data acquired from a 2012 Right to Information claim.
2. India’s foreign aid infrastructure

The same institutional arrangement services India’s overseas development and humanitarian portfolio. The Ministry of External Relations (MEA), the lead decision making outfit in India’s foreign aid infrastructure however uses specific terminology, such as “disaster relief”, “flood relief”, “cash assistance”, “food assistance”, “medical relief” and “humanitarian assistance” to distinguish humanitarian action from development cooperation.11

Projects worth more than $18 million (1 billion Indian rupees) require the approval of the cabinet.12 In all cases, however, the geographically specialized political divisions of the MEA are the drivers of India’s foreign aid portfolio – alongside with a whole range of bilateral and multilateral tasks. These divisions are headed by joint secretaries (heads of desks), who hold substantial power within the Ministry’s bureaucracy due to generally weak policy planning.13

In early 2012, five years after its first official announcement,15 the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) was established within the Ministry to oversee India’s foreign aid portfolio and thus carve out a more strategic direction for India’s ever-growing but hitherto chiefly ad-hoc foreign assistance. Establishing the DPA hence addresses the comparative shortcomings of India’s overseas projects, particularly vis-à-vis China,16 with slow implementation and the misuse of funds across political divisions.17

The Development Partnership Administration is composed of three divisions: “DPA-I deals with project appraisal and lines of credit; DPA II deals with capacity building schemes, disaster relief, Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme and DPA III deals with project implementation.”18

With 16 diplomats, DPA is the largest political unit within the MEA by far and is led, similar to the Pakistan, Afghanistan & Iran (PAI) division, by an additional secretary (higher in ranks than joint secretaries).19 So, if size and leadership can be any indication, the Development Partnership Administration is likely to assume an important role within the MEA. Importantly, it will nurse a quasi-permanent cadre of staff with specialized knowledge in development cooperation and humanitarian action to overcome the lack of institutional knowledge within the Ministry.20

Akin to its foreign policy, India’s lack of “strategic culture” thwarts its global humanitarian engagement.21 Most evidence suggests that decision making has not and will not be transferred from geographic divisions to the DPA. A joint secretary stated in 2012, for example, that “[DPA] will only implement the policies given by the political wing of the MEA, the Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretaries and the territorial divisions.”22 Further exacerbating this fragmentation, India still lacks a formal humanitarian (and development) policy, so internal turf battles are likely to hamper the coherent, strategic allocation of funds in the foreseeable future.23

The establishment of the DPA is in line with the larger aim of strengthening the Indian Foreign Service.24 While the MEA’s yearly budget corresponds roughly to that of Brazil,25 there are about
twice as many Brazilian and even more Chinese diplomats than Indians. Out of the 815 Indian diplomats in 2011-2012, 542 were staffed in the 162 Indian missions and posts abroad. Allegedly, the US embassy in New Delhi alone hosts more than 600 diplomats.

Strengthening the MEA serves to improve Indian capacity to address global challenges and hence further raise the country’s profile in developing and crisis-hit countries. The country’s UNSC bid is but one of such initiatives to benefit from improved interstate relations. Clearly considered a high-priority issue, the MEA’s general and foreign aid budget was expanded for the financial year 2013-2014, despite budget cuts across the board over growing fiscal deficit.

The MEA is not the only relevant actor in India’s humanitarian infrastructure. The National Crisis Management Committee (NCMC), an inter-ministerial coordination forum steering the country’s internationally renowned disaster response, has also reacted to crises abroad. And while the Ministry of External Affairs is not a member, the Ministry of Defence sent the military to provide humanitarian aid in Sri Lanka and the Maldives in coordination with the NCMC. In a similar vein, the National Disaster Management Authority (within the Ministry of Home Affairs) dispatched its National Disaster Response Force to Japan, following the earthquake in 2011.

Chart 1: Humanitarian infrastructure in India (Source: GPPi)
3. Verbal support for the humanitarian system

The manifest “bilateralization” of humanitarian aid in the past two decades has been undermining the ability of implementing agencies to provide impartial and independent aid free from the interests of donor governments. Core contributions to multilateral agencies, by contrast, boost agency-level deliberation over humanitarian action and silent speculations over subordinating needs-based humanitarian action to geopolitical or other considerations.

Troubled by this dynamic, New Delhi expressed its concerns with the “use of bilateral agencies and international NGOs for delivering humanitarian assistance [and claimed] that multilateral mechanisms are the appropriate channel” in 2001. In 2010, albeit with a focus on development cooperation, the Indian Minister of External Affairs reiterated this concern and called for the “manifold increase [in] needs-based activities, especially ‘core’ untied funding.”

New Delhi supports the reformed humanitarian system, and “believes that the United Nations must coordinate international humanitarian assistance [and] that the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) are key mechanisms for strengthening this capacity.” In 2011, the Prime Minister even called on the United Nations to “lead efforts in the area of food security.”

In spite of these declarations, New Delhi has not been at the forefront of core multilateral contributions. On the contrary, most of its humanitarian aid is bilateral or earmarked. Other than symbolic contributions to UNHCR, India has only provided voluntary core funding to the CERF, UN Women and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In the last ten years, these contributions constituted less than 2% of India’s humanitarian allocations (see Table 2 below).

A loud advocate of state sovereignty, India has religiously warned against extending UNHCR’s mandate to include the protection of internally displaced persons. It has also called for the "more meaningful inter-governmental oversight" of the UN’s humanitarian programs. A fitting way to do so is joining OCHA’s Donor Support Group, a club of donors providing a modest $0.5 million core contribution to OCHA. India signaled its intention to join in 2006, but unlike other emerging donors, such as Russia or the United Arab Emirates, it remains an outsider.

India’s inattention to multilateral humanitarian institutions is all the more surprising given its aspiration to become a permanent member in the Security Council of the United Nations. Humanitarian action, similar to development cooperation, projects soft power in crisis-hit countries and thereby garners support for Indian initiatives in the UN and beyond.

Most recently, however, India has received OCHA’s head, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos for dialogue that “boosted cooperation on the working level” between the parties. The Indian ambassador to the UN now partakes in the Dialogue on Humanitarian Partnerships, a high-level policy dialogue between traditional and emerging humanitarian donors in New York. New Delhi has even pondered joining the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, an informal donor forum promoting good practice.
4. The volume and distribution of India’s humanitarian aid 2001-2012

India does not fully report its humanitarian contributions to UN OCHA’s Financial Tracking System; hence, a hitherto unpublished dataset – with information from a 2012 Right to Information claim, MEA annual reports, the Food Aid Information System, Indian embassy websites and other open sources – is used in the following sections.51

The volume of Indian humanitarian aid has not increased substantially in the past eight years. The country’s yearly contributions correspond roughly to Luxembourg’s humanitarian budget and fall significantly short of Gulf donors’ or Turkey’s (over $100 million)52 and that of Northern donors, such as Sweden or the United Kingdom (over $700 million).53

Table 1: India’s overall humanitarian contributions by year, in current US dollars (Source: Compiled by the author)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>$8,907,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>$11,207,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>$18,446,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>$66,256,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>$56,087,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>$30,132,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>$65,705,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>$78,325,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>$40,056,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>$52,679,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>$30,030,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

India’s humanitarian portfolio displays clear regional patterns. So-called neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka received over two-thirds of all assistance over the past 10 years (see Table 2 below).

Afghanistan, the largest beneficiary stands out with a school feeding program worth almost $125 million. In the context of this program, India, the second largest wheat producer in the world, transformed over one million tons of wheat into high-energy biscuits for distribution by the World Food Programme in Afghanistan. Transportation has been a “considerable logistical exercise”54 as Pakistan would not always allow transiting aid shipments to Afghanistan;55 hence, Indian manufactured biscuits would be shipped through Iran. Surprisingly, it did not occur to India, the fifth largest bilateral donor for Afghan development and loud advocate of linking relief, recovery and development,56 to find a more sustainable solution for its humanitarian program. Instead, in 2012, Canada sponsored the establishment of a factory in Kabul to produce high-energy biscuits locally.57

Indian assistance to its neighbors has been predominantly in-kind: medical teams, medicines, wheat and construction material for shelters. This applies to almost all humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh. Seemingly an outlier, in early 2005, Bangladesh received $21.5 million of cash assistance, but a memorandum of understanding was signed between the two countries to constrain the procurement of relief items to India.58 Pakistan accepted in-kind assistance from India after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake,
whereas $15.5 million worth relief supplies were transported through the Line of Control. Following the 2010 and 2011 floods, however, the government of Pakistan refused direct Indian assistance, therefore New Delhi turned into the largest contributor to the UN OCHA-administered Pakistan Emergency Response Fund ($20 million).

The remaining one-third of Indian humanitarian assistance is evenly shared between different geographic regions: the Middle East and North Africa, Southeast and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, the Commonwealth of Independent Countries. Indian trade and foreign policy initiatives, such as Focus Africa, Focus CIS or Look East were not supported by humanitarian projects to the fullest extent; rather, India’s humanitarian presence in these regions has stayed constant over the years.

A shift can only be observed with regard to Latin America and the Caribbean. From 2001 to 2008, India spent altogether less than $1.5 million on humanitarian assistance in this region. From 2009, its assistance rose to roughly $2 million per year, not counting one-time $5 million cash donations to Chile and Haiti in 2010. This rise in humanitarian donations was accompanied by the establishment of embassies in New Delhi and respective Latin American capitals. The Latin American region also stands out for being the only region receiving predominantly cash assistance; this might be due to its geographic distance from India.

In the Middle East, India’s support for Palestinian statehood was reinforced by continued humanitarian commitments bilaterally as well as through UNRWA. Iraq was a regular recipient of Indian high-energy biscuits and India sponsored UN OCHA’s coordination in Libya and neighboring countries with $1 million. Most recently, India pledged $2.5 million to cover the United Nations’ $1.5 billion-worth appeal for Syria.

The most regular recipient of Indian humanitarian aid aside from neighboring countries is probably the DPRK with quasi-yearly, 2 thousand tons rice shipments. In Southeast Asia, the Indian army delivered significant in-kind assistance to Indonesia, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2006 Java earthquake.

Indian assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa has been rather steady, averaging at roughly $2 million per year and distributed among 28 countries. Sudan, the biggest single recipient in the region received a one-time 10 thousand tons donation of wheat in the financial year 2004-2005 to “help [the] people in Darfur.”

As already suggested by the examples above, the most common method to deliver in-kind humanitarian aid is through the Indian military (e.g. after the 2004 tsunami) or the World Food Programme, most prominently in Afghanistan, Iraq and North Korea (DPRK). Cash assistance is deposited on the affected government’s account or distributed by Indian embassies in form of vouchers.

Only on occasion does India provide humanitarian aid through private actors. The Rama Krishna charity, the ICRC and Caritas distributed Indian aid in Sri Lanka in 2005, 2008 and 2010 respectively. The Indian Red Cross has delivered aid to Iran.
In two instances, Indian States financed humanitarian action in consultation with the central government: Tamil Nadu donated for the ICRC’s work in Sri Lanka in 2008-2009 and Kerala to Pakistan in 2010. In addition, private pharmaceutical companies provided medicines after natural disasters, notably, in Moldova and the Ukraine.

Table 2: India’s cash and in-kind humanitarian contributions 2001-2012 by recipient (Source: Compiled by the author)
5. Conclusion

Despite India’s weighty emergence in the international aid architecture, the country remains a lightweight player in humanitarian action. New Delhi’s humanitarian budget has not followed the manifold expansion of its development cooperation programs, but idled to be wafted away by fragmented decision making and the lack of clear policies.

The creation of the Development Partnership Administration will not address these strategic shortcomings. Decisions on humanitarian contributions are likely to be retained by understaffed geographic divisions within the Ministry of External Affairs; hence, geopolitical interests will continue to funnel assistance to neighboring countries. The lack of a global vision will continue to downgrade India’s humanitarian action into a secondary and rather spontaneous role.

On the other hand, DPA is prone to improve the quality of India’s overseas projects and thus enhance New Delhi’s soft power projection in developing and crisis-hit countries. Continued emphasis on bilateral and earmarked humanitarian aid also holds the potential to engage with affected governments and garner support for Indian interests. In this reading, the very fact that humanitarian action remains a subsection of development cooperation is synergizing.

Humanitarian action is designed, however, to support affected people in an impartial way, according to their needs wherever they be. If India, which has legitimately raised its voice against the “bilateralization” of Western aid, means to subscribe to these ideals, engaging in policy dialogue and restructuring its current humanitarian portfolio is instrumental.

India has the potential to match its global aspirations in humanitarian action. The country’s reputed domestic disaster response and generous development budget would allow for a more significant humanitarian engagement. Stepping up as a humanitarian donor would also increase New Delhi’s oversight of multilateral agencies.

Current investments in human resources and participation in international policy fora are but the seeds for India’s adoption of a better fitting, global role in humanitarian action. Failing to concert decision making and increase its puny humanitarian budget, India is missing out on becoming a relevant player to shape the future of the humanitarian system.
Notes


7 India refuses this terminology in principle, but applies it in practice. See, for example, the speech of Ministry of External Affairs Additional Secretary P. S. Raghavan (Raghavan, P. S. (2013). Round-Table. Mapping Experiences around International Development Cooperation. New Challenges and Opportunities, New Delhi, Observer Research

8 For India's humanitarian contributions, see below; for Luxemburg, see UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service. (2013). from http://fts.unocha.org/.


11 Humanitarian aid is categorized under Non-Planned Grants in the Union Budget. “Technical & Economic Cooperation with Other Countries” lists bilateral aid allocations to developing countries (including humanitarian aid), as well as a specific line for Aid for Disaster Relief. Other ministries design their foreign aid allocations, such as regular contributions to UNICEF (Ministry of Health and


25 Data from the Global Public Policy Institute’s previous research on emerging humanitarian donors. See: http://www.gppi.net/?id=1819


27 Ministry of External Affairs (2001-2012). Annual Reports. New Delhi, MEA.


Due to shared decision making, however, the response force arrived belatedly and could not play a relevant role in disaster response. Katoch, A. (2012). Interview. Berlin/New Delhi, 1 November, 2012.


Indian support for pooled funds is greater: $20 million for the Pakistani Emergency Response Fund in 2010 and $1 million for OCHA’s coordination work in Libya and neighboring countries in 2011-2012.


Data from the Global Public Policy Institute's previous research on emerging humanitarian donors. See: http://www.gppi.net/?id=1819


54 Ministry of External Affairs (2009). India and Afghanistan - a Development Partnership. New Delhi, MEA.


58 Ministry of External Affairs (2001-2012). Annual Reports. New Delhi, MEA.


62 A similar, $5 million donation was made for the US after Hurricane Katrina hit its southern states.


67 Ibid.

68 In 2004-2005 the Indian army delivered the bulk of India’s humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka.
