

UN humanitarian aid financing is disorganized, unpredictable and hard to track, two-year watchdog study says

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The United Nations spends billions annually to relieve the suffering caused by natural disasters and civil war, but those costly efforts are uncoordinated, overlap or duplicate effort, and often don't show where the money went, according to a report by a special U.N. watchdog unit.

Nor, the report adds, has the world organization done much about it, with several internal efforts to get a grip on at least part of the problem among a tangle of funds, agencies and programs with different operating procedures either ending in frustration or failing to materialize.

The result: a sometimes chaotic U.N. global relief effort, where "basic humanitarian financing needs are only partly met, and in an inconsistent and unpredictable way;" keeping track of where the money goes frequently doesn't happen (or, as the report delicately says, for some unnamed U.N. agencies "the reporting and monitoring of financing remain somewhat elusive);" and even a coherent definition of "humanitarian assistance" seems to be lacking.

Unless the situation changes to include "robust" forms of coordination and oversight and some form of strategic planning, the report warns, the state of humanitarian anarchy could "negatively affect" the effort to raise money and provide help to some of the world's most desperate people.

The report is the result of two years' work by a senior member of a watchdog organization known as the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), a small group of experts on the U.N.'s workings who are based in Geneva. The JIU is the sole U.N. organization charged with evaluating the performance of the sprawling U.N. system as a whole.

The JIU report on the U.N.'s muddled humanitarian financing is now in the hands of the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), an organization

composed of the 29 heads of the most important U.N. agencies and institutions, chaired by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

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The CEB will be pondering its response to the document at their first semi-annual meeting of the year, a two-day session that starts on April 5 in Madrid. A CEB reply to the JIU's findings, according to U.N. Spokesman Eduardo del Buey, "should be out within the next two weeks."

Meantime, the negative effects warned of in the watchdog report, at least so far as the U.N. is concerned, could already be happening, as fundraising appeals tail off in a climate of global austerity, while disasters and social upheaval add to the desperate millions who need the most basic help to survive.

In 2011, for example, the report notes that slightly more than 300 natural disasters were recorded around the world, including the tsunami that engulfed parts of Japan. In all, some 206 million people were affected by such calamities, the report says, and at least 51 million people in 16 countries needed some form of humanitarian aid. In the same year, some 37 armed conflicts were recorded, primarily in Africa and parts of the Middle East, leaving about 26.4 million displaced persons.

Not all those staggering demands for humanitarian relief are met by the U.N. Nonetheless, according to the U.N. the world organization administered about \$7.9 billion in assistance in 2010 (the year of Haiti's cataclysmic earthquake) gleaned through centralized appeals—but since then, the amounts have been shrinking.

In 2011, the U.N.'s main Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) and associated "flash" emergency appeals took in \$5.645 billion; in 2012, \$5.565 billion, and so far, with a quarter of 2013 gone, just \$1.869 billion. (The U.S. contribution so far is about \$356.8 million, or 19 percent, with another \$128 million pledged but not committed.)

The consolidated U.N. funding appeal is a mammoth affair, which according to a U.N. spokesman encompassed 23 U.N. organizations and 634 non-government organizations, operating in 27 major humanitarian crises.

According the U.N., these organizations are involved in a joint strategic effort, but the JIU inspectors are less impressed. The report cites a welter of overlapping and sometimes contending Emergency Response Funds (ERFs), Country Humanitarian Funds (CHF), as well as other Multi-Donor Trust Funds (MDTFs), as well as the U.N.'s Central

Emergency Response Fund (CERF), not to mention still more funds raised outside the main U.N. appeal process, often by the same or related agencies.

Many of these funds have differing objectives and perspectives, the report observes, resulting in “unequal and duplicated allocation of resources among sectors.” Moreover, when it comes to spending the money, the mismatch of objectives and purposes can become worse.

The report cites complaints from U.N. staffers that decisions to allocate funds for recent disasters in Pakistan and Chile were not “rigorous enough,” as the report puts it, compared to tougher standards used in Central America and parts of Africa.

Meantime, as the JIU delicately puts it, “it is yet to be clarified how the government and local communities in the host country [of a disaster] can properly exercise ownership of the planning, coordination and management of the different financing mechanisms” in conjunction with the relief work as it takes place.

Translation: even while the U.N. and non-governmental organizations raise money together, they lack a “joint, integrated, strategic” planning framework for what to do with the cash they raise, leaving locals frequently on the outside.

Part of that mismatch, the JIU acknowledges, is the result of the explosive growth and complexity of the crises that U.N. relief efforts face.

But those problems are made worse, the report notes, by the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of the U.N. system itself.

A shifting constellation of agencies and programs known by exotic acronyms are involved, ranging from the Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the World Food Program (WFP) to UNICEF and beyond, including a number of the U.N.’s far-flung peacekeeping missions.

Among other things, the report notes, they do not share “an operational definition of humanitarian assistance or humanitarian operations.”

Indeed, the report also observes, more than 15 years ago the U.N. has walked away from a “reliable” internal reporting mechanism that allowed much better planning efforts, a decision that has “made the existing United Nations statistical tools increasingly inadequate for strategic planning and management of resources.”

Most of the funds for the disparate U.N. agencies' missions are collected on an "emergency-by-emergency" basis, which increases the ad-hoc push and pull over spending and management. One suggestion from the JIU is that a greater proportion of "core" humanitarian resources be allocated from regular U.N. budgets that are paid for by membership dues, to increase the financial support for emergency coordination. But if anything the trend in U.N. finances these days is moving in the opposite direction.

Can things be different?

According to a U.N. spokesman who responded to questions from Fox News regarding the new JIU report, whatever the U.N.'s top bosses say shortly about the document, the U.N. intends to introduce "a more explicit strategic planning stage" before it pulls together its next major funding appeal process.

The JIU, however, notes that it has made recommendations that U.N. agencies adopt a joint strategic approach to planning for disaster response on previous occasions, going back to 2005. It has also broached the idea to the U.N.'s top chieftains that they adopt a "results-based management approach to manage programs and resources in a coherent way."

"However," the report adds, "the CEB is yet to implement the recommendation."