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At any one time, large parts of the world are in crisis. Whether the crisis is due to natural disaster, government repression, or simply underdevelopment, a whole host of humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam, Doctors Without Borders, and the International Red Cross have the mission of going into these areas to alleviate suffering.

To do this job, humanitarian organizations divide their work into two categories: development aid that improves underlying conditions, and emergency aid, given in response to a natural or manmade disaster. However, Jennifer Rubenstein, a fellow at Princeton University, questioned this distinction. While it might have logistical advantages, she argued, it does not suit the variety of situations and populations requiring aid.

Rubenstein began by noting differences between development and emergency aid. Development aid aims for sustainable improvement in living standards, focusing on long-term solutions and working closely with governments, while emergency aid targets populations affected by unexpected events that produce urgent and severe need, focusing on short-term alleviation of suffering and rarely allying with governments.

While these activities divide neatly into two categories, Rubenstein emphasized that situations do not typically divide so easily. Most humanitarian organizations make decisions based on three principles: prioritizing the worst off, maximizing aggregate utility, and fulfilling special obligations. However, these principles rarely fall into either the development or emergency category, and the two categories can be at cross-purposes.

While the first principle of prioritizing the worst off would seem to elevate emergency aid over development aid, Rubenstein argued, that is not necessarily the correct course. While emergency situations by definition involve people who suffer urgent and severe need for help, in some cases long-term aid would alleviate suffering that is just as urgent or severe. For example, the long-term need for health care could be just as morally demanding the need for assistance after a natural disaster.

Priorities are equally unclear for the second principle of maximizing utility, Rubenstein said. For example, should a humanitarian organization spend its funds to help flood victims or provide clean water? While the flood victims' need might be more immediate, both needs are certainly severe. The limited budget of many humanitarian organizations is another complication. Governments can use tools such as taxation to make it expensive to assist certain groups; this means that while aid in some areas can be administered cost effectively, these areas are not always those most in need.

Third, Rubenstein discussed the principle of special obligations, arguing that it does not fall neatly into development or emergency aid either. As intervention in a region continues, humanitarian organizations often develop economic partnerships with communities, and a sudden pull-out would cause great harm. Thus, aid continues not because of new compelling reasons, but to avoid a crisis if it were taken away.

Finally, Rubenstein argued that the frequent prioritization of emergency aid over development aid is not always justified. Emergencies happen rapidly and seem temporary. While these features characterize their urgency, she said, they do not demonstrate that the needs are more severe than longer-term needs.

Moreover, Rubenstein argued, the guidelines for defining rapid emergence are skewed. For example, the "crude mortality statistic" (CMR) is sometimes used to define an emergency, and the CMR threshold for declaring an emergency is based on what the usual mortality rate is. This means that conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the usual mortality rate is high, would have

to worsen beyond their already urgent state before the CMR threshold would declare them emergencies. This is clearly not just.

Ultimately, Rubenstein argued that while dividing aid into the development and emergency categories might be useful logistically, the categories are not good principles for distributing resources. She suggested that if humanitarian organizations would focus less on the category of aid and more on distributing it where it is needed most, that would make their allocation of resources more just.