

Executive Summary

Germany's rise as a humanitarian donor: the interplay of narratives, new foreign policy ambition and domestic interests

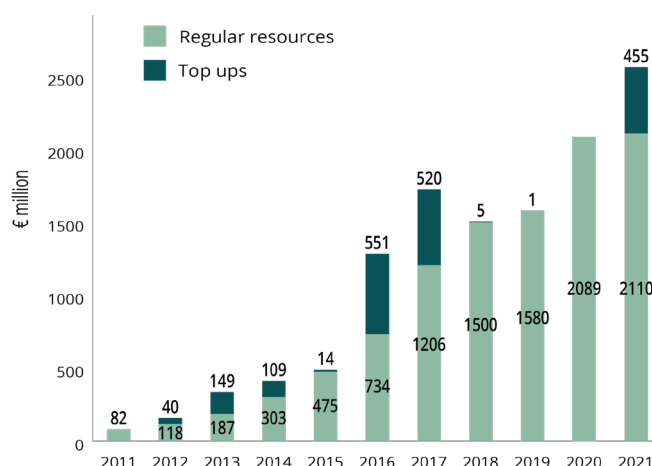
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Understanding narratives is key for making the case for humanitarian assistance

The international humanitarian system is faced with ever-growing challenges of sufficiency, efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy – challenges that cannot be overcome without political will. This political will can be influenced by a variety of factors. Among them, powerful narratives emanating from governments, politicians, the media, and humanitarian organisations themselves. Understanding these narratives, how they are constructed, how they change over time and the mechanisms through which they influence policy decisions is key to making the case for humanitarian assistance.

Germany's rise to becoming the second-largest humanitarian donor is exceptional in a humanitarian system that is plagued by the perennial challenge of sufficiency, where increasing volumes of private and institutional funding do not keep pace with rising humanitarian needs.

How have narratives at play amongst the population, media, government and aid agencies enabled and justified the significant increase in Germany's humanitarian assistance budget? What role is played by the intersection of the stories that actors construct and disseminate to justify humanitarian assistance, and how do they influence the political will of policymakers and decision-making processes?



German humanitarian aid budget, 2011–2021
Data source: Bundesfinanzministerium (2023)

Key Findings

The research demonstrates that there is potential to understand how and why some humanitarian policy narratives gain traction. Humanitarian actors need to make sure they develop narratives taking into account the broader public debate on government expenditure, understand the influencing factors as well as the inner workings of the specific government. The way the media in a country reports on and thinks about aid is also a decisive contextual factor. Actors need to reflect more strategically on how to future-proof humanitarian budgets by stepping up their game with regards to the story they tell about the need for – and the impact of – humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian actors should invest in collecting evidence on the impact and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance

A plausible and coherent narrative is more likely to yield positive effects. Humanitarian actors should therefore invest in collecting evidence on the impact and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. This should include continual highlighting of humanitarian needs and why and where they increase, but also communicating emerging best practice on ways of reducing needs such as anticipatory action, or ways of reducing costs, such as digital innovations.



Using evidence to create political will for change

Source: Saez and Bryant, 2023; <https://odi.org/en/publications/understanding-the-role-of-narratives-in-humanitarian-policy-change>

Humanitarian actors should invest more in communicating the impact and effectiveness of the humanitarian system

Aid organisations should increase transparency and admit to shortcomings in the way that aid money is used and what efforts are and could be taken to address inefficiency in the aid sector. Such self-critical awareness of challenges also allows for

better accountability among key humanitarian actors, e.g. government representatives in charge of allocating humanitarian budgets and whether they practise the needs-based allocation principle that they preach. Aid organisations should also remain transparent with regards to their own interests, such as fundraising opportunities, in order not to jeopardise their credibility.

Methods in brief

The project primarily used semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2023. The research team interviewed 45 key informants across donor/government representatives, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists and academia. Interviews were supplemented with a desk review of key literature including media analysis with a review of articles from five major German daily newspapers and key policy documents.

Paper

The publication is part of the research project “Remaking Aid: ethics, politics, and narratives” by the HPG at ODI. Download the full paper here: <https://odi.org/en/publications/germanys-rise-as-a-humanitarian-donor-the-interplay-of-narratives-new-foreign-policy-ambition-and-domestic-interests/>

Key Considerations

- Political will and policymakers’ beliefs are not only influenced by **evidence** but also by powerful **narratives** emanating from governments, politicians, the media, and humanitarian organisations themselves. Understanding these narratives and the mechanisms through which they influence policy decisions is key to making the case for humanitarian assistance and increasing humanitarian budgets.
- Media coverage of humanitarian assistance in Germany is largely benign and uninterested in specialised humanitarian policy debates and features minimal negative scrutiny. Narratives regarding the **moral imperative of aid, humanity and solidarity** were largely unchallenged, creating an enabling environment for the expansion of the German humanitarian assistance budget.
- The **confluence** of changing foreign political ambitions and interests with an enabling media and widespread public support, together with a robust economic situation, meant that the narratives proved to be particularly compelling.
- Humanitarian actors played important roles in utilising and amplifying **simplistic narratives** about how aid can decrease migration, despite emerging evidence to the contrary. This narrative was seized upon by German politicians and the media and became an **enabling factor** in increasing the humanitarian budget, including for Syria and the region.
- There is tremendous, **short-term** benefit in linking – through (false) narratives – assistance with national interest. But without a strong foundation this narrative and thus basis for aid can be very fragile as the context changes. Aid actors may find it more beneficial to link aid to **longer-term** public values and commitment to aid.

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