The pursuit of humanitarianism in a multicultural world: Critical issues and key tensions

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Much of Western criticism of the Chinese approach to post-disaster assistance has focused on China’s state-centric approach as a manifestation of power seeking and international interest. However, whilst China has never denied the importance of national interest, China also takes post-disaster assistance very seriously. Two key principles derived from China’s historical experience continue to permeate its current concept of post-disaster assistance; legitimacy of the state, and unity between state and society. These need to be understood by the UK, rather than be dismissed or criticised, in order to begin a conversation with China about cooperation in this area.

China has managed post-disaster assistance for over 4,000 years. Chinese mythology states that the first Emperor of China came to power because of his post-disaster expertise in managing a flooding Yellow River. In China, therefore, state legitimacy is closely linked to ability of the ruler to manage disasters. In translating this domestic concept into an international context the Chinese believe that providing assistance directly to a state enables the state’s leadership to work on post-disaster assistance and thus increase its own legitimacy.

In addition, the Chinese believe in unity between state and society. This derives from the Confucian idea that a degree of harmony exists among family, society and state based on communal consensus. Such harmony assumes that society is prepared to work together in the interests of the state and there is no distinction between state and societal interests. China’s assistance in disaster areas also reflects this concept; by strengthening a state it believes that there will inevitably be an increase in harmony between the state and its people. This concept is particularly manifested in China’s infrastructural, rather than capacity-building, approach to assistance.

However, despite the importance of these two principles to China’s concept of post-disaster assistance, they have been applied predominantly to China’s management of domestic disasters. Now that China is applying the same principles in a global context to international post-disaster assistance, there is an opportunity for UK-China cooperation on a joint study to understand the implications of applying the same principles internationally.

The UK also needs to further understand the Chinese bureaucratic structure with which the UK would need to cooperate. Although a challenging undertaking, the structure may be inferred from the Chinese process of decision-making related to the provision of development aid. If relatively minor assistance is requested, the requesting country must first approach China through the relevant Chinese Embassy. The Embassy would then coordinate with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce in China. For more high profile emergencies the decision-making process becomes more complicated, with the Chinese State Council involved in guiding and directing policies through the relevant ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts as a coordination agency for relevant implementation agencies, including the Chinese International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR) and National Earthquake Response Support Service (NERSS). Chinese counterparts are particularly interested in cooperating with the UK at the implementation level providing the UK with a useful starting point for engaging with China in post-disaster assistance cooperation.