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Analytical memorandum

CCEIS, HSE University

Scientific seminar

«China's humanitarian aid in the era of
digitalization: breakthroughs and constraints»



НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКИЙ
УНИВЕРСИТЕТ

On December 9, the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies (CCEIS) and the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the HSE University held the 11th scientific humanitarian seminar. It focused on new trends in China's humanitarian aid, including the introduction of digital technologies.

***Zhang Denghua**, Research Fellow at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, made a presentation on the stages of development of China's humanitarian aid with a focus on differences between the approaches of China and traditional donors and new trends, namely an increase in the volume of aid provided, the growing involvement of non-state actors, China's participation in trilateral cooperation, and the impact of COVID-19.*

***Veronika Smirnova** and **Alexandra Yankova**, Research Assistants at the CCEIS, presented a report on the use of digital technologies in China's humanitarian aid, including cases of participation of private companies and scientific and educational institutions, and the ethical aspect of the digitalization of the humanitarian sphere.*

The panelists also discussed the role of humanitarian aid in promoting China's positive image in the world, the prospects for the participation of non-state actors, and performance criteria of the provision of aid.

*The moderator was **Anastasia Pyatachkova**, Deputy Head of the Asia-Pacific Sector of the CCEIS, Academic Supervisor of the Programme "International Relations" at the HSE University.*

*The discussant was **Lina Gong**, Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*

I. China's humanitarian aid: Stages of development and specific features

The history of the development of China's foreign aid may be divided into the following periods:

1. 1950-1978: ideologically based aid;
2. 1978-1999: aid to ensure domestic economic development;
3. Since 2000: aid to build a positive international image.

China established the coordination system on emergency humanitarian aid in 2004. In December 2004, the devastating tsunami hit the Indian Ocean and China provided significant assistance to the affected countries. Many institutions are involved in the operation of the system, including the newly established China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), the People's Liberation Army of China, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, the Earthquake Administration, the Civil Aviation Administration. In recent years, the Chinese NGOs have also become more active.

In the period 2009-2018, China provided most of humanitarian aid (50.7%) on a bilateral basis. The most frequent aid was in the event of food crises, health crises, and natural disasters. At the same time, China cautiously provided aid to countries in a state of social crisis so that its actions were not perceived as interference in the internal affairs by partner countries. At the same time, 33.3% of aid was channeled through the UN agencies, which indicates the growing importance of this partner to China.

China has become an important supplier of humanitarian aid but its volume is much lower than that of traditional donors, including in the Asia-Pacific. At the same time, the specific features of the Chinese approach may provide new opportunities and address the challenges facing international humanitarian assistance. Among the main features:

- Localization: China focuses on the government to government approach. On the one hand, this allows to provide timely assistance to the recipient country, however, on the other hand, may limit the opportunities for interaction with NGOs and civil society organizations.
- Humanitarian-development nexus: China prioritizes development aid to reduce humanitarian needs. Infrastructure development also facilitates the delivery of humanitarian aid to remote areas in partner countries as well as links the communities and improves the access to markets during and after disasters.

II. Humanitarian aid to promote China's positive image

In April 2018, China established a new aid delivery agency, namely CIDCA. Its foundation confirms China's intention to use foreign aid, including its humanitarian component, to support China's major power diplomacy and to promote the Belt and Road initiative.

During the COVID-19 period, China's aid policy focused on several directions. Primarily, China provided grants and in-kind donations, including medicines and vaccines. The second direction is related to the development of online communication during the COVID-19. China actively participated in online meetings with partners, among which was the Second Vice Ministers' Special Meeting on COVID-19 between China and Pacific Island Countries. The third direction was the work of the Chinese ambassadors with the media on the ground to highlight both the success of the fight against the virus inside China and to confirm the readiness to provide assistance to partner countries. At the same time, the Chinese government took a "whole-of-government approach": the Chinese overseas, medical teams, and Chinese companies were also involved in the Chinese COVID-19 diplomacy.

III. China's interaction with traditional donors

The aim to build a positive international image of a responsible power has influenced the formats for providing humanitarian assistance. In the past 10 years, China has begun to engage in a trilateral cooperation format, within which it interacts with a traditional donor or the UN agency and a recipient country. Specific cases include the China-Malawi-UNDP Disaster Management and Risk Reduction Project and the Australia-China-Papua New Guinea Trilateral Malaria Project.

The Chinese government is still testing trilateral cooperation as a format for providing humanitarian assistance and is selective in its choice of partners. At the same time, the growing geostrategic rivalry makes it more difficult for China to cooperate with traditional donors. Therefore, it increasingly focuses on engaging with UN agencies and other multilateral agencies to provide humanitarian assistance. For China, this is a new direction with great potential.

IV. Digital innovation in China's humanitarian aid

One of the key drivers of changes in the humanitarian sphere is the development of digital technologies. There have been established separate multilateral formats, including the UN initiative on the use of Big Data and AI for humanitarian purposes Global Pulse. The digital agenda also becomes part of national aid strategies. In some areas, there are being developed ethical standards to protect personal data, which is often equal to saving life in the humanitarian field.

On January 10 2021, China published the White Paper “International Development Cooperation in a New Era”. It devotes a separate chapter to emergency humanitarian assistance, which describes China's participation in a number of joint projects utilizing monitoring systems to predict natural disasters and UAVs.

Though the White Paper does not contain a specific part covering the issue of digital innovations, China steadily builds up its tech capabilities, which may be utilized for its humanitarian assistance. AI development appears to be the main focus. For example, China has set a goal to become the world leader in the field by 2030. In September 2021, China also issued the AI Code of Ethics emphasizing the ‘power of decision’ of humans over machines, which is in line with humanitarian agencies' adherence to preserving the human-centered humanitarian processes. China's strategy of Military-Civil Fusion is also a driver for innovation introduction as it also advances the development of Big Data and AI, and UAVs.

Along with this, a feature of the digital age is that most of the innovation comes from the private sector. Among the cases of the Chinese companies' involvement are:

- Alibaba Cloud cooperation with the World Food Program to develop World Hunger LIVE (an online map that tracks and predicts food security indicators in near-real time);
- initiatives by the leading Chinese civilian UAV manufacturer DJI to promote the idea of “Drones for Good”, including the map that tracks UAV rescues, sponsorship for humanitarian awards, and cooperation with foreign public security services) and its participation in the Crisis Mapping in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake.

At the same time, the participation of the academic community is also increasing:

- In September 2021, the world's first International Research Center of Big Data for Sustainable Development Goals was opened in Beijing. The Centre has already established a comprehensive display and cross-integration global monitoring and evaluation system providing the relevant UN agencies and member states with data sharing, technological assistance and decision-making support.
- In 2016, Tsinghua University and UNICEF announced a partnership to leverage innovation and technology to help children, including the foundation of the Global Innovation Centre for Children.

While digital technologies provide China with new opportunities in terms of aid delivery, this also raises the issue of personal data protection. Weak regulation on data collection in China, on the one hand, allows the Chinese Internet industry to accumulate a huge amount of user data and data necessary for AI research, but, on the other hand, raises concerns among the international community. In 2021, the Chinese Law on the Protection of Personal Information and Data Security entered into force, which is a good example on how China tries to follow the global trend on data protection.

V. How to evaluate performance criteria of aid?

The panelists noted that humanitarian assistance issues are often viewed from the perspective of donor countries. It is necessary to pay more attention to the discussion of recipient countries, their genuine needs, reactions to foreign aid programs, including humanitarian assistance, the issue of building effective communication necessary for understanding their needs.

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