

16-country study shows how news shapes governments' humanitarian aid

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A new study shows that media coverage of crises can increase governments' allocation of emergency humanitarian aid—whether or not the crisis merits it.

This is because intense, national [news coverage](#) triggers other accountability institutions (the public, [civil society](#), elected officials) who put pressure on governments to announce additional funding.

Dr. Martin Scott (University of East Anglia), Dr. Mel Bunce (City, University of London) and Dr. Kate Wright (University of Edinburgh) interviewed 30 senior policymakers in 16 of the world's largest democratic, humanitarian donors. In 2020, these donor countries were collectively responsible for over 90 percent of all humanitarian funding.

The researchers found that news [coverage](#) only appeared to influence *emergency* [humanitarian aid](#) budgets. These relatively small, emergency budgets are kept in reserve to respond to rapidly deteriorating, or sudden-onset crises.

According to their interviewees, governments' annual humanitarian aid allocations—which are much larger—are unaffected by news coverage.

However, the researchers found that a *lack* of news coverage did influence policy-making about annual aid allocations.

This was because policymakers assumed that other governments were much more influenced by news than they were. So, they tried to compensate for what they assumed would be less funding for these 'forgotten crises'.

Dr. Wright said: "These findings have important implications for government donors, news organizations and aid agencies, and for wider understanding of how news coverage may influence foreign policy".

Dr. Bunce explained, "If you wanted to influence donors via the [news media](#), this research suggests you should target national [news](#) outlets (rather than international or local ones). You should also target countries

that put more resource into untagged emergency aid (rather than annual aid allocations). And look at countries where there are career-oriented foreign ministers running aid agencies that have limited independence".

Dr. Scott added, "For government departments seeking to resist such media influence, and defend their needs-based decision-making, they should consider building stronger public (and ministerial) understanding of humanitarian principles".

More information: Martin Scott et al, The Influence of News Coverage on Humanitarian Aid: The Bureaucrats' Perspective, *Journalism Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2021.2013129](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2013129)

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