

## The Future of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Humanitarian Sector

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### *Global Transformations and Their Consequences*

Humanitarian Futures Programme Discussion Paper  
for the Start Network

The Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College London, is grateful to the Start Network for the opportunity to share views on the future of non-governmental organisations in the humanitarian sector.

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The **Humanitarian Futures Programme** (HFP) is an independent policy research programme based at King's College London which strives to act as a catalyst within the humanitarian sector to stimulate greater interest in more strategic approaches to the changing types, dimensions and dynamics of future humanitarian crises. Through a wide-ranging programme of research, policy engagement, and technical assistance HFP promotes new ways of planning, collaborating and innovating so that organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities can deal with future humanitarian threats more effectively.

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The **Start Network** is the new name for the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies. The Start Network is a consortium of 18 leading humanitarian NGOs, collaborating to strengthen civil society to improve humanitarian assistance. The collaboration represents a node in an international civil society network which extends to over 4000 organisations, working in over 200 countries and territories. The network was formed in 2010 with an initial two year pilot grant from the UK Department for International Development. The long term vision is to strengthen civil society's pro-active capacity to respond and prepare for crises, to transform the way NGOs approach capacity building, and to create platforms through which humanitarian actors can collaborate. These objectives aim to help civil society innovate, adapt and respond to the growing demands of the future.

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Read this paper. Read it carefully. Take the time to think about what it says. This paper has been commissioned by operational agencies because it's time to think ahead. The message of this paper may be gracefully delivered, but it contains a fundamentally challenging question: for how long will NGOs remain a legitimate humanitarian actor?

This paper explores just how much NGOs will need to adapt in the coming few years. No organisation survives without changing. The *average* life expectancy for a multinational corporation Fortune 500 Company is *less than 50 years*. Many international NGOs are reaching that age. Those readers who are unwilling to contemplate a dramatic scenario should be at least asking some hard questions about the viability of today's NGO business model.

Those questions are important, because civil society delivers some 70% of the last mile of international humanitarian assistance. A crisis for NGOs would mean a crisis for the entire humanitarian system – or at least the humanitarian system as it is understood today.

The humanitarian system may already be different than the traditional actors perceive it. International NGOs, local NGOs and community based organisations will need to find new ways of working together and with others. The choice for NGOs is not about whether to like or dislike the world that is emerging in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the choice is about adaptation, collaboration and re-discovering their role, or not.

The paper suggests how NGOs could add value in new ways, for example as innovators, as actors who connect the local and the global, or as brokers who bring diverse actors together to focus on issues of vulnerability or crisis response.

The future of NGOs in the humanitarian sector is not simply an important question for NGOs; it is an important question for the sector. A sector that is agile enough to address humanitarian crises in the future will need an ecosystem of organisations, rich with diversity and experimentation. If the current economic and political trends result in a consolidation within the NGO sector – a reduction in diversity and complexity of NGOs – the humanitarian system will be less resilient than it is today. Redundancy may be inefficient, but it is adaptive.

Lastly, this paper is challenging because it explores complex issues that have uncertain implications. Predictions are never certain. Yet for those who need concrete certainty before taking any action, consider these questions. What if this paper proves to be an accurate prediction of the future? What if there was a 10 per cent chance this paper was accurate? What degree of certainty about an emerging risk is required for a responsible leader to take action? Who is a leader in today's decentralised and networked world?

If you see NGOs as part of the global safety net, we urge you to think about what you can do in response to what this paper suggests.



Nick Guttman, Chair, Start Network



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'[There is] a puzzling limitation of our mind: our excessive confidence in what we believe we know, and our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance and the uncertainty of the world we live in. We are prone to overestimate how much we understand about the world and to underestimate the role of chance in events. Overconfidence is fed by the illusory certainty of hindsight.'

*Daniel Kahneman – Nobel laureate*

## Executive Summary

*Section I: In the beginning: Assumptions and perceptions*, suggests that the future of non-governmental organisations in the humanitarian sector is, to a significant extent, dependent upon the ways that it can come to terms with many aspects of its past. More specifically, the moral rectitude and economic dominance of much of the sector has sustained a vision of the world that perpetuates assumptions about ‘hapless peoples,’ unchallengeable principles and the utility of supply-driven responses. As one begins to prepare for the future of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the humanitarian sector, the sector’s past provides an important starting point for anticipating not only *what might be* but also *what should be* in the longer term.

There are three aspects of this inheritance that seem particularly poignant as one looks to the future: (i) *a question of principles*; (ii) *vocation versus institutionalisation*; and (iii) *the essence of saving lives*. Paradoxically, principles in the humanitarian sector continue to reflect a system of values that in various ways excludes those of others, while at the same time being frequently prone to ‘operational compromises.’ In a related vein, the history of the NGO sector, mainly as development actors but also in the humanitarian context, demonstrates the relatively rapid transition from a group of organisations that were determined ‘to work their way out of business’ to a sector that has moved to what has been described as an ‘economic rationalist agenda.’ And, while committed to saving lives and livelihoods, the sector is still prone to insist on providing the sorts of assistance that it believes is needed through ‘well-tried and tested operational modalities.’

*Section II: The changing global context* proceeds with the assumption that global change is not happening incrementally but rather exponentially. For NGOs in the future this has to

be seen in the context of (i) *the post-Western hegemon*, (ii) *the political centrality of humanitarian crises*, (iii) *the globalisation paradox*, (iv) *the resurgence of sovereignty* and (v) *emerging technologies and their consequences*.

*The post-Western hegemon*. A continuing blind spot in the world of traditional humanitarian policymakers is reflected not only in the ways that they identify potential risks and solutions, but also in the assumptions they make about the context in which such risks and solutions might occur. This is not to say, for example, that they are not aware of the rise of such emerging powers as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa or the resurgence of sovereignty around the globe. Rather it is to suggest that they appear to find it difficult to move beyond their traditional systems and approaches to accommodate new paradigms. The challenge for many remains to find ways to have traditional systems and approaches fit into new contexts instead of seeking new systems and approaches for accommodating changing contexts.

*Political centrality of humanitarian crises*. Today, humanitarian crises have far greater political significance than they had in much of the latter part of the 20th century and as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill five years later demonstrated, even the most powerful governments have to deal with serious reputational and ‘survival’ issues if they fail to respond adequately to humanitarian crises. As humanitarian crises move to centre-stage of governmental interests, they are imbued with high levels of political significance – both domestically and internationally. While a government’s survival may depend upon the way it responds to a humanitarian crisis, the way that other governments and international actors respond to that crisis will, too, have increasingly political consequence.

*The globalisation paradox.* There is a 'globalisation paradox', namely, that the more globalised the world becomes, the more 'localised' it will also be. This is increasingly countered by new waves of nationalism, and the growth of global commonalities and inter-relationships. These have, in effect generated more intense interest by more and more nations determined to protect their customs, culture, and language. Governments of crisis-affected states will become increasingly wary of those outside humanitarian organisations who feel that their biggest contributions will stem from 'boots on the ground.' In those instances where external involvement *is* acceptable, prerequisites might include proven competencies in local languages and an appreciation of local culture. Increasingly, external assistance will be driven less by supply and more by demand, and the conduit for such assistance might well be through acceptable regional organisations rather than the UN system or Western consortia.

*Resurgence of sovereignty.* Who interprets what is needed for humanitarian response and how it is to be provided will be one clear demonstration of a resurgence of sovereignty. Governments will be more inclined to resist unwelcome though well-intentioned external intervention, and will also be more insistent on determining whether or not external assistance is required and, if so, what will be provided, by whom, when, where, and how.

For traditional humanitarian actors, the consequences of more assertive sovereignty mean that there will be even less receptivity to arguments about rights of access, that alternative providers (i.e. non-traditional actors, including the private sector) might be preferred 'humanitarians', and that the free-wheeling nature of autonomous humanitarian agencies such as international non-governmental organisations will be less and less tolerated.

*Technologies and their consequences.* The hazards that emerging technologies create as well as their positive impacts are well recognised. Nevertheless, their longer-term consequences present profound unknowns. Unmanned aerial vehicles, including 'drones', cybernetics and space, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, 3D printing, and social networking present a vision of possibilities that are profoundly transformative, and yet their social, socio-economic and political consequences are redolent with uncertainty. For humanitarian NGOs, as will be discussed in Section III, the inter-action between an ever-increasing range of technologies and natural hazards will pose ever more challenging strategic and operational issues.

*Section III: The expanding nature of humanitarian crises* assumes that the types of crisis drivers and ultimately the types of crises that need to be anticipated will change in many respects the concept of vulnerability. In a very fundamental way, assumptions about the nature of 'hazard prone countries,' hazard propensities and the vulnerable themselves, will have to be reassessed as one begins to speculate about the changing types of crises drivers and their dimensions and dynamics. With this in mind, Section III considers (i) **the types of crises** that will have to be faced, (ii) **their dimensions and dynamics**, and (iii) **the capacities challenge** that such factors will pose for the humanitarian sector.

*Types of future humanitarian crisis drivers.* The dimensions and dynamics of conventional crisis drivers, such as volcanic eruptions, floods and earthquakes, will increase exponentially, principally because of a confluence of these hazards with what can be described as 'context factors.' The short-term perspectives of government policy-makers as well as the effects of environmental changes, including climate change, will further exacerbate the potential impact of these standard crisis drivers. They will join a growing number of technological and

infrastructural threats that will intensify vulnerability across the globe. Such crisis drivers may in turn add to the fragility of states, intensify disillusion about government interests and competencies, exacerbate ethnic and social divides, generate large-scale flows of migration and ultimately may end in violence and conflict within and across borders.

***Changing dimensions and dynamics of crisis impacts.*** The dimensions of more and more humanitarian crises will be regional and in some instances global; and their dynamics can be seen in terms of (i) systems collapse, (ii) simultaneous crises and (iii) sequential crises. A systems collapse is broadly speaking a complete system's collapse caused, for example, by a cybernetic collapse that will affect large swathes of infrastructure and access to essential resources and services. Simultaneous crises indicate a series of major crises, most likely in different parts of the world that occur within a sufficiently narrow timeframe that capacities to respond would be severely stretched. Similarly, sequential or compound crises suggest cascading crises where a growing number of crisis drivers have ever increasing accumulative effects.

***The humanitarian capacities challenge.*** New and expanded threats will require far greater attention to a range of enhanced capacities. On the one hand, these capacities will reflect the inevitable need for greater resources, including human resources. On the other hand and more importantly, they will reflect the need for greater anticipatory capacities as well as abilities to innovate and to deal with new forms of collaboration. Given the new and expanded types of threats that will have to be faced in the future, far greater efforts will have to be expended on ways to garner 'non-traditional capacities' to meet these challenges.

***Section IV: Operational challenges in a futures context*** ultimately reflect the confluence of the changing global context and the expanding

nature of humanitarian crises. For NGOs that need to prepare for meeting the challenges of the future, there are at least four dimensions that will require substantive adjustments: (i) access, (ii) legitimacy, (iii) value-added and (iv) funding. These adjustments in a very fundamental sense have less to do with institutional mechanisms and far more to do with changing mind-sets.

***New approaches to the issue of access.*** The issue of access to crisis affected peoples is changing due to a variety of factors, including a combination of 'remote control' operations in conflict areas, governments' increasing assertion of sovereignty and alternative 'non-traditional actors' willing to play humanitarian roles. All such factors make access less an issue of principles, international standards and obligations, and far more one of 'alternative routes.' These routes include enhanced relationships with regional organisations, partnerships with private sector and state capitalist structures, with social network hubs and diasporas. In other words, the challenge when it comes to access in the future is as much about indirect as direct access and engagement.

***Negotiated legitimacy.*** The source of legitimacy for NGOs, and for NGO humanitarian action in particular, is increasingly in question. It is unclear whether NGOs can continue to meet expectations of legitimacy when they increasingly work through hidden operational partners or assume that their activities are justified by humanitarian principles that seem ever more contested and difficult to maintain in complex response environments. Moreover, rather than maintaining a presumption of legitimacy based upon principle, a growing number of non-traditional actors—such as Brazil, China, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—gain their legitimacy through consultative and collaborative approaches – not to support a concept of legitimacy but rather to gain the interest and support by identifying what is acceptable to potential partners.



*Value-added and comparative advantage.* In the ever more complex world of humanitarian action, value-added and comparative advantages will be ever more difficult for NGOs to identify. In part this conclusion stems from the likelihood that governments of affected populations will prefer more localised approaches to intervention; in part because other actors, including the private sector and the military, will in an increasing number of ways be able to provide the sorts of demand-driven requirements that will mark operations of the future. While difficult to over-generalise, there are at least three inter-related value-added and comparative advantages that NGOs could provide: (i) identification and demonstration of innovations and innovative practices that will be needed, particularly for prevention and preparedness; (ii) capacity-building both at community and central levels to promote resilience and sustainability; and (iii) network development for monitoring vulnerability and assessing best practices.

*Funding in the future.* There are a host of challenges that surround the issue of funding in the future. One example is that NGOs will have to deal with a paradox that inevitably will impinge upon future funding. Increasingly, their value-added will be underpinned by promoting trust between partners encompassing a broad spectrum of actors. The paradox, therefore, will emerge when the persistent search for funds, perceived as necessary for NGOs to maintain their influence, undermines potential partners' sense of trust. Other funding challenges will arise when NGOs also will have to confront the full implications of social networking technologies where, for example, crowd-sourcing projects will enable donations to be filtered directly to projects without an NGO intermediary. A further consideration – one by no means unknown to NGOs today – is that traditional donor government sources may in the foreseeable future be on the wane. As part of this trend, the roles that NGOs might see for themselves in the future,

possibly less focused on direct operations 'in the field,' may not be as compelling for traditional donors as the perceived role of NGOs as deliverers. Moreover, 'non-traditional' donor governments may be inclined to fund their own, more 'local' NGOs, and similarly private sector organisations may replace NGO actors and also may feel more interested in funding local partners.

*Section V: The emerging humanitarian eco-system* concerns various 'models' that humanitarian NGOs might consider as they look for means to address the sorts of strategic and operational challenges of the future. The sorts of models that are proposed in this section reflect not only the implications of the previous sections, but also a conceptual construct that attempts to place humanitarian action in a wider space, a space that emphasises inter-relationships too often ignored by humanitarian planners and policymakers. Before addressing possible future models, it would be worth identifying ways that NGOs could respond to the overall implications of the emerging humanitarian eco-system. With that in mind, the eco-system of which humanitarian NGOs need to be part of would include (i) *new types of dialogues*, including with the natural and social sciences, (ii) *brokering functions* in a multi-layered humanitarian construct, (iii) an *emerging catalysing role*, and (iv) *new types of partnerships*.

*New types of dialogues.* Innovations and innovative practices, so increasingly essential for humanitarian NGOs interested in dealing with future challenges, suggests the importance of promoting dialogues between the sciences and humanitarian actors. That sort of dialogue should not be seen as 'one-offs,' but its importance will lie in systematic interaction. Similarly, the NGO of the future will look more and more for ways 'to discuss' how the core business of the private sector can enhance NGO efforts to reduce vulnerability and foster resilience. In noting these



two sectors, the reality is that the number of partnerships that will deserve greater interaction between NGOs and others is considerable, but the key point is to identify with whom one should engage consistently and systematically over time.

**Brokering functions.** The issue of dialogue demonstrates the considerable array of potential actors and 'layers' with which NGOs will have to engage, though these layers will not conform to the hierarchies of the current system. Yet, the purpose of such dialogues would by no means be solely for the purposes of bilateral engagement. An increasingly important role for NGOs will be to act as brokers or intermediaries, as facilitators to bring a wide and diverse group of actors together to focus their respective capacities to deal with a specific set of issues that, for example, pertain to vulnerability and resilience as well as crisis response. In other words, there will be a number of actors with a number of skills, but the prominent humanitarian actor in the future will increasingly be a broker to bring necessary talent together in the multidimensional eco-system of the humanitarian world. However, NGOs should not assume that they can portray themselves or pursue funding as a broker as they have as implementers.

**NGOs as catalysts.** Related to future brokering function, the catalytic role of NGOs will be ever more important. In various ways NGOs have always served as catalysts for the wider humanitarian sector – a role that includes advocacy for forgotten emergencies and the promotion of accountability standards. The catalysts of the future, however, will have to go beyond such activities, and see their value in promoting new types of innovations and innovative practices as well as seeking to identify new types of threats and different coalitions of partners. Not only will they have to be brokers, but they, too, will have to experimenters and testers—catalysts in a world that may otherwise

be reluctant to add uncertainty to an already complex environment.

**New types of partnerships.** NGOs have like the rest of the humanitarian sector been encouraged from many quarters to engage more with the private sector, diasporas, non-state actors, non-traditional bilateral donors, regional organisations and even in some instances with the military. Yet, partnerships of the future will reflect amongst other things virtual-based networks and hubs, short-term, mission-focused networks (MFN) and more functionally linked partners, e.g. cities-to-cities, cross-border communities. The challenge for NGOs will be how best to bring such partnerships into forums that will support their objectives as brokers and catalysts.

Alternative models for addressing the sorts of value-added functions of NGOs in the future would include at least five conceptual frameworks: (i) *purveyors of expertise and innovation*, (ii) *integrated platform facilitators*, (iii) *decentralised regionalism*, (iv) *mission-focused networks* and (v) *niche market focus*. None of these is mutually exclusive; all have elements that can be seen as inter-related or mutually supportive: *Purveyors of expertise and innovation*. Replacing a 'boots on the ground' mind-set with a commitment to providing innovations and innovative practices to help countries and communities deal with ever more complex crisis threats is an NGO model that will increasingly be valued by a growing number of governments and regional authorities. The NGO of the future will understand that much of this capacity building and knowledge transfer can be done online as well as in-country;

**Integrated platforms.** Based principally in areas of anticipated vulnerability, NGOs could facilitate the creation of platforms that would consist of a range of potential responders and providers from, for example, the private sector, local authorities and communities that would

undertake, monitor and test prevention and preparedness planning on a regular and systematic basis.

**Regional decentralisation.** Many but by no means all major NGOs mirror corporate structures where subsidiaries reflect the general agenda and modalities of the centre. A future framework could reverse this model significantly by having regional structures determine their own contextually specific agendas and modalities, and where the centre is primarily a source of services for those individual regional organisations;

**Mission-focused networks.** For too many organisations, innovation and adaptation are constrained by linear thinking, standard operating procedures and short-term trends analysis. There are alternative constructs emerging that are fostering innovative and adaptive practices in a growing number of fields. One such construct is the *mission-focused network*, characterised by defined, time-bound objectives, normally openly accessible information and peer-to-peer interaction. Here, NGOs could use such MFNs to stimulate new approaches to humanitarian action;

**Niche market focus.** Situations of conflict might in the foreseeable future underscore the potential value of humanitarian NGOs far more than other types of activities. As localism and alternative

actors become more engaged in humanitarian action and assistance, a 'niche' of fundamental importance for the NGO community – one of considerable value for those caught up in internal or international conflict – is the presence of the NGO 'in the field.'

**Section VI: The tabula rasa question** is essentially simple. If one took a disaster of major consequence, one where today's humanitarian configuration was not in place, how would one deal with that crisis? What sorts of mechanisms would one establish – not based upon past experience, but upon an innocence unfettered by precedents. If one started again, what would it look like, and what lessons might today's NGOs learn in preparing for the future? This question goes to the heart of humanitarian NGOs' of the future. That said, NGOs do exist, but nevertheless need to test their importance, relevance and value on a regular basis in a context of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

Preparations for the future should include greater efforts to be more anticipatory, to spend much more time focusing upon the '*what might be*'s. For the NGO fit for the future, much greater attention will have to be paid to new forms of partnerships as well as to sources of innovation and innovative practices. The NGO of the future will be able to go beyond just incremental adjustments to changing circumstances and more willing to see change in terms of transformative action.

## I. In the beginning: assumptions and perceptions

Moral rectitude and economic dominance have underpinned humanitarianism since its 19<sup>th</sup> century origins. And, while humanitarian action has a tradition that harks back to the ancient Assyrians, indeed well before, the assertion of universal principles and the perception of a world frequently divided between the hapless and the resilient were very much consequences of the same world that created ‘Dunantism’.

As one begins to prepare for the future of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the humanitarian sector, the sector’s past provides an important starting point for anticipating *what might be* in the longer term. That said, the immediate challenge in looking both at an NGO past and an NGO future, is to define what one means by an NGO. For the purposes of this discussion paper, the NGO focus is on those international non-governmental organisations, typically organised around a normative aim or social or moral goal,<sup>1</sup> predominantly from Western Europe and the United States, with the status of a charity, and structurally not answerable to anyone other than their own governing bodies and those who give them money.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, there are at least three broad and inter-related characteristics that have evolved over the past century that points to some core challenges that may well affect the ways that NGOs might address the future.

<sup>1</sup>Obrecht, Alice (Forthcoming 2013), ‘NGO Accountability: The Civil Society Actor model for NGO-stakeholder relationships,’ in: Brooks, T. (ed.) *New Waves in Global Justice*.

<sup>2</sup>This broad description excludes for the purposes of this paper what has been described as ‘the largely unknown and under-appreciated universe of local NGOs and civil society organisations.’ Holmes, John, (2013), *The Politics of Humanity: The Reality of Relief Aid*, Zeus Publications, London, pp.4

### *A question of principle*

The notion of the universality of humanitarian principles stems in no small part from a set of assumptions and perceptions that are very much part of the growth of Western hegemony. It mirrors a global dominance that emerged out of the age of discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, through industrialisation, colonialism and economic dominance in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—past Solferino—and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That confidence and dominance supported the moral rectitude that emboldened it

‘Humanitarianism is the product of years of practical institutional evolution, not first principles. It is what is has been made to be.’

*Hopgood (2008), pp. 100*

to proclaim that the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality in the provision of humanitarian assistance were fundamental and universal. That same confidence and dominance allowed alternative principles to be by-passed: Western individualism was insensitive to collectivism; justice was not deemed to be a humanitarian principle; principles were not to be negotiated.

While the humanitarian principles have been portrayed as universal, on a more operational level their application is far more ambiguous. One of the important chroniclers of humanitarian action has recently noted that, whatever post-World War II period one takes, the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action, ‘on the giving and receiving ends alike, takes place in the context of political frameworks and is rarely, if ever, totally free of political impetus or effects.’<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Minear, Larry, (2012), ‘Humanitarian Action and Politicization: A review of experiences since World War II,’ in Donini, Antonio (ed.), *Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, Kumarian Press, pp. 43.

Indeed two other distinguished analysts have concluded that

the agencies that are able to withstand such pressures (of the reward system)—the ICRC, MSF and a handful of other ‘Dunantist’ organisations that take their inspiration from the Red Cross principles and are able to assert their autonomy from partisan agenda – are very much a minority.<sup>4</sup>

From a historical perspective, that ambiguity persists, but normally below the surface, spurred in no small part by the demands of institutional survival.

#### *Vocation versus institutionalisation*

In the words of the humanitarian director of a major NGO, ‘The humanitarian ethos has been lost to an “economic rationalist agenda.”’ Whether or not that is a fair reflection on NGOs as a whole, there is a sense amongst observers as well as many within the sector that humanitarian commitment over the past four decades has increasingly been weighed against the need for ensuring the perpetuation of the organisation. Rarely, if ever, does one hear the earlier NGO mantra of ‘we’re here to work our way out of business;’ and, more often than not one’s own institutional survival is deemed essential to ensure the well-being of others.

This issue is compounded by the defining organisational feature of NGOs as non-governmental and independent of formal political institutions. As discussed later on in connection to legitimacy, this independence creates a need for NGOs to find other sources of legitimation outside of political processes and

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<sup>4</sup>Walker, Peter and Donini, Antonio, (2012), ‘So What,’ in Donini, Antonio (ed.), *Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, Kumarian Press, pp. 43

transfers of power, as well as reinforces the view that a humanitarian presence that is specifically *non-governmental* should be sustained in perpetuity. That said, the scale of global humanitarian needs, the technical capacity of some NGOs, and the legitimate need for independent and neutral (which often means

‘most organisations today would be instantly recognisable to their founders, still raising money in the rich world and spending it in poorer countries, adding more “bells and whistles” along the way’

*Edwards (2010), pp. 6*

external) humanitarian actors in many contexts, particularly conflicts, all point to need for international humanitarian NGOs that will not soon, if ever, disappear.

Over recent decades, there has emerged a clear relationship between institutional survival, professionalisation and the decline of humanitarian action as a vocation. This is not in any way to suggest that those who join humanitarian organisations are not generally committed to helping others. Rather it is to suggest that a combination of institutionalisation and humanitarian professionalisation have created an industry that is self-perpetuating, and reflects a set of values that has as much to do with enhancing the business proposition as with eliminating the need for it. In one sense, the dual mandate of many NGOs can be seen to reflect the motives of institutionalisation over those of vocation.

Looking out over a WFP tree-planting project in northern Ethiopia in 1987, the then Country Director commented that he did not understand the emphasis that his organisation continued to give to emergency assistance rather than development. ‘Development is the way to get out of this mess,’ he concluded. ‘The (Ethiopian) government wants it, but all the internationals

want disaster relief.' On the one hand, the remark points to the dichotomy between humanitarian action and development that clearly persists today, reflecting in no small part the relationship between disaster relief funding and institutional survival. On the other hand, it too, was an early demonstration of an emerging fact that, in humanitarian action, funds do not always follow the needs, all too often resulting in what have been called 'forgotten emergencies.' It is this very duality and financial dichotomy that DFID's Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR) attempted to address when the issue of resilience was discussed at the end of 2010. While the HERR was initially introduced as a kind of administrative means to bring development and disaster funding together, the barrier between these two forms of foreign assistance remains one of the most difficult to eliminate within the organisation. This dichotomy continues to be reflected in the stove-piped nature of all too many dual-mandated, non-governmental organisations, where the real synergies that could reduce disaster vulnerabilities and indeed promote resilience are ignored. In so saying, it is not that such relatively rigid duality is lost on the NGOs, but the commitment to break down the unnecessary barriers that separate development and disasters continue, as in most aid institutions, to be resisted.

### *The essence of saving lives*

Stemming from the deeply held values of saving lives, the humanitarian vocation carried with it a deep and abiding concern involving hands-on approaches to provide for the needs of the afflicted and the vulnerable. Humanitarian assistance was in that sense underscored by a commitment to 'on-the-ground' operationality

and direct assistance. Along with such deeply well intentioned objectives – from Biafra and East Pakistan

onwards – there also seems to have emerged a mind-set that emphasised 'the practical,' that had more than a degree of disdain for what was described as

'the academic' and saw 'the world' of humanitarian action as 'the field.'

'Despite the tasks that lie ahead there is little talk of transformation in the current scenario, but rather hope that by doing more of the same cost-effectively, we will get where we need to go.'

*Edwards (2010), pp. 7*

All too often, 'the practical' was an unintentional way of addressing the immediate with too little thought focused on its eventual consequences. It also tended to re-enforce what might be described as the unconscious assumption that 'we know what needs to be done,' usually more than the afflicted, themselves. Similarly, the accusation of 'too academic' was another unintentional way to resist new ideas and innovations...unless such ideas and innovations fit into a relatively narrow humanitarian paradigm. The use of the term, 'the field,' too, reflected a certain attitude that stressed a sense of difference from us, and a perception of the haplessness of the victim. In this context, it is not irrelevant how many concerned humanitarians resisted providing psycho-social assistance and trauma counselling, because those were not issues directly related to saving lives – not the kinds of lives the humanitarian sector had become used to assisting.



## II. The changing global context

A continuing blind spot in the world of traditional humanitarian policymakers is reflected not only in the ways that they identify potential risks and solutions, but also in the assumptions they make about the context in which such risks and solutions might occur. This is not to say, for example, that they are not aware of the rise of such emerging powers as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and a host of other rising middle-income countries around the world, or the resurgence of sovereignty that seems to have come with it.

Rather it is to suggest that they appear to find it difficult to move beyond their traditional systems and approaches to accommodate new paradigms. The challenge for many remains to find ways to have traditional systems and approaches fit into new contexts instead of seeking new systems and approaches for accommodating changing contexts.

In an October 2011 meeting of twenty-five heads of Canadian non-governmental organisations to look at emerging future challenges, participants stressed the value which they attested to the event because it gave them 'time to think' before they had 'to return to the practical day-to-day routines' of running their organisations.<sup>5</sup> All too often these day-to-day routines fail to provide the institutional transformations that may be required to meet global transformations. Continuing emphases, for example, on 'universal humanitarian principles, 'boots on the ground' approaches to relief operations, engaging with 'traditional donors' and improving the present

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<sup>5</sup> See: 'Foul Humanitarian Words,' a comment on the dangers of the misuse of the terms *practical*, *academic* and the *field* for humanitarian policy-makers, arising out of discussions at the Policy and Advocacy Group for Emergency Relief, Ottawa, Canada, 20 October 2011, HFP Newsletter – November/December 2011 available at: [www.humanitarianfutures.org](http://www.humanitarianfutures.org).

'humanitarian sector' all suggest that the future is likely to be addressed from the perspective of the present. The probability that the sorts of transformations that are underway might require policy-makers to alter fundamentally the way that they define problems and the means for resolving them does not readily enter the policy analysis process.<sup>6</sup>

And yet it is evident that major global transformations are underway and will require new ways for those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to think and prepare for the future. Examples of such global transformations abound, but there are at least six inter-related factors that the humanitarian policy-maker should take into account: the implications of the post-Western hegemon, the political centrality of humanitarian crises, the resurgence of sovereignty, the globalisation paradox, technologies and their consequences and new types of humanitarian actors.

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<sup>6</sup>The difficulty for the policy-maker to move out of what might be described as their 'comfort zone' is suggested in a critique by Harvard University's Stanley Hoffmann of a recent work by the distinguished political analysts, Friedman, Thomas L. and Mandelbaum, Michael, (2011), *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented And How We Can Come Back*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. Hoffmann notes that, despite the authors' recognition that the world has changed fundamentally and that the United States is now just another power in a world of multiple powers, they nevertheless fall back on the contradictory assumption of 'American exceptionalism,' namely, the uniqueness of the American experience which would enable it to resume its role as global leader. It is difficult in other words for even highly trained analysts to let go of fundamental assumptions despite the implications of major transformational change. (See: Hoffmann, Stanley, 'Cure for a sick country?', in *New York Review of Books*, October 27- 9 November 2011, Volume LVIII, No. 16).



### *The post-Western hegemon*

The rise of alternative powers around the world, including Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa, has been well documented, and its implications for the global economy, security and global regimes well explored. The traditional assumptions about Western influence and authority are being challenged across the board.

This is not to suggest that so much of what has been part of *Pax Americana* will not remain. The multilateral system – principally the United Nations and Bretton Woods structures – will most likely endure for the foreseeable future, though their mechanisms such as the UN's Security Council and its procedures may well undergo significant change.

Not only are political and economic power shifting in many directions across the globe, but so too are demographics. Populations outside of the Western world's growth rates have long been outstripped by those predominately in Asia and Africa, and while growth may have levelled off in many countries, it has left youth bulge whose often destabilising impact has only recently been felt. Concurrently, the proportion of the elderly in much of the world, particularly, but not only, the Western world, and the vulnerabilities which can such populations can face, also present new challenges for humanitarian actors. Not only can elderly populations have specific needs, but their presence and numbers in many contexts can challenge some the fundamental priorities which humanitarians have long held.

Populations are also moving rapidly, driven by crisis and opportunity, spreading communities across the globe, making diasporas an indispensable extension for communities, particularly those impacted by crises. Concurrently, the location of the world's most impoverished and vulnerable is changing rapidly as well, and without consensus on where they may be found in the future. Whether or not the economic structures that have led to

unprecedented though asymmetric economic growth over the past half century will endure remains uncertain and the way physical power will be asserted, too, will most likely undergo significant change. The fundamental difference, however, will be the diversity of actors that will influence the course of local, regional and global events.

This diversity will offer up the prospect of far more disparate if not more divisive barriers to be overcome when attempting to reconcile contending interests; and in a world in which values such as 'humanitarian principles' have hitherto been regarded as universal, the decline of hegemonic influence will mean that it is quite likely that in the words of the anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, the humanitarian sector will have to accommodate a new approach to principles which he describes as *tactical humanism* – a humanism that is prepared to see universals as 'asymptotically approached goals, subject to endless negotiation, not based on prior axioms...'<sup>7</sup>

### *Political centrality of humanitarian crises*

Three decades ago, humanitarian crises were considered aberrant phenomena, relatively peripheral to core governmental interests. Governments around the world today increasingly see the repercussions of poorly managed crises in terms of their very survival. The evidence spans a growing catalogue of cases, from governmental reactions to Myanmar's Cylone Nargis to the Thai government's reactions to the 2011 floods, from the Turkish government's response to the 2011 Van earthquake to Japan's tsunami generated

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<sup>7</sup>[This is] not a recommendation in disguise for relativism, for tactical humanism does not believe in the equal claims of all possible moral worlds. It believes in producing values out of engaged debate.' Appadurai, Arjun, (2004), 'Tactical Humanism,' in: Jerome Binde, *The Future of Values*, UNESCO, Paris, pp.18.

Fukushima catastrophe in March 2010. Today, humanitarian crises now have far greater political significance than they had in much of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and, as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill five years later demonstrated, even the most powerful governments have to deal with the consequences of serious reputational issues if they fail to respond adequately to humanitarian crises, and more authoritarian governments might find that failure to be seen to be responding could trigger violence and revolution.

As humanitarian crises move to centre stage of governmental interests, they are imbued with high levels of political significance – both domestically and internationally. While a government's survival may depend upon the way it responds to a humanitarian crisis, the way that other governments and international actors respond to that crisis will, too, have increasingly political consequence. This is by no means a new theme. The political consequences of external support for a beleaguered state are as old as humanitarian response itself.<sup>8</sup> However, as the rate of significant humanitarian crises increases, placing greater demands on resources and foreign assistance budgets that continue to shrink in light of the 2008 economic crisis, governments may increasingly adopt a strategic approach to their humanitarian engagement, guided by political considerations. It is not merely the types of assistance that is provided, but the context – the perceived public relations support or overt or implied criticism – that comes with assistance. For both sides – recipient and donating governments – this context will increasingly affect wider interests including commercial relations and common security arrangements.

This means, in part, how and who provides assistance will weigh heavily for recipient and

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<sup>8</sup>Walker, Peter and Maxwell, Daniel G., (2009), *Shaping the Humanitarian World*, Taylor & Francis Publishers, Oxford.

donor government decision-makers, and that decisions will be more and more influenced by the abiding political interests that are linked to the provision of assistance than even they are today. What is referred to as the 'instrumentalisation of humanitarian assistance,' where assistance is used in almost a surreptitious way to achieve 'non-humanitarian objectives' will become more overtly calculated and political.<sup>9</sup>

### *The globalisation paradox*

Globalisation is by no means a new theme, and is one that has been recognized since the 1970s as one of the transformative factors in the history of human kind. The intensity of global interconnectedness is evident in almost all aspects of modern life, and the new mantra in various quarters has moved from 'all politics is local' to 'all politics is global'. From basic means of survival to the complexities of manufacturing, from sources of innovation to the sustainability of infrastructure, there are few facets of human existence where, in the foreseeable future, some form of global inter-relatedness and interdependence will not be evident.

And yet, there is a 'globalisation paradox', namely that the more globalised the world becomes, the more 'localised' it seems to be. In other words, the assumption that had underpinned the concept of globalisation was that it would lead to a growing degree of uniformity and commonality around the world, and that individual cultures would disappear under relentless waves of global similarities and sameness. This is increasingly countered by new

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<sup>9</sup>Macrae, Joanna, (2004), 'Understanding Integration from Rwanda to Iraq,' *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 29-35. See also Donini, Antonio, (2010), 'The Far Side: The Meta-functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalized world,' in *Disasters*, Vol. 34, Supplement S2, pp.S220-S237, available at: [www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/ISA\\_the\\_farside.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/ISA_the_farside.pdf)

waves of nationalism,<sup>10</sup> and the growth of global commonalities and inter-relationships has in effect generated more intense interest by more and more nations determined to protect their customs, culture, and language.<sup>11</sup>

Governments of crisis-affected states will become increasingly wary of those outside humanitarian organisations who feel that their biggest contributions will result from 'boots on the ground', although those who bring much needed technical expertise might be the most consistent exception to that emerging rule. In those instances where external involvement is acceptable and technical capacities needed, prerequisites might include proven competencies in local languages and an appreciation of local culture and context. Increasingly, external assistance will be driven less by supply and more by demand, and the conduit for such assistance might well be through acceptable regional organisations rather than the UN system or Western consortia. In that sense, the role of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as an aid conduit to Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis is instructive.<sup>12</sup>

### *The resurgence of sovereignty*

That humanitarian assistance – particularly in the context of international assistance – is imbued

with political significance and calculations is by no means a new theme. In the midst of a series of humanitarian crises in Africa and eastern Europe at the end of the 1990s, the then UN Secretary-General warned states in sub-Saharan Africa that the international community could no longer tolerate the politicisation of humanitarian response and the consequent abuse of human rights.<sup>13</sup> Yet that moral high ground had decreasing relevance as the political centrality of humanitarian crises intensified. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe were increasingly unwilling to abide by an externally imposed, Western-driven moral imperative.

Efforts to counter this tendency in Africa and around the globe persist. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, for example, continues to seek governments' commitment to International Disaster Response Laws;<sup>14</sup> and persistent efforts to promote the right to protect also continue through an array of multilateral and bilateral fora. However, these and related initiatives are countered by a trend that does and will constrain their impact – the resurgence of sovereignty, or the growing confidence in more and more governments that they can resist the prescriptions and perceived intrusions of Western-oriented institutions and states.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Malloch-Brown, Mark, (2011), *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Limits of Nations and the Pursuit of New Politics*, Allen Lane, London.

<sup>11</sup> Shearman, Claire, (2005), 'Communities, networks, creativity and culture: insights into localisation within globalisation,' in Michael Talalay, Chris Farrands, and Roger Tooze (eds), *Technology, Culture and Competitiveness: Change and the World Political Economy*, Taylor & Francis, New York.

<sup>12</sup>Creac'h, Yves-Kim and Fan, (2008), 'ASEAN's role in the Cyclone Nargis response: implications, lessons and opportunities,' in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, Issue 41, available at: <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-41/aseans-role-in-the-cyclone-nargis-response-implications-lessons-and-opportunities>.

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<sup>13</sup>Annan, Kofi, (1999) 'Two concepts of sovereignty,' in *The Economist*, 18 September, pp. 49–50.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, David, (2007), 'Domestic regulation of international humanitarian relief in disasters and armed conflicts: a comparative analysis,' in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 89, No. 866, pp. 353–355.

<sup>15</sup>See Falk, Richard,(2011), 'Dilemmas of sovereignty and intervention', in *Foreign Policy Journal*, available at:<http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/07/18/dilemmas-of-sovereignty-and-intervention/>, who notes that the concept of sovereignty has all too often been a mechanism for legitimizing the space of states as a sanctuary for the commission of 'human wrongs.' He also notes that the West has historically claimed rights

In no sense is this to argue that the resurgence of sovereignty automatically denies human rights, including the right to humanitarian assistance. Rather, it is to say that how these are interpreted, and who will determine what is needed and when, will be less negotiable, and in the foreseeable future, increasingly determined by a state's sovereign authority. Governments will be more inclined to resist unwelcome though well-intentioned external intervention, and will also be more insistent on determining whether or not external assistance is required and, if so, what will be provided, by whom, when, where, and how. However, new technologies and the reach of diasporas, among other factors, can now allow crisis-affected communities to speak for themselves, not only through their governments, challenging a state's ability to deny their right and their access to humanitarian assistance. For traditional humanitarian actors, the consequences of more assertive sovereignty mean that there will be even less receptivity to arguments about rights of access, that alternative providers (i.e. non-traditional actors, including the private sector) might be preferred 'humanitarians', and that the free-wheeling nature of autonomous humanitarian agencies such as international non-governmental organisations will be less and less tolerated.

### *Technologies and their consequences*

Technology impacts humanitarian organisations in multiple ways: it can contribute as a crisis driver (see next section), but can also shape how NGOs respond to a crisis, transforming the space in which NGOs operate. Finally, the widespread availability of social networking and mobile capability shapes the local and global public arenas in which NGOs must negotiate their credibility and legitimacy. The hazards that

emerging technologies create as well as their positive impacts are well recognised. Nevertheless, their longer-term consequences present profound unknowns. Unmanned aerial vehicles, including drones, cybernetics and space, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and 3D printing present a vision of possibilities that are profoundly transformative, and yet their social, socio-economic and political consequences are redolent with uncertainty. For humanitarian NGOs, the inter-action between an ever-increasing range of technologies and natural hazards will pose ever more challenging strategic and operational issues.

In this context the issues of social networking and mobile technology offer an interesting case in point. There are few who would deny the transformative consequences of these technological developments; they are lauded as societal equalisers as well as a source for practical day-to-day routines such as money transfers. Related technologies, including telemedicine, open the way for the provision of care at a level normally not considered possible in poor or inaccessible communities, and through this same technology one can anticipate profound changes in the accessibility of education and the very means of manufacturing through '3-D processes.'

And, while social networking is indeed transformational, it also carries with it dimensions of risks that have to be acknowledged. There are a growing number of instances when 'noise' – contending and often misleading information—plays havoc with the prioritisation and location of needs. Events in Haiti over the past three years offer a host of instances when relief efforts were confused by different calls for assistance. While the positive impact of social networking cannot be denied, its proponents' contention that it is an irresistible force for democracy fail to see that more and more governments are able to interfere with, exploit for their own purposes, and in some

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of intervention 'in the name of "civilization".' normally in the non-West – a trend increasingly resisted.

instances entirely block internet systems. Hence, technology, too, presents the humanitarian sector as well as others with another example of the globalisation paradox.

### *New types of humanitarian actors*

NGOs have, like the rest of the humanitarian sector, been encouraged from many quarters to engage more with ‘new humanitarian actors’ such as the private sector, diasporas, non-state actors, non-traditional bilateral donors, regional organisations and even in some instances with militaries. Yet, partnerships of the future will also reflect, amongst other things, virtual-based networks and hubs, short-term, mission-focused networks and more functionally linked partners, e.g. cities-to-cities, and cross-border communities. The challenge for NGOs will be how best to bring such partnerships into forums that will support their objectives as brokers and catalysts.

That will be increasingly difficult. Traditional NGOs, as noted earlier, will have to confront the fact that in many instances new types of actors will not understand their ‘language,’ namely, a

basic lack of understanding about their motives, terms and procedures. At the same time, new humanitarian

actors such as those in the private sector will often be potential competitors,

‘The humanitarian aid system remains highly competitive, often anarchic, ungovernable and inefficient.’

*Healy & Tiller (MSF) (2013), pp. 1*

offering goods and services at the behest of donor and recipient governments. Again, as noted earlier, online actors - through crowd sourcing and crowd-funding as well as through online networks and hubs – will provide direct access to those perceived in need as well as well as alternative projects and programmes, traditionally in the domain of NGOs.

The challenge for NGOs in this context is how they will deal with these new types of humanitarian actors. The idea that the former will be able to incorporate the latter into their realms is less and less a plausible answer. The answer increasingly will be how NGOs will accommodate such new actors.

### **Critical Driving Forces Reshaping Civil Society to 2030**

- The level and sources of funding for civil society stakeholders
- The social and political influence of increasing access to technology
- The extent and type of citizen engagement with societal challenges
- The state of global and regional geopolitical stability and global integration of markets
- The effect of environmental degradation and climate change on populations
- The level of trust in governments, businesses and international organizations

*Source: WEF (2013), pp. 19*



### III. Expanding nature of humanitarian crises

The types of crisis drivers and ultimately the types of crises that need to be anticipated will change in many respects the concept of vulnerability.<sup>16</sup> In a very fundamental way, assumptions about the nature of ‘hazard prone countries,’ hazard propensities and the vulnerable themselves, will have to be reassessed as one begins to speculate about the changing types of crises drivers and their dimensions and dynamics.<sup>17</sup>

The conventional adage that crisis drivers expose the vulnerability of the poor will in many ways

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<sup>16</sup> In developing a list of potential threats, an OECD report notes that this list could be carried on almost indefinitely. The point is that surprising events capable of killing millions if not hundreds of millions, of humans happen. Moreover, even without huge loss of lives, capital stock is decimated, setting back development worldwide for decades. Not a single one of the items on the list is impossible. And, in fact, some of them like an asteroid impact or the spill of a deadly chemical have already happened – many times. Each of these events is what has come to be called in recent years an ‘extreme event,’ or Xevent for short. These are events generally seen as deadly surprises whose likelihood is difficult to estimate, and that can turn society upside-down in a few years, perhaps even minutes. Xevents come in both the ‘natural’ and ‘human-caused’ variety. The asteroid strike illustrates the former, while a terrorist-inspired nuclear blast serves nicely for the latter. Casti, John, (2011), ‘Four Faces of Tomorrow,’ *OECD International Futures Project on Future Global Shocks*, OECD, Paris, , pp.2.

<sup>17</sup> In this context, NASA’s Task Force on Planetary Defense warns that the international community has to increase its capacities to deflect in-coming asteroids – a suggestion endorsed by the White House’s Office of Science and Technology Policy. These are seen as plausible and indeed possible threats, threats for which one can prepare through the creation of relatively inexpensive deflection systems. Such threats will be general in their impacts, and will defy the proposition that those who are poorest are necessarily the most vulnerable. The Task Force on Planetary Defense of the NASA Advisory Council estimates the costs of deflection systems are \$250 to \$300 million, with an annual maintenance budget of \$75 million. See the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy message to US Congress October 2010.

have to be recalibrated. Japan’s March 2011 crisis demonstrated that there is an emerging category that can be labelled ‘the new poor,’ those who – despite insurance and government support – have lost sufficiently to slide down several socio-economic rungs. At the same time emerging crisis drivers will not only put an end once and for all to the assumptions of the ‘hapless South’ and ‘resilient North,’ but will blur the socio-economic demarcations of vulnerability. In other words, the types of crisis drivers of the future may in some instances have greater impact upon the socio-economic advantaged than the disadvantaged.

#### *Types of future crisis drivers*

The dimensions and dynamics of conventional crisis drivers, such as volcanic eruptions, floods and earthquakes, will increase exponentially, principally because of a confluence of these hazards with what can be described as ‘context factors.’ The short-term perspectives of government policy-makers as well as the effects of environmental changes, including climate change, will further exacerbate the potential impact of these standard crisis drivers.<sup>18</sup> They will join a growing number of technological and infrastructural threats that will intensify vulnerability across the globe. Some of these new crisis drivers will be part of the *desiderata* of spent technologies or the consequence of poorly planned ‘development’; others will derive directly from technologies presently in use, while others will be the result of the abuse of such technologies.

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<sup>18</sup>Leonard, Herman B. and Howitt, Arnold M., (2010), in *Advance Recovery and the Development of Resilient Organisations and Societies*, *Risk Dialogue Magazine Compendium*, pp. 16, offer important insights about institutional ‘myopia and proclivities to not always think rationally or effectively about low probability events or about events that are potentially far off in time.’



All such crisis drivers may in turn add to the fragility of states, intensify disillusion about government interests and competencies, exacerbate ethnic and social divides, generate large-scale flows of immigration and ultimately all too often may end in violence and conflict within and across borders.

In the first category, it is evident that there is a growing link between disaster risks and abandoned technologies. In this category, the potential catastrophes that could arise within Central Asia and beyond from radioactive waste and nuclear tailings are cases in point. According to one analysis, the festering remnants of the Soviet nuclear arms industry could poison significant portions of the water sources and agricultural lands of countries in the region, and – in a resource strapped environment – could ultimately be the source of conflicts within and between those countries. Such waste could also have far more extensive psychological effects if caught in airstreams that carry it well beyond the region, itself.<sup>19</sup> Similarly the ‘red sludge’ from a burst bauxite storage reservoir near the Hungarian town of Ajka offers another case in a growing number of examples in which the sheer cost and complexity of industrial and waste storage around the world are exacerbating risk.<sup>20</sup>

Technology’s impact upon vulnerability is also reflected in issues such as cybernetic collapse,

nanotechnology and biotechnology. All three reflect scientific innovations that will be increasingly important and positive parts of modern society, while at the same time all three will present potential hazards that could generate vulnerabilities which in turn could translate into large-scale crises. Only recently the British government ranked cybernetic terror as the second greatest threat to the nation<sup>21</sup> and the negative as well as positive aspects of nanotechnology and biotechnology have been a source of considerable debate over the past decade.<sup>22</sup>

The disaster risks that will emerge from what might be regarded as ‘poorly planned development’ are numerous and frequently recognised as such. The evident dilemma for policy-makers is the need to reconcile seemingly incompatible objectives, for example, between economic growth and longer-term risk. Hence, displacement caused by large infrastructure projects, especially dam construction, has become common in China – as in other countries within the Asian region – in response to the escalating demand for electricity and water associated with rapid urbanisation. The sorts of risks that projects such as China’s Three Gorges Dam create are reflected in the potential environmental catastrophe that is forecast in the aftermath of moving more than 1.4 million people away from

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<sup>19</sup>Hobbs, Chris, (2010), ‘Radioactive Leakages and Nuclear Tailings in Central Asia,’ Humanitarian Futures Programme, King’s College, London, pp.12. This report was prepared initially for UN ISDR’s *Global Assessment Report – 2011*, launched in May 2011.

<sup>20</sup>The 21 October 2010 collapse of the bauxite sludge pond near Ajka, Hungary, containing caustic waste from the process that converts bauxite to aluminium almost made it into the Danube ecosystem. The pond had been on a 2006 watch list of sites “at risk” for accidents that could pollute the Danube ecosystem. WWF Hungary had pushed for the closure of the pond (large enough that it could easily be seen from space on Google Earth) and of two other bauxite sludge storage ponds in western Hungary.

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<sup>21</sup>Theresa May warns of growing threat of cyberwarfare,’ *The Guardian*, 18 October 2010.

<sup>22</sup>‘There are a great many studies on cells and animals suggesting that nanomaterials can have damaging effects on the health and the environment,’ says conference organiser Professor Bengt Fadeel, Vice Chairman at the Institute of Environmental Medicine at Karolinska Institutet. ‘When you shrink material down to the nanoscale, you change their properties and we still don’t really understand which properties are hazardous.’ *Swedish Research institutions warns on health hazards of nanotechnology*, Finfact Ireland 15 October 2010

in and around the dam site.<sup>23</sup>

The full consequences of such choices are not analysed or understood sufficiently. As highlighted in the controversy over the Zipingpu dam's contribution to the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, dams can end up becoming agents of their own demise. The pressure of the water in lakes of several square kilometres locked behind a large dam may contribute to an increase in the seismic activity beneath it, especially if the dam is built directly over a fault.

### *Dimensions and dynamics*

Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the Russian firestorms of 2010 demonstrate that all geographical areas are vulnerable to crisis, and that the severity of impact more often than not is a reflection of the ways that societies structure themselves and allocate their resource. Yet, whatever may have been characterisations about vulnerabilities in the past, it is increasingly apparent that the dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian crises are changing exponentially; and that those concerned about reducing disaster risks and their impacts will have to take both into account. As noted in the Humanitarian Response Index 2008, 'Given the heavy strains on the humanitarian system, there is an urgent need to invest more in making sure that the system as a whole works better to meet current and future humanitarian needs'.<sup>24</sup>

There are in this regard at least three issues that those involved in humanitarian action will have to accommodate in preparing to address possible future risks. Each of these suggest that risk reduction and preparedness will not have the luxury of looking at individual risks as isolated

<sup>23</sup>Xinhua News Agency, (2010), 'International scientists to launch environmental studies on "HKH region,"' available at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2010-03/09/content\\_13129540.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2010-03/09/content_13129540.htm).

<sup>24</sup>DARA,(2008), *Humanitarian Response Index (HRI)*, pp. 3.

phenomenon, but will have to take into account the ways that a seemingly random number of potential risks interact.

From this perspective, the three dimensions of future crisis dynamics that should be borne in mind are **[i] systems collapse, [ii] simultaneous crises and [iii] sequential crises**. Each emphasise the interactive nature of risk identification and reduction, and each stresses the need to look at both in terms of boundaries that transcend conventional geo-political demarcations.<sup>25</sup>

### **[i] systems collapse.**

'It's the convergence

of stresses that's especially treacherous and makes synchronous failure a possibility as never before,' noted Thomas Homer-Dixon in his seminal work, *The Upside of Down*. 'In coming years, our societies won't face one or two major challenges at once, as usually happened in the past. Instead they will face an alarming variety of problems – likely including oil shortages, climate change, economic instability, and mega-terrorism – all at the same time.'<sup>26</sup> This describes *synchronous failures*.<sup>27</sup>

'...a future that will be dominated by the demands of climate change and other collective problems that cannot be tackled by the "North" or "South" in isolation.'

*Edwards (2010), pp. 6*

<sup>25</sup>ibid

<sup>26</sup> Homer-Dixon, Thomas, (2007), *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilisation*, Alfred A. Knopf, London, pp. 16

<sup>27</sup>Throughout the city ATM networks collapsed, a significant proportion of the Bombay and National Stock Exchanges became inoperative, for the first time in its history the Mumbai-Pune Expressway was closed, due in no small part to landslides, the Chatrapati Shivaji International Airport as well as smaller airports closed down. In other words for a 48 hour period, one of the largest and economically important cities in the world shut down. Across all aspects of economic, social and political life, it was almost impossible to function. Some of the causes that intensified the crisis became evident in the flood's

**[ii] *simultaneous crises.*** In speculating about the types of future crisis drivers and crises that might have to be confronted in the future, it would seem evident that their impact and effects will be significantly greater. As Haiti and Pakistan reminded practitioners and policy-makers alike during 2010, the capacity to respond to such individual crises leaves the humanitarian sector overstretched. The challenge for that same sector is how to cope with the consequences of such events happening simultaneously. The prospect that a significant earthquake could occur on the West Coast of the United States while a major tsunami hits several Far Eastern countries and a major drought continues in West Africa cannot be dismissed; and, indeed points to the prospect of a considerable humanitarian capacities challenge. Large international NGOs that maintain a hierarchical global structure can struggle to provide adequate support to multiple country offices undergoing simultaneous crisis responses.

**[iii] *sequential crises.*** Policy-makers and practitioners, too, have to take into account the cascading effects of a single crisis driver that may trigger a range of other crises. Such sequential crises are not hard to imagine. The earthquake that leads to a tsunami which in turn affects a nuclear power plant is a stark example. The interconnectedness between crisis events is ever more evident, and the probability of domino crises is ever more plausible as the

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aftermath. 40% of the mangrove ecosystems that served as buffers between land and sea were lost to shopping malls and the development of waste dumps. Despite periodic warnings over the past fifteen years about the consequences to infrastructure of over-building, the Environment Ministry merely stated that it was not practical to impose new guidelines with retrospective effect 'as there are millions of buildings'. And in a related vein, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation had maintained that the 1990 plan to enhance the city's drainage capacity to 50 mm per hour was too expensive, i.e. 600 million Crore, or approximately US\$130 million.

interconnection between the March 2011 Japanese earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown clearly suggests. More controversially, the way in which humanitarian actors, including NGOs, respond to a crisis can itself be the cause for a further and more significant crisis, the outbreak and spread of cholera from the UN in Haiti being a prime example. For NGOs, this is a significant risk, as any perceived contribution to further harm will immediately raise questions as to the value of their intervention and their very legitimacy.

The complexities surrounding water are by no means new, and serve as a harrowing reminder of interconnectedness and sequential crises. Water scarcity as a crisis driver can readily lead to drought and famine, loss of livelihoods, the spread of water-borne diseases, forced migration and even open conflict. Such a spectre has been referenced directly and indirectly over the past decade as have been possible solutions.<sup>28</sup> And while such practical solutions range from those that are globally aspirational to those that are technically specific, there is an abiding message for those concerned with humanitarian action. Reducing and preparing for risks needs to begin with risk identification, and in so doing needs to take into account not only the inter-relationship between different crisis drivers, but also possible sequencing patterns.

#### *The humanitarian capacities challenge*

New and expanded threats will require far greater attention to a range of enhanced capacities. On the one hand, these capacities will reflect the inevitable need for greater resources, including human resources. On the other hand

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<sup>28</sup> The past decade has witnessed a plethora of relevant global and country-specific analyses. Some recent examples include UNESCO, *The UN World Water Development Report (2009)*; the World Bank, *India's Water Economy: Bracing for a Turbulent Future* and *Pakistan's Water Economy: Running Dry* and the Asia Society, *Asia's Next Challenge: Securing the Region's Water Future*.

and more importantly, they will reflect the need for greater anticipatory capacities as well as abilities to innovate and to deal with new forms of collaboration.

Given the new and expanded types of threats that will have to be faced in the future, far greater efforts will have to be expended on ways to garner 'non-traditional capacities' to meet these challenges. In the United Kingdom, the HERR stressed the importance of traditional humanitarian actors engaging more effectively with the private sector and the military as well as with the scientific establishment to promote community resilience and effective risk management. This same proposition should apply to conflict prevention, for the probability of increased numbers and causes of conflicts make the case for expanded forms of collaborative networks to promote anticipation and innovative approaches to conflict identification and resolution compelling. That said, there are substantive constraints that have to be overcome to meet the capacity and collaborative challenge.

#### *The 'language' dilemma*

One of the most persistent challenges in bringing non-traditional actors into the humanitarian or conflict prevention folds is language. One study noted that commercial and humanitarian actors, '[l]ack a common vocabulary for their collaboration and humanitarian action, including for terms such as risk, vulnerability, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.'<sup>29</sup> This same concern pervades relations between the military and the traditional humanitarian sector, as evidenced in continuing discussions at the Red Cross Contact Group, in NGO consortia such as the US-based InterAction and in recent debates at the Australian Civil-Military Centre of Excellence. At the same time, the vocabulary,

though often far from consistent, clear or well-understood, in use throughout the humanitarian sector also contributes to making the sector, its actions and ideas, inaccessible to those not fluent in the language of humanitarian action.

Yet, the language dilemma goes further. What, for example, in both a strategic and operational sense is a humanitarian actor? Or, for that matter, what does one mean by the private sector, or in a conflict prevention sense, is one referring to paramilitaries and special police forces at the same time one is talking about formal military elements? As one seeks to meet the capacity challenge by promoting more effective cross-sectoral collaboration, is one referring to dual-mandated humanitarian organisations, or local commerce as well as multinational corporations, or even so-called 'non-state actors' who play a military role?

#### *The operational conundrum*

Frustrating, time consuming, but ultimately successful was the way that private sector logistics specialists including DHL and TNT and the UN's World Food Programme described their prolonged efforts to find ways to collaborate. In the end there was indeed a sound basis for operational collaboration, but it was not a question of days or months but of a process that lasted two years.<sup>30</sup> There is a presumption that collaboration amongst different types of actors, such as humanitarian NGOs and militaries can be readily resolved by guides, manuals and well-intentioned conferences and workshops. However, experience has shown, for example, between militaries and the humanitarian sector that effective collaboration depends upon a combination of a perceived need, agreed mutual interests and a persistent effort over time to experiment with different forms of engagement.

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<sup>29</sup> Burke, Joanne et al., (2011), *Commercial and Humanitarian Engagement in Crisis Contexts: Current Trends, Future Drivers*, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London, pp.28

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<sup>30</sup> Van Wassenhove, Luk N et al, (2008), *Corporate responses to humanitarian disasters*, Research Report R-1415-108-WG, The Conference Board, New York, page 27

That said, when it comes to humanitarian action, many of the operational assumptions reflect the experience of Western-oriented actors, and have not captured lessons that might be emerging out of a new configuration of 'non-traditional' and traditional humanitarian and conflict prevention actors elsewhere. In that context, increasing attention will have to be given to such initiatives as ASEAN's role of the military as 'first responders' in humanitarian crises and the emerging practices of 'state capitalist' corporations both in terms of humanitarian action and conflict prevention.<sup>31</sup>

### *The missing links*

Only in the rarest of instances do traditional and non-traditional actors concerned with conflict prevention and humanitarian action sit together to identify common purpose, comparative advantages and value-added. There are, of course, instances when the intensity of conflict makes it impossible for NGOs to engage with potential partners that are seen to represent one side or another, but in light of the growing number of crises that are not driven by conflict, there is a range of opportunities for bringing the military and humanitarian sectors together. And yet, neither at operational or strategic levels are there consistent efforts by either side to come together to consider their respective comparative advantages and value-added. Similarly the

interaction between the private sector and humanitarian actors, though replete with individual examples of effective engagement, still has resulted in few platforms where the two can develop consistent and common strategic and operational frameworks.<sup>32</sup>

'Many civil society actors provide significant value by standing apart from commercial or political interests and illuminating aspects of the world that need to be seen, understood and acted upon.'

WEF (2013), pp. 34

Increasingly telling is the fact that there really are no consistent and common strategic and operational frameworks or platforms that bring these three major sectors together. In a world in which the capacity challenge is ever more evident, the means to promote collaboration are not sufficiently well developed. There are steps afoot to bring the private sector and the military into closer collaborative contact,<sup>33</sup> while at the same time various humanitarian groupings engage sporadically and with varying degrees of success with the private sector and the military. No forum brings these three together at appropriate levels – nationally, regionally, internationally – consistently and systematically. There is a conceptual and institutional missing link.

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Association of South East Asian Nations' ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), Annex C, that provides for cross-border support by the military for disaster management. With reference to the impact of state capitalism, see, for example, 'The rise of state capitalism,' *The Economist*, 21 January 2012.

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<sup>32</sup> See Oglesby, Rosie and Burke, Joanne, (2012), *Platforms for Private Sector-Humanitarian Collaboration*, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London,, available at [www.humanitarianfutures.org](http://www.humanitarianfutures.org).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the PeaceNexus Foundation; [www.gpplatform.ch/pbguide/organisation/peacenexus-foundation](http://www.gpplatform.ch/pbguide/organisation/peacenexus-foundation).



## IV. Operational challenges in a futures context

Along with many others, the aforementioned complex and intertwined drivers of change already present significant and at times confounding challenges for the operations of humanitarian NGOs, demonstrating how central aspects of the operational models long in use are no longer sufficient and cannot be expected to be in the future. However, these changes also present opportunities for NGOs to explore and experiment with new approaches to these persistent challenges. As Edwards notes ‘exciting times lie ahead for NGOs that can seize the opportunities for transformation provided by a more fluid global context.’<sup>34</sup>

Four of the key operational challenges humanitarian organisations face—namely access to crisis-affected populations, tests of their legitimacy and proving their added-value in an increasingly complex and competitive humanitarian landscape, and funding their ambitions—will be examined here.

### *New approaches to the issues of access*

Civil society faces ever-tightening restrictions in many contexts, particularly in hegemonic states plagued by conflict and instability. This is done not only through restrictions on physical access to crisis-affected populations, but also through restrictions on access to domestic and foreign funds, barriers to the flow of information, and the application of often onerous and arbitrary administrative processes.<sup>35</sup>

In the past decade insecurity—and increasingly often the direct targeting of aid workers—has become the predominant barrier to access in many contexts. Much has been written on the trends in aid worker security where certain

contexts or parts thereof, particularly the highly politicised conflicts tied to the Global War on Terror, have become effectively off-limits as far as the traditional expatriate-led Western NGO model is concerned, and kidnapping has become one of the predominant means of violence against aid workers.<sup>36</sup>

However, there are other potentially more transformational by-products of the changes predominantly Western -led and -staffed organisations have made in to operational approaches in highly insecure contexts. Many have shifted to ‘remote control’ operations, using only non-Western international staff, or partnerships with national or local organisations where they can no longer safely rely on the traditional expat-led model of intervention. And in many cases a by-product has been to reinforce local capacity to address crises more effectively than in other less-insecure contexts. As a result, some, perhaps unwittingly, may be working themselves out of a job, and trialling approaches that could be applied elsewhere. This bolstering of local capacity and operational control, when coupled with modern

‘More and more we’ll see local actors in the lead, except in those situations of conflict, on the battlefield where traditional NGOs can still be very relevant and critical if they act impartially.’

Sara Pantuliano,  
Humanitarian Policy  
Group

communications technology and financial systems, has the potential to reduce the role of the international humanitarian organisation to an that of an inadvertent middle-man, a role it already plays, though may be loath

<sup>34</sup>Edwards, M. (2012). Retirement, replacement, or rejuvenation? *The Broker*, pp. 6

<sup>35</sup>World Economic Forum (WEF) (2013). *The Future Role of Civil Society*, pp. 7

<sup>36</sup>See generally: Aid Worker Security Report 2012 and the Aid Worker Security Database, [www.aidworkersecurity.org](http://www.aidworkersecurity.org)



to admit, in other operational models as well. Such a role is clearly neither sustainable nor efficient where it is not acknowledged, and whether or not traditional humanitarian organisations can avoid being reduced to this is examined below. Crucially, this also challenges the hierarchical relationships, which are often misrepresented as partnerships, that now dominate in many programmes and contexts, regardless of their level of insecurity and access restrictions.

However, it is not only security that can and will affect humanitarian access. As noted earlier, governments in much of the world, including, and at times especially, in crisis-prone or fragile states, are reasserting their sovereignty and are no longer bound to rigid political or economic alliances. This, along with a resurgence of nationalism and localism, has fundamentally changed the balance of power in what many long viewed as a hierarchical relationship between noble Western humanitarians and hapless Southern governments. And not only are the governments, as well as other actors who control access, asserting control over all external actors, they also now have the luxury of choice when external assistance is required, and will often only accept it on their own terms. Hopgood suggests that NGOs have 'enjoyed a free hand because states have granted them exclusive access, largely through indifference. But these same states are now offering this market to the private sector.'<sup>37</sup> The belief that NGOs have an intrinsic right, based on their motivations, to access and to provide assistance, and the unique capacity to do so, or a comparative advantage, is outdated, and is unlikely to carry as much weight in the future.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons why affected governments are increasingly controlling in their approach to crises is that they now recognise them as threats to their own legitimacy and survival. As crises become more acute and less predictable and play out in the global media, what crises can expose about a government's capacity and its relations with its population can be very influential, domestically and internationally.

However, such matters depend on perception as much as they are on substance. While some governments may view exerting their prerogative to deny access to foreign NGOs when that is perceived as politically expedient, others may do the opposite. Accepting international or NGO assistance in a crisis could be spun as a compassionate and caring choice, regardless of whether it is driven by a desire to see assistance reach those in need or simply by having seen how the refusal of international offers of assistance can tarnish the reputations in the eyes of some.

From the perspective of an affected government, or an affected population, who are now unlikely to view themselves or entertain any other perception of them as helpless victims dependent on the benevolence of outsiders, but rather with agency and options, they are right to question who it is may come offering assistance, and what right they have to intervene. Though at any point, including and perhaps especially, during humanitarian crises, neither governments nor individuals, nor any other body that might control access, can be counted on to behave entirely rationally. It would nonetheless seem obvious that one of most effective approaches any NGO could take would seem to be to demonstrate their capacity, perhaps unique, to provide assistance, and to do so in a transparent and forthright manner. This may be as much as most NGOs can do when access and proximity for direct assistance remain priorities.

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<sup>37</sup>Hopgood, Stephen, (2008), 'Saying No to Wal-Mart? Money and Morality in Professional Humanitarianism' in: M. Barnett, M., and Weiss, T. (eds.), *Humanitarianism in question: politics, power, ethics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 109

### *Negotiated Legitimacy*

In understanding the changing context for the legitimacy of NGOs, it is helpful to distinguish between the legitimacy of an NGO as a type of organisation and the legitimacy of humanitarian action as a principled, apolitical intervention. Sources of legitimacy for NGOs, that is, the basis for their right to act, have always been contested; however, in part due to the immediacy of the need to which they respond, humanitarian organisations have largely enjoyed the luxury of acceptance with relatively low investment on their part. This is clearly no longer the case. Humanitarian NGOs now must earn the acceptance of informed, assertive, and well-connected governments and populations, who are right to question their ambitions and legitimacy.

Legitimacy, in this context, has been defined as ‘the particular status with which an organisation is imbued and perceived at any given time that enables it to operate with the general consent of peoples, governments, companies and non-state groups around the world ... It is generated by veracity, tangible support and more intangible goodwill.’<sup>38</sup> Legitimacy, a product of both principles and action, has normative, empirical and legal dimensions,<sup>39</sup> each of which is an absolute necessity for gaining—and maintaining—acceptance and access. But despite the moves towards greater monitoring and accountability, and evidence-based decision-making, legitimacy remains only partly tied to

actual results. Slim notes that ‘[q]ualities such as credibility, reputation, trust and integrity are critical to an organisation’s legitimacy. Although they are closely dependent on the tangible sources of legitimacy - support, knowledge and performance - they are unusual because they can take on a life of their own. They thrive on perception to function more like belief than fact. They can rely on image rather than reality and may not require any empirical experience to influence people one way or the other.’<sup>40</sup>

‘the diversity among emerging humanitarian actors should be embraced—the challenge in such a crowded environment is to clearly distinguish and separate principled humanitarian action from pure relief assistance.’  
*Daccord (2013)*

With respect to the legitimization of humanitarian action, Hopgood has suggested that even from the time of Dunant ‘any motive would do because action was what mattered, in the here and now, for just this person, no questions asked. Concrete needs trumped abstract principles.’<sup>41</sup> This creates a tension for humanitarian NGOs, whose normative legitimacy is often rooted in their solidarity with the suffering: many organisations cannot solely focus on meeting concrete needs over abstract principles, as implied by Dunantism, when, in their view, solidarity with victims is what separates them from other forms of assistance delivery.

Understandings of what counts as legitimate humanitarian action or legitimate humanitarian actors are currently being redefined by relative newcomers to humanitarian action, such as Brazil, China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. These non-traditional donors now incorporate

<sup>38</sup>Slim, Hugo, (2002), *By What Authority? The Legitimacy And Accountability Of Non-Governmental Organisations*, The International Council On Human Rights Policy, International Meeting on Global Trends and Human Rights, September 2001: Impacts on Human Rights Work, Geneva, 10-12 January 2002, pp. 6. [http://www.ichrp.org/files/papers/65/118\\_Legitimacy\\_Accountability\\_Nongovernmental\\_Organisations\\_Slim\\_Hugo\\_2002.pdf#search='slim'](http://www.ichrp.org/files/papers/65/118_Legitimacy_Accountability_Nongovernmental_Organisations_Slim_Hugo_2002.pdf#search='slim')

<sup>39</sup>Vedder, Anton, (2003), *NGO Involvement in International Governance and Policy: Sources of Legitimacy*, MartinusNijhoff, 2010.

<sup>40</sup>Slim, Hugo, (2002), pp.9

<sup>41</sup>Hopgood, Stephen, (2008), pp. 101.

international humanitarian action into their foreign policy, and are choosing to define humanitarian action in their own terms,<sup>42</sup> thereby challenging the *de facto* monopoly of traditional Western actors in humanitarian action, and in parallel in the debate on the definition and future of humanitarian action.

These new donors, and their associated implementing agencies, may have tools and approaches which traditional actors can learn from, but their approaches are not entirely novel. They too are often driven by a combination of solidarity and self-interest, with the latter often outweighing the former. As ALNAP notes 'the humanitarian agenda will increasingly be affected by calculations reflecting national interest that may not always square neatly with humanitarian principles, particularly impartiality.'<sup>43</sup>

However, one critical distinguishing factor to most of their approaches is respect for the sovereignty of the affected governments, in contrast to the prioritisation of independence and perceived entitlement to access of many traditional humanitarian organisations. However, this approach has now been tempered by an increasingly consultative and collaborative approach, at least on paper, of many actors as the power balance of the past has shifted. As ALNAP has noted 'there is evidence of a slow but important shift towards recognition and support for the primary role of an affected state in responding to assist its population, but much less evidence of the system building those capacities.'<sup>44</sup>

While such collaborative approaches are desirable in most crises, where affected

governments fail to make attempts to provide or allow for the provision of support for crisis-affected populations, there will remain a need for genuinely-independent humanitarian action which may run contrary to the wishes of a government. As Terry notes '[r]ather than accepting the instrumentalization of humanitarian action to disguise overt political ends or a lack of political interest, humanitarian actors need to reclaim an activist role, reminding states that failure to meet their higher responsibilities is what allows crises to unfold in the first place.'<sup>45</sup> Of course such an approach does not make gaining access any easier, but the infeasibility of carrying out silent and absolutely neutral humanitarian action has long been exposed, and is a model now followed by few in principle or in practice.

The need to reinforce their humanitarian identity and constantly prove their value-added to all actors, belligerents, communities, and governments alike, has already become a critical issue, and will almost certainly remain so in the future.

#### *Value-added and comparative advantage*

As noted earlier international humanitarian organisations arose in world with few responses to—and even less acknowledgement of—the most acute suffering, leaving a niche NGOs both grew to fill and defined in their own terms. However, as they no longer hold a *de facto* monopoly on action to alleviate suffering in such situations, they now have competition in many forms.

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<sup>42</sup>Bernard, Vincent, (2011), 'The Future of Humanitarian Action,' *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 884, pp. 893.

<sup>43</sup> ANLAP, (2012), *The State of the Humanitarian System, 2012 Edition*, pp. 80

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid* pp.84

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<sup>45</sup> Terry, Fiona, (2002), *Condemned to Repeat*, Cornell University Press, pp. 217

It is critical to consider the origins and validity of this monopoly of the traditional humanitarian sector. One could argue that two of the three elements of the traditional sector—the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and the United Nations agencies—have specific and unique mandates in international humanitarianism. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement does have a unique standing in international law, and lacks clear completion in certain aspects of its mandate. The operational

‘New social movements may undermine the need for and importance of organised civil society. As people connect and mobilise spontaneously, key actors (citizens, policy-makers, business) may question why we need institutionalised NGOs’

*Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, CIVICUS, quoted in WEF (2013), pp.18*

agencies of the UN may also have specific, if overlapping, mandates, but are no longer the only, or even the preeminent, intergovernmental options for humanitarian action. Regional and sub-regional organisations, as well as ad hoc alliances, can fill the same role and are increasingly likely to become a preferred option for effective and more obliging responses to domestic and international humanitarian crises.

If the humanitarian act is to be inherently practical, where impact trumps ideals, their motivations, however noble, cannot alone be the foundation for this monopoly. Their comparative advantage then must be largely built on their superior skills and effectiveness in humanitarian action. This may have once been the case, but in a world where organisations of any type from any nation can theoretically have access to significant capital, transnational pools of skills and labour, and, crucially, may not carry the baggage of the traditional Western humanitarians, this comparative advantage seems thin, if not long-past. Unsurprisingly, many feel that in the not-

too-distant future the current humanitarian system may simply be bypassed.<sup>46</sup>

As Hopgood states ‘[s]uspicious of claims to natural authority, globalisation demands performance from any institution claiming our loyalty.’<sup>47</sup> Humanitarian organisations will undeniably still depend on the trust of those with whom they interact, whether in the form of loyalty, acceptance, or otherwise, and therefore must be able to earn that trust through action, not through the assumption that they are the only ones deserving of it.

### *Funding in the future*

Though the total scale and growth of funding for international humanitarian action appear impressive, they, and more importantly, their impact, remain grossly insufficient to meet the challenges of today, let alone tomorrow. The availability, conditions, and predictability of funding for humanitarian action are without a doubt critical concerns for any organisation, but funding alone cannot create genuine capacity for action.

This growth, in absolute terms, has been staggering in recent decades. Official humanitarian assistance reached USD \$17.1 billion in 2011.<sup>48</sup> But this growth must be considered in light of the comparably staggering growth in needs, or at least accessible needs, and of actors competing for these funds. For some organisations, particularly the ‘cartel’<sup>49</sup> of major Western aid agencies, it has in some respects cemented their currently place atop the humanitarian pecking order.

<sup>46</sup> Healy, Sean and Tiller, Sandrine, (2013), *Reflections on emergency response and the humanitarian aid system – the view from Médecins Sans Frontières*, pp. 1

<sup>47</sup>Hopgood, Stephen, (2008), pp. 117.

<sup>48</sup>*Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* (2012), Development Initiatives.

<sup>49</sup>Collinson, Sarah and Elhawary, Samir, (2012), *Humanitarian space: a review of trends and issues*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, pp. 19

In Edwards' view, a revival of political interest in and support—though by no means altruistic—for humanitarian action since the turn of the millennium has 'provided a security blanket for current practice', allowing agencies—who have not necessarily retained the capacity for concrete interventions—to build their capacity for leverage through research and advocacy 'without changing their structure, role, or position in society in any fundamental way.'<sup>50</sup>

The on-going global financial crisis has only compounded the growing competition amongst civil society for financial resources and visibility and 'in this period of great uncertainty, resource competition is driving division.'<sup>51</sup> WEF cites international civil society leaders who feel see a general decline in available funding for activities or causes which 'challenge the status quo',<sup>52</sup> of which humanitarian action could certainly be considered one.

The financial clout of many non-Western states, particularly the BRICS and Gulf States, has in recent years allowed them to begin to incorporate international assistance into their foreign policy. Their assistance has largely been directed towards their own non- or quasi-governmental implementing agencies, Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies, as well as multilateral institutions, and into contexts with clear political links; much like how many Western donors once directed much of theirs, and as many still do. NGOs have not yet considerably tapped into the

sources of potential funds, despite their constant search for financial stability. There are many possible reasons for this: simple lack of understanding of motivations and relationships; uneasiness of doing business with unfamiliar States, or the subsequent perception issues (though this has not stopped many from accepting support from USAID and others with thoroughly tarnished records); the desire of such donors to fund their own preferred partners; perhaps most crucially, an inability to access the populations such donors aim to assist.

Having all or some combination of these factors aligned against NGOs might seem insurmountable, and a further and substantial threat to their *de facto* monopoly, but some feel that these new donors, as well as their implementing partners, know, or at least soon will learn, that there is much that traditional NGOs can offer in terms of building their own capacity for international and domestic response, credibility within the sector and in unfamiliar regions. Mutually-

'CSOs have witnessed traditional funding streams shrink. Modifications have been made to donor criteria, including diversification of funding sources, requirements for private sector partners, and more stringent requirements to demonstrate impact. Simultaneously, new sources of finance are emerging, such as the rise of emerging market philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, and social investment products. New mechanisms to access finance are also emerging, such as crowd-sourced funding and models like KIVA, an online lending platform connecting lenders and entrepreneurs.'

WEF (2013), pp. 16

beneficial partnerships should not be far off for traditional NGOs who are willing to shrewdly engage with these and other emerging donors. Also, while unlikely the only motivation, moves to internationalise funding and management structures by many international civil society actors, could be seen as an attempt to redefine themselves in pursuit of broader international legitimacy, in line with the appeals to universal values and global actions.

The many factors noted above which have eroded the comparative advantage of traditional humanitarian actors, coupled with new

<sup>50</sup>Edwards (2012), pp. 6

<sup>51</sup>WEF (2013), pp. 17

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid*, pp.7



communications technology and financial systems, do create the real possibility that traditional Western organisations may find themselves as an unnecessary link in the often lengthy chain between donor and beneficiary, a chain which raises crucial questions regarding the overall efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of such an approach.<sup>53</sup>

It has been asked whether the humanitarian world can sustain its perceived separation from the world of private enterprise, financing, and markets, though many feel this is a deluded perception held only by some of those inside the traditional humanitarian sector. Globalisation is breaking down the past barriers between the public and non-profit sector and the world of private capital, and '[f]ew spheres of modern social life can plausibly make the case for a principled immunity from this transformation.' But, he continues, if humanitarians were able to draw this immutable line, its substance would be their disinterested motivation—some form of self-sacrifice—and non-substitutable ends which cannot be transformed into utility.<sup>54</sup>

Private and other non-traditional funding sources have grown significantly in recent years; ALNAP have noted a five-fold rise in the two years to 2010. Funding from private sources, including individuals, corporations, and foundations,<sup>55</sup> together with non-Western government donors, will continue to erode the financial dominance, and ensuing control, of the humanitarian sector.

Despite their relentless pursuit of funding and the ever-increasing and staggering needs which persist, traditional humanitarian organisations

have moved cautiously toward many of these potential funding sources. Independence of course is a core humanitarian value, though subject to vastly different interpretations, and financing rarely comes without conditions of some sort, whether explicit or abstract. However, these relationships, essential and inescapable as they may be to most humanitarian organisations, are increasingly complicated by a 'widening deficit of trust towards institutions and between sectors,' from the perspective of both the general public and civil society, and particularly towards governments and the financial sector.<sup>56</sup>

A further consequence of the demographic shifts noted above is the changing behaviour of individual donors. While individuals around the world, and particularly in the West, have long been very generous in times of crises, this funding model is changing. Technology has certainly made disaster appeals much more efficient and allowed the model to be implemented in new ways and locations, but attitudes and expectations are changing. Younger generations throughout the world, including the West, are seeking to engage in new ways. Some are no longer satisfied with the regular monthly donation model, but want to engage, or at least feel they are engaged, with those they seek to assist, either through new or social media, or through participating, virtually, physically, or financially, or as advocates for a given cause. The impact of such approaches can certainly be questioned and is difficult to gauge, but the proliferation of online fundraising and advocacy networks such as Avaaz, clearly demonstrates the model has potential, though still largely untapped for humanitarian actors.

A thorough examination of the range of emerging and potential future funding avenues for humanitarian organisations is beyond the scope of this discussion paper, but, as a critical and

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<sup>53</sup>Daccord, Y., (2013), 'Humanitarian action in a changing landscape: fit for purpose?' Retrieved from *International Red Cross and Red Crescent*, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/editorial/02-04-humanitarian-action-yves-daccord.htm>

<sup>54</sup>Hopgood (2008), pp. 99

<sup>55</sup> ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System, 2012 Edition*, pp. 38

<sup>56</sup>WEF (2013), pp. 16

potentially transformational element of the future of humanitarian action, is intended to be the subject of a subsequent Start Network-HFP research initiative.

## V. The emerging humanitarian eco-system and humanitarian models

Like all 'eco-systems,' the humanitarian landscape reflects the dynamic interaction between 'living organisms' and 'non-living components,' and the humanitarian eco-system is just a sub-component of myriad sets of other eco-systems. In other words, any effort to adapt humanitarian organisations to the changes in the geo-political sphere and to emerging crisis threats will require models that are sensitive to the nature of systems.

The sorts of models that are proposed in this section reflect not only the implications of the previous sections, but also a conceptual construct that attempts to place humanitarian action in a wider space, a space that emphasises inter-relationships too often ignored by humanitarian planners and policymakers. Before addressing possible

future models, it would be worth identifying ways that NGOs could respond to the overall implications of the emerging humanitarian eco-system. With that in mind, the eco-system of which humanitarian NGOs need to be part of would include (i) new types of dialogues, including with the natural and social sciences, (ii) brokering functions in a multi-layered humanitarian construct, (iii) an emerging catalysing role, and (iv) new types of partnerships.

**New types of dialogues.** One of the complaints made by NGOs of themselves is that they are too self-referential. They acknowledge the

importance of sharing information, of learning from others, but all too often in the final analysis, the NGO community is quite satisfied to define expanded dialogue as speaking amongst themselves. In the 'ecology' of the emerging world, this sort of Western-centric model is no longer tolerable. The diversity of geo-political, socio-economic and cultural systems will require truly different dialogues, undertaken in far more

systematic ways. There are various examples where NGOs need to expand the universe with which it engages.

Innovations and innovative practices, so increasingly essential for humanitarian NGOs interested in dealing with future challenges, suggest the importance of promoting dialogues between the sciences and humanitarian actors. That sort of dialogue should

not be seen as a 'one-off,' but its importance will lie in systematic interaction. Similarly, the NGO of the future will look more and more for ways 'to discuss' how the core business of the private sector can enhance NGO efforts to reduce vulnerability and foster resilience. In noting these two sectors, the reality is that the number of partnerships that will deserve greater interaction between NGOs and others is considerable, but the key point is to identify with whom one should engage consistently and systematically over time.

**Brokering functions.** The issue of dialogue demonstrates the considerable array of potential

'This is the time for humanitarian agencies to make the most of their common ground, to make the most of their differences, and to move forward with a genuine commitment to filling the gaps and avoiding duplication of humanitarian aid; to show a genuine commitment to effective action rather than words; and to make a real difference to people affected by ongoing and emerging humanitarian crises. Only then will humanitarian aid be fit for purpose in a tumultuous environment with increasingly complex needs.'

*Dacord (2013)*

actors and ‘layers’ with which NGOs will have to engage. Yet, the purpose of such dialogues would by no means be solely for the purposes of bilateral engagement. An increasingly important role for NGOs will be to act as ‘brokers,’ as facilitators to bring a wide and diverse group of actors together to focus their respective capacities to deal with a specific set of issues that, for example, pertain to vulnerability and resilience as well as crisis response. In other words, there will be a number of actors with a number of skills, but the prominent humanitarian actor in the future will increasingly be a broker to bring necessary talent together in the multi-layered eco-system of the humanitarian world. Edwards suggests that despite the daunting problems which lie in front of NGOs, they are uniquely positioned as ‘intermediaries’—geographically, institutionally, functionally, and philosophically—to address the challenges of the future if they can integrate ‘the best from their values with the innovations of today, extending their impact into the deeper structures of society and becoming agencies of transformation in the process.’<sup>57</sup>

**NGOs as catalysts.** Related to future brokering or intermediary function, the catalytic role of NGOs will be ever more important. In various ways NGOs have always served as catalysts for the wider humanitarian sector – a role that includes advocacy for forgotten emergencies and the promotion of accountability standards. The catalysts of the future, however, will have to go beyond such activities, and see their value in promoting new types of innovations and innovative practices as well as seeking to identify new types of threats and different coalitions of partners. Not only will they have to be brokers, but they, too, will have to experimenters and testers—catalysts in a world that may otherwise be reluctant to add uncertainty to an already complex environment.

**New types of partnerships.** NGOs have, like the rest of the humanitarian sector been encouraged from many quarters to engage more with the private sector, diasporas, non-state actors, non-traditional bilateral donors, regional organisations and even in some instances with militaries. Yet, partnerships of the future will reflect amongst other things virtual-based networks and hubs, short-term, mission-focused networks and more functionally linked partners, for example, cities-to-cities, cross-border communities. The challenge for NGOs will be how best to bring such partnerships into forums that will support their objectives as brokers and catalysts. Greater transparency and a broader range of actors and capacities will challenge the traditional and often hierarchical ‘partnerships’ now prevalent throughout the system.

‘In a turbulent and uncertain environment, actors can no longer work well in isolation – new, more effective ways of tackling societal challenges will inevitably transcend traditional sector boundaries. This means civil society actors need to look to unusual sources for inspiration and relevance in order to adapt successfully.’

WEF (2013), pp. 5

Alternative models for addressing the sorts of value-added functions of NGOs in the future would include at least five conceptual frameworks: (i) purveyors of expertise and innovation, (ii) integrated platform facilitators, (iii) decentralised regionalism, (iv) mission-focused networks and (iv) niche market focus. None of these is mutually exclusive; all have elements that can be seen as inter-related or mutually supportive:

**Purveyors of expertise and innovation.** Replacing a ‘boots on the ground’ mind-set with a commitment to providing innovations and innovative practices to help countries and

<sup>57</sup>Edwards (2010), pp. 7

communities deal with ever more complex crisis threats is an NGO model that will increasingly be valued by a growing number of governments and regional authorities. The NGO of the future will understand that much of this capacity-building and knowledge transfer can be done online as well as in-country.

**Integrated platforms.** Based principally in areas of anticipated vulnerability, NGOs could facilitate the creation of platforms that would consist of a range of potential responders and providers from, for example, the private sector, local authorities and communities that would undertake, monitor and test prevention and preparedness planning on a regular and systematic basis.

**Regional decentralisation.** Many but by no means all major NGOs mirror corporate structures where subsidiaries reflect the general agenda and modalities of the centre. A future framework could reverse this model significantly by having regional structures determine their own contextually specific agendas and modalities, and where the centre is primarily a source of services for those individual regional organisations.

**Mission-focused networks.** For too many organisations, innovation and adaptation are constrained by linear thinking, standard operating procedures and short-term trends analysis. There are alternative constructs emerging that are fostering innovative and adaptive practices in a growing number of fields. One such construct is the *mission-focused network*, characterised by defined, time-bound objectives, normally openly accessible information and peer-

to-peer interaction. Here, NGOs could use such MFNs to stimulate new approaches to humanitarian action.

**Niche market focus.** Situations of conflict might in the foreseeable future underscore the potential value of humanitarian NGOs far more than other types of activities. As localism and alternative actors become more engaged in humanitarian action and assistance, a 'niche' of fundamental importance for the NGO community – one of considerable value for those caught up in internal or international conflict – is the presence of the NGO 'in the field.'

A key question is how receptive donors might be to funding these new models, highlighting the need for humanitarian organisations to become more comfortable with the role of advocacy, particularly in terms of articulating and motivating a new system of humanitarian assistance and their value added within that new system. Currently NGOs are quite uncomfortable with having these types of discussion with bilaterals and other key donors. Remaining silent, however, begs the question: who will write the future of humanitarian NGOs? Will it be the organisations themselves, or will they allow this future to be written by donors and other powers that shape the environment in which they operate and in which humanitarian principles are being re-negotiated?



## VI. The tabula rasa question

If one took a disaster of major consequence, one where today's humanitarian configuration was not in place, how would one deal with that crisis? What sorts of mechanisms would one establish – not based upon past experience, but upon an innocence unfettered by precedents. If one started again, what would it look like, and what lessons might today's NGOs learn in preparing for the future? This question goes to the heart of humanitarian NGOs' of the future. That said, NGOs do exist, but nevertheless need to test their importance, relevance and value on a regular basis in a context of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

Preparations for the future should include greater efforts to be more anticipatory, to spend much more time focusing upon the *'what might be's*. It will not be the section that deals with the organisation's policy that will be responsible for a more futures-oriented perspective, it will have to be the organisation as a whole. For the NGO fit for the future, much greater attention will have to be paid to new forms of partnerships as well as to sources of innovation and innovative practices. The NGO of the future will be able to go beyond just incremental adjustments to changing circumstances and be more willing to see change in terms of transformative action.

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