The future of humanitarianism

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Going back over 50 years of history in order to consider the future of humanitarianism. Randolph Kent takes up the challenge, pointing out the structural flaws of the system so that it can face up to the stark challenges that, according to the author, are on the horizon.

Transformative change all too often occurs at the brink of chaos. Decision-makers, strategists, policy planners adjust for the evident, but all too rarely choose to explore the *what might be's* – factors that have transformative consequences beyond the immediately obvious. This would seem to be the case for what is generally referred to as "the humanitarian sector" – those institutions and individuals who have roles and responsibilities for preventing, preparing for and responding to disasters and emergencies.

This all-too-evident proposition comes at a time when the types, dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian crisis drivers are increasing – in some instances exponentially. With this in mind, this article will briefly describe the evolution of humanitarian organisations and assistance from the early 1970s to the present; and, in so doing, see to what extent the humanitarian sector has been adequately adaptive in the past, and the extent to which the record of the past indicates ways that the sector may respond to the challenges of the future.

However, if that record suggests an inability to anticipate and adapt to new types of threats and ways to mitigate them, then the future bodes ill for vast numbers of people around the world. If, on the other hand, those concerned with humanitarian action anticipate and adjust to the plausible consequences of such challenges, then in so many ways their consequences may be mitigated. Reasons for promoting more anticipatory and adaptive approaches for dealing with ever more complex crisis drivers will underpin this article's conclusions.

"Pandemonium run riot"

Soon after a cyclone in 1970 tore into the delta of what was then East Pakistan, a senior US government official was asked to comment on the international community's response to the cyclone. "It was," he said, "pandemonium run riot"[1]. There was a well-intentioned rush to assist. Parcels of food, some containing pork, were sent to the survivors, the majority of whom were Muslim; high-heeled shoes, not particularly appropriate for the mud-soaked delta, were amongst the mountains of clothing delivered from overseas; and a plethora of well-intentioned governmental, international and non-governmental organisations randomly spread out near the affected areas as well as in Dhaka, the capital – all eager to see how best from their own individual perspectives they could help.

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[1] Randolph C. Kent, *Anatomy of Disaster Relief: The International Network in Action*, Frances Pinter, London, 1987.

The response was in various ways symptomatic of humanitarian assistance throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. And yet it was not the inappropriate food or clothing that were the consistent features. Rather it was a set of assumptions that – whatever the well-intentioned rhetoric – became imbued in "disaster and emergency relief". Few, for example, were willing to accept that disasters and emergencies were in fact reflections of "normal life", or the inevitable results of how societies structured themselves and allocated their resources. Hence, disasters and emergencies were perceived as "aberrant phenomena", divorced from normal life, and certainly in the case of most so-called "natural disasters" – generally unpredictable. It was perhaps for this reason, too, that there was little effort by the emerging humanitarian sector to anticipate possible disasters and emergencies. In light of the aberrant nature of crises, the humanitarian sector was far more reactive than proactive, far more response-driven than anticipatory.

In a related vein, disasters and emergencies were seen to be limited in time and space. Or, in other words, humanitarian crises were not seen as triggers of other crises, nor did one assume that they spilled over into others. Rather they were assumed to reflect essentially linear "systems failures", and as such had finite beginnings and ends. They certainly were not regarded as "complex messes"[2].

Another assumption that increasingly underpinned humanitarian crises concerned the roles of the governments of the affected countries as well as the affected people themselves. Up to the beginning of the 1970s, it was assumed, except in the rarest circumstances, e.g. the 1967 Biafra crisis, that the governments of the affected countries had the principal responsibility to respond, and also generally speaking had the capacities to do so. The charity, pity and compassion flowing from Northern-based non-governmental organisations and governments were merely well-intentioned supplements to a state's obligatory response.

More and more, however, the "resilient North" – reflecting an array of institutions in the developed world – felt it necessary to guide and often by-pass the governing institutions of the South. There was an emerging sense that the provider had a greater capacity to determine what was needed and how it should be provided than the recipient. These emerging assumptions in various ways became inherent in a loose and often erratic humanitarian network, normally referred to as the humanitarian system, on occasion as the humanitarian sector… and by some observers as "the humanitarian enterprise"[3].

Systems and stasis

It was 1984, and with the intensification of the Ethiopian famine, the heads of the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund felt compelled to meet with the UN's Secretary-General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, to persuade him to mobilise the UN's operational

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[2] Alpaslan and Mitroff state that problems "resist our attempt to confine them and rein them in by reducing them to a single discipline or point of view. For example, different stakeholders rarely have the same definition of the individual problems that constitute a mess and of the entire mess itself. Indeed the fact that different stakeholders have different perceptions of a mess is itself one of the keys defining attributes of messes! As a result 'problem negotiation'is one of the most important aspects of managing messes. Before one can 'solve'a problem one first has to agree on the nature of the problem. And if agreement is arrived at all, it should be reached only at the end of an intense debate about the 'nature'of the problem instead of the all – too-common pressure to get a quick consensus."
Can M. Alpaslan and Ian I Mitroff, Swans, *Swine and Swindlers: Coping with the growing threat of mega-crises and mega-messes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011.
[3] Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise : Dilemmas and Discoveries*, Kumarian Press, 2002.

agencies to respond to a crisis that was spreading across East Africa. There was a growing awareness that public expectations in large parts of the West were shocked by the suffering that emerged more and more on their television screens. There, too, was a growing recognition that the roles and responsibilities of previously reluctant organisations, particularly many in the inter-governmental sector, had to expand into the disaster and emergency vortex to be seen to be adequately sensitive to global change.

Though rarely stated and more often than not denied, behind the increasing focus on disaster and emergency assistance was a lurking geo-political element as well. The Cold War was an ever-present reality for a few major States – which also were major contributors to humanitarian causes. Even as far back as the aforementioned 1970 Bhola cyclone, US officials noted the importance of US assistance as one step towards spoiling any Soviet attempt to establish a foothold in South Asia. Now, moving from the 1980s through the 1990s, in more and more situations, the roles of UN peacekeepers, bilateral interventions and so-called "compliance measures" found themselves intersecting with humanitarian activities.

As the importance of developing disaster and emergency roles spread across a growing number of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, there were significant institutional developments across the burgeoning sector. Certainly since the 1960s, many organisations appeared that dealt with development issues, but clearly since the 1980s a significant portion added disaster and emergency response to their respective portfolios. In parallel a bevy of new organisations were created as direct responses to emerging humanitarian crises.

Their growth created many ripples throughout the sector. Humanitarian issues increasingly competed with development when it came to institutional priorities; the relationship between relief and development was an increasing source of discussion, as were the priorities to be given to prevention and preparedness as well as response. Innumerable efforts were made to introduce coordinating mechanisms that could guide, if not direct, key players, new types of relief products and approaches were added to "the relief package", competition for resources became core institutional objectives, debates intensified about the roles of the affected and the importance for humanitarian actors of adhering to humanitarian principles was a frequent leitmotif for innumerable conferences and workshops.

And yet, while there was indeed growth in the humanitarian sector, and despite all the changes that were being initiated, few ran contrary to what had become perceived wisdom. All too often, despite some potentially transformative innovations such as cash transfers or the use of food as market mechanisms, the underlying assumptions that underpinned so much of the sector through the formative 1980s continue to be the humanitarian "comfort zones" of today. In that sense, the sector appears to be in a state of institutional stasis.

The sector, despite a growing emphasis on the "local", still responds in ways that suggest that humanitarian action is ultimately dependent upon a resilient North determining the fate of an inherently vulnerable South. The sector, too, continues to ignore the "normal life" proposition about the sources of humanitarian crises, and the presumption that disasters and emergencies are aberrant phenomena all too often explains its reactive responses to crises. In a related vein, the inclination to react to crises rather than anticipate them also reflects a critical driving force,

namely, that the sector is in so many ways an industry that is faced with competing priorities and anxious not to antagonise potential funders[4].

As one astute observer of the humanitarian sector noted: "What history also tells us is that, while the humanitarian system is highly adaptable to external changes, enduring tensions that have been present from the sector's origins perpetuate outdated assumptions, dynamics and practices – and the institutions that maintain them – that prevent it from implementing more fundamental change"[5].

Towards a new humanitarian paradigm

In anticipation of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the then UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, stressed that a New Humanitarian Agenda was needed, one that resulted in meaningful change for the world's most vulnerable people. Yet while the WHS resulted in important initiatives such as the Grand Bargain[6], it could also be argued that some of the most critical changes that were required to meet the challenges of the future were generally ignored. There were few if any calls for an appreciation of the types of crises for which the global community needed to prepare, and there was very little attention paid to the sorts of systems transformations that would be required to meet such challenges. Ultimately what the WHS failed to do was to generate an awareness that a new humanitarian paradigm was needed – one no longer embedded in the present, but one that was relevant to ever more complex and uncertain crisis drivers in the future.

Urging those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to begin to prepare for a far more complex and uncertain future is not to say that today's plight of hundreds of millions of refugees, IDPs and other crisis-affected people can in any way be ignored. Rather it is to say that the perspectives, strategies and "tools" required to begin to prepare for the future will also have positive impact upon the ways that we address the present.

Predicting the future is at best a hazardous business, but preparing for the future is not predicting. Instead it is about acknowledging the importance of being sensitive to the "*what might be's*", or devoting individual and institutional time to considering the consequences of plausible longer-term change. In this context, those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities might wish to consider the consequences of the sorts of future-oriented threats noted below, and ask what sorts of humanitarian impacts could result and how might they respond:

- *bio-engineered pandemics and global catastrophes* – According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, the prospect of an artificially created pandemic substance becoming a global

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[4] Richard Dobbs *et al., No Ordinary Disruption: The Four Global Forces Breaking All the Trends*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2015. See also, *Planning from the Future: Is the Humanitarian System fit for Purpose Overseas Development Institute*, King's College, London and Tufts University, November 2016, p.23, www.planningfromthefuture.org

[5] Planning from the Future..., p.23.

[6] *Agenda for Humanity: 5 Core Responsibilities; 24 Transformations*: "The Grand Bargain includes a series of changes in the working practices of donors and aid organisations that would deliver an extra billion dollars over five years for people in need of humanitarian aid. These changes include gearing up cash programming, greater funding for national and local responders and cutting bureaucracy through harmonised reporting requirements. The Grand Bargain commits donors and aid organisations to providing 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, along with more un-earmarked money, and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response, among other commitments."

pandemic is very feasible, and its overall impact could be worse than a nuclear war[7]. The issue raises these very fundamental questions: what sort of knowledge and capacities would be required to be an effective humanitarian responder?; how does one monitor what could become an existential threat, and in this sort of context what do prevention and preparedness imply?

- *global indebtedness and synchronous failures* – "Pulling the plug" is a dark but increasingly used expression in the world of finance, and suggests that given increasing global indebtedness, a demand by one country, e.g. China, to reclaim another country's debt, e.g. the United States, could lead to an unparalleled global systems collapse. The level and intensity of subsequent poverty could be catastrophic. In such circumstances, how would one define "need", and how would one prioritise response?

- *cybernetics and cyber catastrophes* – Increasingly cyber systems have become essential pillars of human activity, and it is likely that such systems will eventually be based in outer space. If meteors or man-made interventions destroy such space-based systems, what would it mean in terms of availability and access, for example, to fuels, food, water, communications and financial and health systems? Would those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities have any capacities at all to offset the impact of such catastrophes, and how would they even locate, let alone engage with the affected?

- *displacement as a violent continuum* – The ebbs and flows of people criss-crossing countries in vast numbers, and being forced to settle in new types of "no man's lands" offers a plausible longer-term perspective on displacement. State boundaries may become more uncertain, which in turn could trigger conflicts across disputed state boundaries and amongst displaced groups caught in the geo-political cross-fire. For humanitarian actors, meeting needs would require unparalleled levels of operational manoeuvrability and flexibility. It, too, would require unprecedented volumes of assistance, quite possibly measured in terms of decades. Under such circumstances, what sorts of flexibility and forms of engagement would humanitarians need, and how certain can they be when it comes, for example, to supply chains?

In various ways, the answers to the questions posed in each of these speculative scenarios suggest the need for a different way of looking at threats in the future. They call for a new paradigm, a consensus around emerging ideas that are inherently different from the present underpinnings of humanitarian action. From the motives that trigger humanitarian response to the very nature of who is a humanitarian and what is humanitarianism, different perspectives will have to emerge if attempts at prevention, preparedness and response will be fit for purpose.

Planning from the future: A new humanitarian paradigm

When asked why the US Africa Command was participating in a Southern Africa Development Community workshop on epidemics, the Colonel replied, "You see, Sir, an epidemic in West Africa is a direct threat to the United States."

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[7] Central Intelligence Agency, *The Darker Bio-* w*eapons Future*, 2003, as referenced in Harvey Ruben, *Future Global Shocks: Pandemics*, OECD/IFP Project on "Future Global Shocks", IPF/WKP/FGS, 2011, 2, p.60.

And, while perhaps obvious in this instance, what is too often missed is that in the foreseeable future crisis drivers and their impacts will have direct and indirect consequences that go well beyond the initial source or site of any single crisis event. It needs to be recognised that disasters and emergencies are parts of systems that are in constant flux, driven by a "persistent need for energy"[8]. Like normal life, they are in a state of non-equilibrium, and reflect the ever-fluctuating boundaries of normal life – boundaries moving in myriad directions.

One implication of this perspective is that when it comes to crisis drivers and impacts, conventional distinctions such as those between "developed" and "developing" countries will be conceptually less relevant; and, that a more appropriate focus will be on ways that any single event triggers multiple and complex reactions globally and without predictable timelines. A further implication is that disaster and emergency action will be perceived less and less as matters driven by compassion, pity or charity, and more and more by an awareness that "my interests will ultimately depend on protecting yours" and *vice versa.*

These paradigmatic shifts open the way for considering what may be meant by "humanitarian roles and responsibilities" in the future. As suggested by the scenarios above, the types, dimensions and dynamics of future crisis drivers will require expertise that goes well beyond even the most sophisticated humanitarian institution. In many instances, too, the volume and types of assistance required will depend upon organisations that have production and delivery capacities that hitherto have had little if any involvement in the world of humanitarianism.

The bevy of actors that will be involved in the future will include those with outer-space monitoring and delivery capacities, experts in telemedicine and 3 and 4 D printing, those that offer instant desalinisation processes and large-scale drone delivery systems. In other words, the types of actors that will need to be involved in humanitarian crises of the future will involve a wide range of organisations – virtual and real – and diverse expertise. They will represent the private sector, social networking systems, the military as well as a plethora of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. And their reason for involvement will increasingly be an appreciation of an interdependence reflected in the term, mutual self-interest.

In contemplating this paradigmatic shift, four things need to happen. The first is that far greater attention has to be given to anticipating crisis drivers and their potential impacts. Here, organisations that will be called upon to contribute to humanitarian action will need to be more adaptive; given the record of the traditional humanitarian sector to date, such capacities have never been particularly evident. A second requirement is that greater collaboration amongst different types of organisations will be essential. The history of coordination has been at best mixed. Growing awareness of interdependence and mutual self-interest may lead to effective collaboration and replace efforts at weak hierarchical approaches to coordination.

Innovation is a third requirement, and those who will be involved in humanitarian action will have to take more creative and proactive routes to be prepared for future threats and solutions. In no sense is this to suggest that the present humanitarian sector has not in various instances been creative. Cash transfers, the related use of M-pesas, Impact Bond Mechanisms and drought insurance all reflect the use of innovation when it comes to preparedness, prevention and response. And yet, given the challenges which will be faced, those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities will have not only to look far more proactively for innovations, but also to actively look for expert individuals and organisations with which to collaborate.

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[8] Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p.220.

Finally, with the emerging complexity and uncertainties that will mark future humanitarian challenges, it will be vitally important to have far greater capacity to monitor potential threats and innovative approaches for dealing with them on a global basis. There are myriad institutions that undertake related activities. However, there is one underutilised entity which has the capacity to take the lead in a paradigmatically different world – the United Nations. While recognising that today the UN faces its own challenges, a global role to monitor and assess potential threats, to use its convening power and related expertise to mobilise a broad range of experts and to assess the effectiveness of relevant initiatives and collaborative groupings may prove to be the vital cog in a *future*-oriented humanitarian wheel, in a construct that has to *plan from the future* – always alert to the "*what might be's*".

Biography • Randolph Kent

Dr. Randolph Kent has directed the Futures Project at the Royal United Services Institute of London since 2017. Prior to that appointment, he directed the Humanitarian Futures Programme at Kings College, London, where he and his staff worked from 2004 to 2016 with a wide range of multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations to strengthen their strategic and planning capacities for dealing with longer-term humanitarian threats. Before he completed his assignment as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia in April 2002. He served as UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Kosovo (1999), UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Rwanda (1994-1995), Chief of the UN Emergency Unit in Sudan (1989-1991) and Chief of Emergency Prevention and Preparedness in Ethiopia (1987-1989).