

## Strategic Design and Public Policy: A Humanitarian Perspective

Presented at the Glen Cove Conference on Strategic Design  
and Public Policy, June 9–11, 2010<sup>1</sup>

by **Randolph Kent**

Humanitarian action is ultimately determined by the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts in which it takes place. Since the 1970s when modern international humanitarian intervention was in its nascent phase, humanitarian action was circumscribed by Cold War tensions and hegemonic Western economic influence. Humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality notwithstanding, the ability to intervene was determined by the extent to which governments felt able to balance sovereignty and survival with their needs for external support for the disaster affected. Often the two were closely entwined.

In the ensuing years many changes have taken place, and some of these are noted below—as transformations that are already evident or that would seem likely in the foreseeable future. Yet, in one way or another they all inevitably will increase the focus upon the concept of *local*. And they, too, will force us to reflect once again upon what we mean by *local*. Was the impact of remittances sent by Haitian economic migrants to their relatives in earthquake affected Haiti a local act? Is the interactive Internet engagement of Somali Diaspora in the day-to-day commerce and politics of their clans *local* acts?

If one considers the transformations suggested below, there is another issue that seems quite relevant to this meeting. The UN's Assistant Secretary-General for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) said recently that "humanitarianism [as we know it] is reaching its end". There are too many contradictions, too many tired assumptions that underpin what Tufts University's Larry Minear had labelled, "the humanitarian enterprise." If these transformations suggest the need for a new humanitarianism, what would it look like? Should the cacophony of humanitarian terms—*prevention, preparedness, response, early recovery, recovery, rehabilitation*—as well as issues of development be encapsulated in the term and concept of *addressing vulnerability*? And how would one approach this from a strategic design perspective?

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is presented as received from the author.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The views expressed here are the sole responsibility of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the United Nations, UNIDIR, or its staff members or sponsors.

**Randolph Kent** is Director of the Humanitarian Futures Project and Senior Research Associate of the International Policy Institute, King's College, University of London.

These broad considerations are intricately linked to transformations that will clearly affect the design and policies that will drive humanitarian action, now and in the future.

## Humanitarian perspectives: now and in the future

**Centrality of humanitarian crises.** Three decades ago, humanitarian crises were considered aberrant phenomena, relatively peripheral to core national and governmental interests. They reflected “acts of nature”, “acts of God,” but in one way or another, they were divorced from what might be called “normal life”. The causes and effects of climate change, the consequences of civil strife and deepening social and economic inequalities in developed as well as developing countries, now make it ever more evident that humanitarian crises are increasingly recognised as reflections of the ways that societies structure themselves and allocate their resources.

Humanitarian crises have moved from the periphery of governmental interests to centre stage; and in so doing, they are imbued with high levels of political significance. Such interests span issues of commercial relations and development to national security and stability. Governments—be they donors or recipients—around the world are less and less inclined to abrogate humanitarian response to those who may be well intentioned but insensitive to governmental interests.

This in part means that how and who provides assistance will weigh heavily for recipient and donor government decision-makers, and that decisions will increasingly be determined by the abiding political interests that assistance providers can offer. The challenge that humanitarian crises are increasingly posing to governments is in no small part reflected by the changing types, dimensions and dynamics of crisis drivers.

## Changing types, dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian crises.

Uncertainty, rapid change and complexity will increasingly be the hallmarks of humanitarian crises in the foreseeable future. The foreseeable future will reflect new sets of sudden and slow-onset crisis agents, including technological systems failures, large-scale industrial and chemical collapse, nuclear seepage, water scarcity and pandemics and intense levels of civil strife in seemingly stable societies. At the same time, as suggested by potential pandemics and issues related to climate change, humanitarian crises will become increasingly global, and due to demographic patterns will shift the humanitarian battlegrounds from rural to possibly far more complex urban environments.

More and more future crises will be interactive, global and synchronous. The persistent division between natural and man-made disasters will become increasingly artificial. Natural events will trigger political turmoil which in turn will lead to violent conflict and more natural, technological and systems failures. Clearly changes in rates of precipitation in the Hindu-Kush Himalaya region which could lead to severe water crises is the sort of case that will not only lead to a humanitarian crisis induced by a natural hazard, but also one that could spark large scale inter and intra-state conflict. And in that context, it is significant to note how little analysts know about local interests and coping mechanisms of highly vulnerable people in that fragile region, which holds almost 20% of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>

**Post-western hegemonic states.** As increasingly evidenced in a growing number of states around the world—from Indonesia and Myanmar to Zimbabwe and Iran—states are becoming less and less willing to accept the dictates—no matter how well intentioned—

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Waters of the Third Pole: Sources of Threats; Sources of Survival*, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London, China Dialogue, Aon-Benfield Hazards Centre, University College, London, May 2010.

of Western powers. Be they macro issues concerning climate change or more situationally specific issues such as local delivery systems, governments which heretofore may have been more inclined to accept Western bilateral donor advice appear less and less inclined to do so. The reasons for this emerging demonstration of self-confidence are several, and include the rise of alternative power structures (eg, fluid multi-polarity) and more suzerain-tributary relationships (eg, China and Myanmar) where smaller states are protected by their larger neighbours. These sorts of prospects make access more difficult and assumptions about influence more challenging.

These factors mean that humanitarian organisations like commercial organisations will in some contexts have to accept the practical realities that states will increasingly “call the shots”. There will be less tolerance for external intervention, no matter how well intentioned. Coordination mechanisms—be they UN or IASC Country Teams or “clusters”—will either directly involve government or will find themselves increasingly marginalised if they do not.

At the other end of the scale, transformation in state systems over the next two decades will also mean that more and more local people will live in so-called “no-man’s lands” where governments have little capacity or interest in providing security and social safety nets over large portions of state territory. This could be the case, for example, in parts of Central Asia, where there are large deposits of valuable natural resources though declining government capacities to provide services. Such people will survive on the margins, and their lives and livelihoods will fall prey to the most minimal changes in living conditions.

**Expanding range of humanitarian actors.** Change is afoot. Different types of organisations, groupings and networks are engaging in humanitarian action—*on-line as well as off-line*. Commercial actors involved in humanitarian response come from a growing number of countries, from the Gulf states, China, Indonesia and Venezuela. And when, where and how this commercial sector becomes engaged is an issue of growing importance. Yet, this should not ignore the fact that there is also a growing number of actors—not in the commercial or traditional humanitarian sectors—that participate in humanitarian action.

Emphasising the political nature of humanitarianism, the role of “non-state actors,” is ever more evident in relief and recovery programmes, eg, Hezbollah in the summer 2006 crisis in Lebanon. The Diaspora—as was so apparent in the 2010 Haiti earthquake response and recovery efforts—have become recognised as powerful “humanitarian actors” through amongst other things their direct financial contributions to the affected; and the military—within countries and across borders—is seen in some contexts as increasingly necessary to deal with the sort of strategic planning and surge capacities needed to deal with humanitarian crises now and in the future.<sup>3</sup>

A perceived paradox of globalisation is that the more globalised the world, the more “localised” it would seem to be. In other words, the more one has focused on potential global commonalities and inter-relationships, the more will local variations, reflected in customs, cultures and even language, come to the fore. Consistent with changes in government attitudes towards international humanitarian intervention, suggested above, governments, too, will be more inclined to opt for local over international. This would mean that humanitarian actors will increasingly be drawn from national and local community networks and organisations, and that external intervention will be less and less encouraged, and “localism” will be the preferred option.

**The future role and delivery of aid.** As humanitarian assistance increasingly moves to the core of political concerns, that centrality will change the sorts of activities that will

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Annex D of ASEAN’s Asian Disaster Management and Emergency Response agreement.

be perceived as needed from the international community. On a technological level, the mobile phone and related Internet phenomena will have major impacts upon the conventional delivery of relief items. From food and clothing to water and shelter, funds via the Internet will give access to a large portion of affected peoples to much needed assistance, underscoring the assumption that access and not availability is critical; and that local inevitably is the mainstay of effective prevention, preparedness and response.<sup>4</sup>

These sorts of innovations pose a challenge to traditional humanitarian approaches to assistance. Increasingly humanitarian action will be led by technologies and innovations that require degrees of specialisations not normally associated with humanitarianism. Satellite transmitted remote sensing will over time be able to assess the physical conditions of internally displaced peoples and refugees as well as monitor their movements. Telemedicine will increasingly become a norm; and internet technologies, as noted above, will transform many aspects of response and delivery. Therefore, when it comes to the plethora of those who might be included under the rubric of the “expanding range of humanitarian actors,” it is more than likely that direct involvement will more and more be reduced to those who have specific technical or cutting-edge innovative capacities, be they corporate or humanitarian actors; and that *local* will increasingly have the capacity at hand to address humanitarian issues, from prevention through to response.

**Supply versus demand driven response.** In 1970 a cyclone in what was then “East Pakistan” killed 250,000 people in six hours. Reflecting back on the international response to that crisis, one official noted that “it was pandemonium run riot... America cleared out its junk closets and sent it all to East Pakistan.” Until relatively recently, humanitarian intervention—including prevention and preparedness as well as response—was based upon the availability of resources and the perception of the donor about what might be required as well as more political donor interests.

As one looks now upon the evolving humanitarian context in which new and more traditional humanitarian actors will be engaging, it will become increasingly apparent that humanitarian action will become more demand driven, to the extent that recipient governments, for example, will be less reluctant to make their preferences known. Whether the most timely and appropriate aid is or is not perceived as inherent in humanitarian principles, the reality is that recipient governments as well as potentially or actually affected communities may be more insistent on criteria of quality and effectiveness in their acceptance of aid. Some have even spoken about the possibility of legal action being taken against incompetent or irresponsible aid providers.

If more and more humanitarian assistance will be demand driven, far greater awareness of and sensitivity to the values, norms, needs and consequences of humanitarian assistance naturally has to follow.

**Professionalism and managerialism.** There is no doubt that the humanitarian sector has become more professional in many aspects of its work. Logistics and distribution systems have generally improved. Coordination structures and information exchange—by no means perfect—are better than they were in the beginning of the 1990s, and innovation has crept into various aspects of humanitarian work, eg, plumpy’nut, cash-for-food.

And yet at the same time, it can also be argued that the development of what was earlier noted as “the humanitarian enterprise” has not come without certain costs in terms of empathy and advocacy. Despite aspirational principles, there is a recognised tendency among many multilateral and non-governmental organisations in the sector to accommodate the concerns of major donors. Needs assessments too frequently

---

4 Innovations initiative, See: HFP/Linksbridge <<http://www.humanitarianfutures.org> >.

reflect institutional expertise rather than a genuine understanding of what are the real requirements of the affected, and accountability has often had more to do with informing donors about the end-use of their resources rather than the impact that those resources have had upon the affected.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this sort of institutional managerialism is the reality that the humanitarian sector like the commercial sector is a “competitive industry”—seeking to gain due shares of an expanding though ultimately limited market. Those who determine the parameters of that market may be changing. No longer can one assume that “hapless governments” in the South will pay instant heed to the will of a more resilient North. No longer can one assume that the traditional label of “humanitarian actor” gives an NGO or a UN organisation more automatic rights to intervention than other types of actors which may not be conventional “humanitarians”.

In a very basic sense, collaboration and cooperation for humanitarian action among a growing number of traditional and unconventional humanitarians will inevitably be circumscribed by competition and resource rivalry.

**Multiple humanitarian principles.** The paradox of globalisation noted under the expanding range of humanitarian actors, above, is equally applicable when it comes to the possibility of a multiplicity of humanitarian principles in the future. In other words, along with growing homogeneity is an equally as vibrant trend towards greater heterogeneity. Localism and the resurgence of ethnic and ideological groupings may drive this diversity. Linked to such changes and to transformations in the global system will also be changes in the ways that humanitarian principles are seen by an increasingly diverse global community. There has been an assumption sometimes implicit and other times explicit that such humanitarian values as independence, impartiality and neutrality are universal. However, such assumptions are being challenged.

As one leading anthropologist has noted, there is a growing tendency to accept that humanism and its related humanitarian principles are not necessarily universals. They are values that will emerge out of “engaged debate”.<sup>6</sup> That is not to say that all values are “equal”, but rather that their relevance and applicability will have to take into account different and contending perceptions. In that context, “there is no formal universal standard to which organisations, which see themselves as “humanitarian,” can be held to account.<sup>7</sup>

Whose principles and assumptions determine what is ethical, and to what extent—like the dilemma for humanitarian practitioners—do principles and indeed ethics have to be sacrificed for a greater good? Whose good?

## Strategic design and public policy from a humanitarian perspective

It would seem evident that the assumptions that have underpinned humanitarianism and humanitarian action for the past four decades, if not longer, are being challenged by transformations that are global but that at the same time bring *local* to the fore.

---

5 See, for example, Linda Polman, *War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times*, Viking, London, 2010.

6 Arjun Appadurai, p.18

7 Antonio Donini, “The far side: the meta functions of humanitarianism in a globalised world,” *Disasters*, 2010, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2010, p. 5223.

There is a pressing need for designing policies that will deal with future crisis threats and growing vulnerabilities, and that will take the sorts of transformations discussed above into account. A starting point begins with an understanding and appreciation of the threats, themselves, their potential impacts and means to offset them...without reference or recourse to what previously designated “humanitarian actors” do or what experiences one has had in the past.

Defining the problem and solution is the critical design challenge. Who does it is in a very fundamental sense is the secondary challenge.



# UNIDIR RESOURCES

## About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)—an autonomous institute within the United Nations—conducts research on disarmament and security. UNIDIR is based in Geneva, Switzerland, the centre for bilateral and multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations, and home of the Conference on Disarmament. The Institute explores current issues pertaining to the variety of existing and future armaments, as well as global diplomacy and local tensions and conflicts. Working with researchers, diplomats, government officials, NGOs and other institutions since 1980, UNIDIR acts as a bridge between the research community and governments. UNIDIR's activities are funded by contributions from governments and donor foundations.