Planning from the future: an emerging agenda

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Abstract

In the foreseeable future, it is more than likely that the types, dimensions, and dynamics of crisis drivers will increase dramatically, in some instances exponentially. While a growing number of organizations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities sense that such changes are afoot, few have looked at how these might fundamentally affect not only what they do but also how they do it. This article suggests that it is time for humanitarian organizations to look far more systematically at the transformational factors that will increase disaster vulnerabilities around the world and also the opportunities that exist to mitigate them. The article notes that some of the most transformative factors affecting humanitarian action will be the result of new political structures in the post-Western hegemonic world and the growing political centrality of humanitarian crises. The consequences of these and other transformative factors mean that those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities will have to be far more anticipatory and adaptive than is the case today. They will have to pay far greater attention to innovation and

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innovative practices and significantly expand the ways in which and with whom they collaborate.

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Extrapolating lessons from the past will increasingly provide less guidance on how to deal with humanitarian *futures*. The types of humanitarian crisis driver are increasing exponentially, as are their dimensions and dynamics; furthermore, the systems, institutions, and assumptions that have emerged over the past two decades will not be adequate to meet the humanitarian challenges of the next two decades and beyond. Moreover, not only are the types, dimensions, and dynamics of crisis drivers significantly expanding, but at the same time the broader global context in which such crisis events take place is dramatically changing. It is the interplay between the changing nature of threats and the context in which they will increasingly play out that calls for a new humanitarian agenda – one underpinned by 'planning from the future'.[1]

Conceptually, 'planning from the future' has its roots in a number of different disciplines – management, political science, new approaches to governance, and environmental management. What many of these areas share is an appreciation of insights from complexity theory. These insights suggest that reductionist analysis leading to top-down strategies, with finite objectives and predefined means for attaining them, is neither feasible nor desirable in a world in which ongoing economic and technological changes and increasing social complexities predominate. Nevertheless, in a number of cases, successful 'planning from the future' has emerged from adaptations of such conventional approaches. As Ramalingam has suggested in his analysis of successful vaccination programmes in the health sector:

> We can see a clear evolution from a prescriptive model, a broad formal, rational, design approach, which tried to 'solve the puzzle'... towards a learning, evolutionary, politically savvy approach, in which the context shaped the approach, and conscious effort was put into adapting the project as it progressed.[2]

'Planning from the future', in other words, assumes that one cannot predict what will be, but that one can learn how better to deal with and navigate uncertainty and complexity. It also assumes that this is an approach that can and has been learned. Increasingly modern social and natural sciences assume that 'most phenomena in the universe are somewhere in the middle [between randomness and deterministic]; they mix determinism and randomness in complex and

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1   The phrase 'planning from the future', besides being the title of this article, is the motto of the Humanitarian Futures Programme at King's College, London. It suggests an approach in which standard futures analysis, which normally depends upon trends analysis, is replaced by scenario analysis, which focuses upon the complex interplay of non-linear factors that in and of themselves do not necessarily reflect consistent patterns of behaviour.
2   Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming 2012.

unpredictable ways. In the twentieth century, science came to accept the messy and the indeterminate'.[3] With that in mind, it is evident that the capacities to deal with complex problems are often distributed vertically and horizontally across a wide range of actors and hierarchies, that they represent the sorts of problems not amenable to any single set of disciplines, and that they may reflect conflicting, divergent, and equally plausible interpretations.[4] As this article will suggest, this perspective has significant implications for the ways in which those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities develop policies, consider who should be at the policy formulation table, and, from a planning perspective, how objectives and inherently fluid contexts might interrelate.

While recognizing that what has been called the 'humanitarian industry' has become more professional over the past two decades,[5] the first section, 'Perceptual blind spots and the changing nature of threat', suggests that this professionalization has not been in response to a growing awareness of the implications of complexity. Rather, on the whole the humanitarian sector appears relatively oblivious to those implications, to what this article will discuss as the ever-expanding types, dimensions, and dynamics of humanitarian crises. As with all too many organizations, those in the humanitarian sector view professionalization in terms of better co-ordination, control, and executing abilities, but not necessarily in terms of better innovating and knowledge-creating abilities.[6]

An equally poignant challenge for what Harvey and others define as the 'humanitarian sector'[7] will be the extent to which those representing that sector are sufficiently sensitive to the changes that constantly emerge from any 'open complex adaptive system', or, in this case, from the myriad factors that represent the broader context in which humanitarian crisis drivers and their consequences are perceived and addressed. The second section, 'The changing global context', will attempt to capture aspects of that rapidly moving, multifaceted context in which the consequences of macro and micro impacts can often be indistinguishable.

For those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities, the ever more complex and seemingly random nature of humanitarian crises and the contexts in which they occur require new ways of preparing for the challenges of the future. The final section of the article, 'Planning from the future', suggests some measures that humanitarian organizations need to take to be ready. While these measures are regarded by a growing number of organizations as useful, they are all in one way or

3   Eric Beinhocker, *The Origin of Wealth: Evolution, Complexity and the Radical Remaking of Economics*, Random House Business Books, London, 2005, p. 99.
4   Harry Jones, 'Taking responsibility for complexity: how implementation can achieve results in the face of complex problems', Working Paper No. 330, Overseas Development Institute, London, June 2011, available at: http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/6485.pdf (last visited December 2011).
5   John Holmes, 'New dimensions of collaboration and the corporate sector', speech to the RedR/King's College London conference 'Hard Realities and Future Necessities: The Role of the Private Sector in Humanitarian Efforts', London, 3 December 2009, p. 12.
6   E. Beinhocker, above note 3, p. 378.
7   Paul Harvey *et al.*, *The State of the Humanitarian System: Assessing Performance and Progress: A Pilot Study*, ALNAP/Overseas Development Institute, London, November 2010.

another underpinned by a more abiding recognition that the most important step to be fit for the future begins with 'mind change'.

Perceptual blind spots and the changing nature of threat

A former Thai Minister of Finance, M. R. Pridiyathorn, warned that, if the Thai government in 2011 continued to pursue its proposed rice-pledging schemes, they would result in policies that would 'aggravate natural disasters'.[8] In neighbouring Cambodia, policy-makers were perplexed to discover that a major wealth creation scheme, namely the creation of casinos in Phnom Penh, was leading to a significant increase in suicides among the local population.[9]

The two concerns offer important reminders, if not lessons, for the humanitarian sector. The link between the Thai government's rice-pledging schemes and so-called 'natural disasters' underscores the fact that humanitarian crises are generally reflections of the ways in which societies structure themselves and allocate their resources. They are not aberrant phenomena, divorced from normal life; they are reflections of 'normal life'. Similarly, the Cambodian casino is a reminder that assumptions about the impacts of crisis drivers are not linearly based, but more often than not their consequences have to be seen in terms of their context and the multiplicity of phenomena that might potentially have an impact on that context. The analogue that has often been used is the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil, the eventual consequence of which is a tornado in Texas.[10]

These cases reflect what might be called 'blind spots'. They suggest a linear view of causation, a compartmentalized approach to expertise, and a general unwillingness to probe potentially complex contexts. Such blind spots permeate the world of humanitarian experts and professionals. They are in part perpetuated by institutional tendencies to compartmentalize problems, by the need to focus upon issues that are perceived to be acceptable, and by screening out issues that do not fit into recognized categories. It is instructive in this context to consider the way in which members of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Council on Disaster Management began its deliberations in 2011 on issues relevant to corporate humanitarian collaboration.

In their initial deliberations, members of the Council were urged to recognize the discreet nature of 'natural disasters', and that this category was different from other humanitarian concerns of the WEF such as 'catastrophes' and scientific and technological disasters.[11] The assumption that disasters can be categorized in terms of a specific type of crisis driver ignores the emerging reality

8   Wichit Chaitrong, 'Government policies threatening to aggravate natural disasters', in *The Nation*, 26 September 2011, p. 2A.
9   David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th edition, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 2008, p. 249.
10 Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA, 1993.
11 Personal reflection of the author, who served as a member of the Council on Disaster Management of the World Economic Forum from 2011 to 2012.

that few humanitarian crises are the result of a single causal factor, such as a natural disaster. The March 2011 Fukushima crisis is a case in point.

The interplay between the tsunami and the subsequent leak of Unit 1 of the Fukushima nuclear reactor suggests why such conventional categories as 'natural disasters' and 'complex emergencies' may be linguistically convenient but conceptually flawed. The former fails to recognize that it is human agency that makes natural hazards a threat to lives and livelihoods; the latter is too often a cloak for describing the consequences of inter- or intra-state violence without recognizing the complexities and multidimensionalities that trigger such violence. In the case of Fukushima, the crisis that led to a total of 22,000 people being confirmed dead or missing and almost 250,000 people displaced had multiple drivers.[12] An earthquake, a tsunami, nuclear leakage, and collapsed infrastructure, which in various ways interacted with each other, created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, requiring multiple response measures. The event was not a 'natural disaster' nor a 'technological disaster', but the result of multiple and interactive crisis drivers.

That disasters generally have multiple drivers has normally been the case. Recent examples abound. The impact of the Mumbai floods in 2005, for example, was the result of administrative decisions to reduce mangrove groves that heretofore had provided protective barriers against storm surges, as well as the sheer intensity of the rainfall. Collapsed sewage systems in highly vulnerable parts of the city and inadequate infrastructure were as responsible for the eventual consequences of the floods as the high level of rainfall itself. In 2011 in Hungary, a combination of heavy rains, lack of appropriate attention to toxic sludge in a bauxite storage facility, and untested safety measures to contain residual bauxite almost led poisonous 'red sludge' to enter the waters of the Danube. Similarly, the tragedy that befell New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was in no small part due to the failure of the US Army Corps of Engineers' surge protection system and the lack of adequate warning measures in Louisiana's coastal cites and towns.

All too often, experts tend to focus on one type of driver, and only subsequently recognize strands of other types. As experts tend to compartmentalize hazards based upon their expertise and institutional interests, they not only fail to plan upon the likely prospect of interactive drivers but also fail to explore the possibility that they will have to deal with new types of crisis driver.

New types of crisis driver

If disasters are reflections of the ways in which societies structure themselves and allocate their resources, then it is more than likely that increasingly complex economic systems, the consequences of globalization, and the inter-related nature of technology, population growth, demographic shifts, and natural phenomena such as climate change will result in new types of crisis driver and also new types of interactive crisis.

12 'Nuclear energy: 2011 Japan nuclear crisis overview', in *New York Times*, available at: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/energy-environment/atomic-energy/index.html (last visited 10 December 2011).

The potentially disastrous consequences of cybernetic failure offer one example. In a world more and more dependent upon interconnected communications, information transmission, and access to a wide range of cybernetic systems, cascading failures, or networks that become severely impaired owing to malfunctions in hardware or software, will quite plausibly become major crisis drivers. Food supply chains, mobile communications, water systems, emergency logistics (air, land, and sea), and access to money or trading commodities are all increasingly dependent upon complex systems that rely upon internet communications and related satellite capacities. In developed as well as developing countries, the potential vulnerability of such systems are intensifying; unintended cybernetic failures or calculated cybernetic attacks are seen as factors that can bring large parts of society to their knees.[13]

In 2009, the US National Academy of Sciences prepared a report for the US National Aeronautic and Space Agency, entitled *Severe Space Weather Events: Understanding Societal and Economic Impacts*. In the 132-page report, analysts found that a 'super solar flare' followed by an extreme geomagnetic storm would mean that, in societies dependent upon high levels of technology, nothing would be immune. The loss of electricity would ripple across the social infrastructure with, for example,

> water distribution affected within several hours; perishable foods and medications lost in 12–24 hours; loss of heating/air conditioning, sewage disposal, phone service, fuel re-supply and so on. The concept of interdependency is evident in the unavailability of water due to long-term outage of electric power – and the inability to restart an electric generator without water on site.[14]

China's determination to ensure adequate electric power and water for burgeoning urban populations demonstrates a related dimension of emerging crisis drivers – in this instance, the interface between sophisticated technologies and conventional crisis drivers. An earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale in Sichuan in 2008 was, according to one highly reputable source, triggered by the enormous weight of back-filled water in the recently constructed Zipingpu Dam pressing down on a fragile fault-line. The result, according to the chief engineer of the Sichuan Geology and Mineral Bureau, was an impact that had '25 times more' than a year's worth of natural stress from tectonic movement.[15]

In a recent study about the consequences of meltwater in South Asia's Hindu-Kush Himalaya region, a group of analysts suggested that the impact of

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13   North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Lisbon Summit Declaration, 20 November 2010, para. 40, available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm (last visited 10 December 2011).
14   United States National Academy of Sciences, *Severe Space Weather Events: Understanding Societal and Economic Impacts*, National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2008, pp. 17–18.
15   Richard Kerr and Richard Stone, 'A human trigger for the great quake of Sichuan?', in *Science*, 16 January 2009, Vol. 323, No. 5912, p. 322. It should be said that not everyone is in agreement with the analysis of Kerr and Stone, including Kai Deng, *et al.*, 'Evidence that the 2008 Mw 7.9 Wenchuan Earthquake Could Not Have Been Induced by the Zipingpu Reservoir', in *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America*, No. 1, November 2010, pp. 2805–2814.

climate-change-generated meltwater was far less a crisis driver than the ways that governments were working to increase agricultural productivity and electricity generation. Experts as well as policy-makers focused all too often on the short-term benefits of dam construction and hydroelectric power with too little attention paid to alternative uses of water power.[16] State boundaries, and not the natural flow of the region's rivers, determined the ways in which experts sought to meet infrastructural needs such as irrigation. Such approaches, in turn, compound the potential impact of natural hazards as well as become sources of conflict.

Policy-making and the improbable

Policy-makers like to distinguish between low-probability, high-impact events – those events that are quite probable but with relatively low impact – and events that are not only probable but are quite likely to have high impact as well. All too often, they ignore the first category – low-probability and high-impact – because it is perceived to be unlikely to happen and too costly to prepare for the improbable. The fact that government officials in China had disregarded warnings about the potential impact that such large-scale dam projects could have in a seismically active area is reminiscent of more recent accusations about Japanese officials' failure to take into account the potential threat that the location of the Fukushima Daiichi reactor could pose.[17]

The use of such conventional probability/impact categories all too often fails to take into account the assumptions that underpin probability/impact *calculations*. A solar flare, *per se*, while potentially creating considerable disruption, may be perceived as a relatively rare phenomenon when compared, for example, with the occurrence of cyclones off the coast of the Bay of Bengal. And yet these calculations are only based upon one approach to identifying what has been called 'systems knowledge', or, in this instance, what are or are not 'natural parts of a system'. A complex, globally interconnected world requires problems to be identified and managed in ways that avoid rigid demands of certainty in hard facts or indisputable scientific laws of nature. The issue is not necessarily the relative probability that a solar flare will occur more or less frequently than a cyclone off the Bay of Bengal, but what might be the inter-relationship between the two events.

All too often, the pursuit of 'evidenced-based' knowledge, demands for 'objectivity', and hard data blinds those responsible for anticipating 'mega-crises'

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16 Note the preface by Michael Jones, UN Resident Coordinator, to the Humanitarian Futures Program (HFP) Report, *Integrated Action Plan: A Phase One Analysis of the UN Country Team in Tajikistan,* HFP, King's College, London, 2008, available at: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/sites/default/files/IAP_Tajikistan_Report_Phase1.pdf (last visited December 2011). Note also HFP, China Dialogue, and University College, London, *The Waters of the Third Pole: Sources of Threat; Sources of Survival*, HFP, King's College, London, May 2010, available at: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/sites/default/files/Waters%20of%20the%20Third%20Pole.pdf (last visited 10 December 2011).

17 Norimitsu Onishi and Martin Fackler, 'Japan held nuclear data, leaving evacuees in peril', in *The New York Times*, 8 August 2011, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/09/world/asia/09japan.html?pagewanted=all (last visited 11 December 2011).

and 'mega-messes' to more sensitive and possible, if not plausible, causation.[18] For this reason, 'systems thinking' offers a more compelling way to come to grips with the sorts of complexities that form the loose, flexible, and malleable parameters of future crisis drivers:

> In systems thinking, the physical sciences, certainly knowledge about the physical world, are inseparable from the social sciences and knowledge about the social world.... [W]hether we admit it or not, physical science is done by all-too-human beings that not only have a 'psychology' but operate within a 'social context.' The psychology and the sociology of the investigator or the 'expert' affect not only the production of physical knowledge but its very existence.[19]

Policy-making and the sciences

As noted earlier, a major challenge for dealing with complexity involves ways to engage a broad range of actors on a wide spectrum of horizontal and vertical levels. Many of these actors will offer contending interpretations of any specific phenomenon under focus. The ways in which policy-makers engage the natural and social sciences provide cases in point.

In June 2011 the UK's House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology issued a report on *Scientific Advice and Evidence in Emergencies*. It pointed to the fact that, in dealing with two recent crisis threats that affected the United Kingdom, the government had failed to use its chief scientific advisors (GCSA) effectively – particularly when it came to assessing risk. As the Committee noted:

> Risk assessment underpins preparedness. In turn, risk assessment should be underpinned by the best available evidence. We were very disappointed to learn that the GCSA has had little involvement with what is a cross-Government process. It appears that, for both the volcanic ash emergency and the recent severe winter weather, the GCSA had been asked to provide advice after the emergency had happened, although we note with interest that the severe winter weather was not deemed an emergency. This is simply not good enough: scientific advice and evidence should be integrated into risk assessment from the start.[20]

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18 Can M. Alpasalan and Ian I. Mitroff, *Swans, Swine, and Swindlers: Coping with the Growing Threat of Mega-crises and Mega-messes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2008, pp. 37–38. According to these authors, 'all crises are messy' for three reasons: i) stakeholders who are affected define crises differently and often disagree over what is happening and why; ii) all crises contain a wide variety of issues, problems, and assumptions that must be handled simultaneously; iii) crises are not isolated events, and normally trigger chain reactions.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

20 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Third Report: Scientific Advice and Evidence in Emergencies*, March 2011, para. 110, available at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee/publications/ (last visited December 2011).

While the sciences are invited increasingly into the room, they still too often are not invited to the policy-makers' table. In part, this is because policy-makers all too often are inclined to insist on certainty no matter how un-nuanced. In a related vein, longer-term threat analysis is still regarded as a luxury by policy-makers, pressured as they often feel by the demands of the immediate.

In the 2011 Horn of Africa crisis, for example, there were at least three problems that faced policy-makers when it came to using available science.[21] The first relates to the Parliamentary Committee's findings, namely that there was and is no systematic and consistent approach to bringing the sciences into policy-making. In part this has to do with how, all too often, science is used to confirm the opinions of practitioners rather than guide them. In part it has to do with the uncertainties that frequently permeate the ways in which findings are presented, and in part with the fact that scientific findings, when they do arrive on policy-makers' desks, have to be sieved through a host of contending priorities that have less to do with the findings *per se* and more to do with the political, administrative, and operational realities that surround them.

The second is that scientific information that is used by policy-makers and planners has to find ways to be more contextualized. In other words, patterns of drought impact in the Horn of Africa crisis in and of themselves still do not provide sufficiently precise information, for example, to identify differentiated effects upon populations, cattle, and agriculture. In the case of the present crisis in the Horn of Africa, a combination of satellite remote sensing and mobile technologies that can 'ground truth', or verify and differentiate impacts, are available, but not co-ordinated and integrated sufficiently well.

Finally, there is a more fundamental issue that the crisis in the Horn of Africa and a growing number of other crises illuminate. To date, there has rarely been any coherent action except when the signs of imminent crises are about to appear. There is no overarching framework or strategy that reflects a commitment to prevent and prepare for such events. In that sense, the lack of a full commitment to prioritizing and systematically addressing these ever-increasing disasters offers little incentive for a systematic and consistent dialogue between scientists and policy-makers to deal with this increase in crisis drivers, little incentive for the policy-maker to learn how to engage with the scientist and *vice versa*.

In a related vein, governments throughout a large swathe of the international community simply do not have sufficient dedicated, focused institutions undertaking research on disasters. As noted in the recently launched Forensic Investigations of Disasters (FORIN) project, while it is

> true that scientific knowledge and modern technology are not uniformly distributed and that many developing countries have a lower capacity to utilize or introduce the science and technology that is theoretically available due to institutional or social capacity constraints ... the fact that major disasters

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21 Randolph Kent, 'Famine in the Horn of Africa: never again?', in *New Scientist*, No. 2829, 14 September 2011, pp. 28–29.

continue to occur in developed countries suggests that there must be more to the explanation than access to science and technology, and choice of location, and resource scarcity, important though these factors undoubtedly are. This points to a deficit and a deficiency in the preponderance of existing research on disasters.[22]

Greater interaction between humanitarian policy-makers and the sciences is not *the* solution for overcoming linear, over-compartmentalized thinking about complex and interactive crisis drivers. Nor does it resolve the tension between policy-makers' demands for certainty and natural and social sciences' more circumspect understanding about the nature of evidence. Greater interaction between the two, however, should expand the opportunities for greater cross-disciplinary under-standing and for what earlier were called 'innovating and knowledge-creating abilities' so essential for identifying the sorts of humanitarian threats and the means to offset them that will be required for dealing with the future.

The changing global context

A continuing blind spot in the world of traditional humanitarian policy-makers is reflected not only in the ways in which they identify potential risks and solutions but also in the assumptions that 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 (referred to as 'the BRICS') 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 that of finding 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 organizations held in Ottawa to look at emerging future challenges, participants stressed the value of the event because it gave them 'time to think' before they had 'to return to the practical day-to-day routines' of running their organizations.[23] 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 'humanitarian sector' all suggest that the future is likely

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22 Disaster Risk (IRDR), The FORIN Project: Forensic Investigations of Disasters (IRDR RIA Publication No. 1), October 2011, p. 6.

23 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: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/newsletters/nov-dec11/foulwords (last visited December 2011).

to be addressed from the perspective of the present. The probability that the sorts of transformation that are underway might require policy-makers to alter fundamentally the way in which they define problems and the means for resolving them does not readily enter the policy analysis process.[24]

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 five 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, fluid multipolarity, and the globalization paradox.

The post-Western hegemon

The rise of alternative powers around the world, including the 'BRICS' 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; even US military might is seen by some as on the decline when it comes to influencing others.[25] Perhaps less well explored are the additional implications arising from the growing array of loosely defined secondary powers – from Indonesia and Malaysia to Argentina, from Nigeria to a variety of Middle Eastern and Gulf states. Combined with the BRICS, this next tier of actors further challenges the semblance of relative stability under Western-designed, if not Western-driven, institutions, traditions, principles, economic structures, and ultimately overwhelming military strength.

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 probably endure for the foreseeable future, though mechanisms such as the UN's Security Council and their procedures may well undergo significant change. Global approaches to such issues of global

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24 The difficulty for the policy-maker to move out of what might be described as his or her 'comfort zone' is suggested in a critique by Harvard University's Stanley Hoffmann of a recent work by the distinguished political analysts, Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented And How We Can Come Back*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2011. 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. In other words, it is difficult for even highly trained analysts to let go of fundamental assumptions, despite the implications of major transformational change. See Stanley Hoffmann, 'A cure for a sick country?', in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 58, No. 16, 27 October–9 November 2011.

25 Kishore Mahbubani, 'A letter to Netanyahu: time is no longer on Israel's side', in *Financial Times*, 11 November 2011, p. 9, in which Professor Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, suggests that 'shrinking [US] budgets will cut defence and aid expenditures . . . Countries will no longer hesitate to vote against American preferences.' Available at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/15537caa-0bc8-11e1-9310-00144feabdc0.html (last visited December 2011).

concern – so-called 'regime issues' (such as those pertaining to the law of the sea) – will be used to address new and emerging concerns about humanitarian crisis drivers, such as cybernetic threats and the uses of outer space. Whether or not the economic structures that have led to unprecedented though all too often asymmetric economic growth over the past half century will endure remains uncertain, and the way in which physical power will be asserted will also probably undergo significant change. The fundamental difference, however, will be the diversity of actors who will influence the course of local, regional, and global events.

This diversity will lead to what will be noted below as fluid multipolarity and the resurgence of sovereignty. It will also 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 that 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'.[26]

In that context, an ICRC official noted his surprise when, in a standard presentation on humanitarian principles, a member of an audience in the Middle East politely but firmly noted that in his society 'justice', too, was a humanitarian principle. 'Where do your principles relate to ours?' was, according to the official, a question of abiding importance.[27]

The political centrality of humanitarian crises

Three decades ago, humanitarian crises were considered aberrant phenomena, relatively peripheral to core governmental interests. And, while the fall of Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Salassie in 1974 was in no small part due to the way in which he failed to deal with the Wollo famine, 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 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 twentieth 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 issues if they fail to respond adequately to humanitarian crises.

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26 '[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'. Arjun Appadurai, 'Tactical Humanism', in Jerome Binde, *The Future of Values*, UNESCO, Paris, 2001, p. 18.
27 Personal communication, ICRC Geneva, 2004.

As humanitarian crises move to centre-stage in 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 in which it responds to a humanitarian crisis, the way that other governments and international actors respond to that crisis will have increasing political consequence as well. 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.[28] What *is* new and will increasingly be of significance is the growing politicization of humanitarian engagement. It is not merely the types of assistance that are provided, but the context – the perceived public relations support or overt or implied criticism – that comes with assistance. For both sides – recipient and donor governments – this context will increasingly affect wider interests, including commercial relations and common security arrangements.

This means, in part, that how and who provides assistance will weigh heavily on recipient and 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 even than they are today. What is referred to as the 'instrumentalization of humanitarian assistance', where assistance is used in an almost surreptitious way to achieve 'non-humanitarian objectives', will become more overtly calculated and political.[29]

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 politicization of humanitarian response and the consequent abuse of human rights.[30] 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, international 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;[31] and persistent efforts to promote the right to protect also continue through

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28 Peter Walker and Daniel G. Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World*, Routledge, 2009.

29 Joanna Macrae, 'Understanding integration from Rwanda to Iraq', in *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2004, pp. 29–35. See also Antonio Donini, 'The far side: the meta-functions of humanitarianism in a globalized world', in *Disasters*, Vol. 34, Supplement S2, 2010, pp. S220–S237, available at: www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/ISA_thefarside.pdf (last visited 10 December 2011).

30 Kofi Annan, 'Two concepts of sovereignty', in *The Economist*, 18 September 1999, pp. 49–50.

31 David Fisher, '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, June 2007, pp. 353–355.

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.[32]

In no sense is this to argue that the resurgence of sovereignty automatically denies human rights, including the right to humanitarian assistance or the right to protection. Rather, it is to say that how these are interpreted and who will determine what is needed and when will be less and less negotiable, and in the foreseeable future increasingly determined by state's sovereign authority. Hence, the world's outrage over the 1984 Ethiopian famine and the intrusive though relatively successful 'Geldof phenomena' are unlikely to cohere with emerging geopolitical realities. 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 organizations will be less and less tolerated. As suggested in recent disaster situations such as Turkey's 2011 Van earthquake, that of Chile in 2010, and Myanmar's cyclone in 2009, governments have in many instances attempted to resist external pressures of humanitarian actors, and there are aspects of fluid multipolarity that will strengthen the capacities of governments to resist the beneficence of the well intentioned, and to insist on support that is driven more by demand and less by supply.

The implications of fluid multipolarity

States' assertion of sovereignty will not stem solely from their individual capacities to resist external intervention. Their ability to assert their sovereignty will in part reflect the decline of Western hegemony, and also a tendency to resist change through blocs of states with shared interests. Such blocs or political alignments – be they nation-states or city-states – into groups intended to resist externally imposed change is as old as the concept of governance itself. And, in the foreseeable future, such blocs will not only continue but will also increase in number and complexity, and will enable members to resist various forms of external pressure. While the Arab

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32 See Richard Falk, 'Dilemmas of sovereignty and intervention', in *Foreign Policy Journal*, 18 July 2011, available at: http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/07/18/dilemmas-of-sovereignty-and-intervention/ (last visited December 2011), 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 of intervention 'in the name of "civilization"', normally in the non-West – a trend increasingly resisted.

Union's 2011 denunciation of Syrian domestic violence and its earlier intervention in Libya would seem to challenge the proposition that state sovereignty is protected through the mechanisms of blocs and coalitions, there are two more-abiding reasons that would seem to support the proposition that emerging blocs and the resurgence of sovereignty will go hand in hand.

In the foreseeable future, two types of loose and shifting bloc alignments, or fluid multipolar blocs, will become increasingly evident. The first reflects a suzerainty dependency relationship where there is a trade-off between the commodity interests (such as food or minerals) of the suzerain power for the protection of sovereignty for the tributary power. Such alignments are already evident in relations between China and India and a variety of states in Africa. As opposed to geopolitics of yore, these alignments will resemble the fluidity of commodity markets, where shifting functional needs will be reflected in relatively fast adjustments in the relations between bloc members, but their existence will enable governments of weak states to resist unwanted external pressures more effectively than in the past. This would apply to all interventions, whether they be demands for adherence to international humanitarian law or humanitarian access to areas sensitive to local authorities.

Of course, there may well be instances where the stronger state might conversely insist that its 'vassal' abide by international demands, including those related to humanitarian obligations. The overarching point, however, is that the certainties of the moral imperative are ever more in decline, and that the key to the new order in this regard is to anticipate and understand these new relations.

A second dimension of fluid multipolarity will be reflected in what has been described as 'minilateralism'.[33] There is increasing concern among some political analysts that the time and effort consumed in seeking to persuade member-states around the world to agree to multilateral arrangements and regime issues are inherently inefficient. The minilateralist position is that smaller groupings of states with common functional interests will increasingly be inclined to bypass the tortuous route of multilateral negotiations, and will project their influence through arrangements that serve the interests of the like-minded. Whether the outcomes will be positive and in the interest of any single community over time is difficult to judge, but this trend is a further demonstration of the fluid nature of multilateralism in the foreseeable future, and the possible resistance to external pressures that can ensue.

The 'globalization paradox'

Globalization 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

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33 Moises Naim, 'Minilateralism: the magic number to get real international action', in *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2009, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/18/minilateralism?page=full (last visited 11 December 2011).

'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, as scholars have also noted, there is a 'globalization paradox', namely that the more globalized the world becomes, the more 'localized' it seems to be. In other words, the assumption that had underpinned the concept of globalization 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 waves of nationalism,[34] 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.[35]

For the policy-maker concerned with humanitarian issues, the 'globalization paradox' brings together many aspects of the changing context in which they will have to operate. The decline of Western hegemony, the political centrality of humanitarian crises, and the resurgence of sovereignty in various ways will make localism – or the preference for one's own customs, culture, and language – not only a preferred option but also a political necessity. It will be a preferred option because it will reflect a sense of political individuality and assertion that in turn is mirrored in sovereignty, minilateralism, and fluid multipolarity; and it will be a political necessity because the political centrality of humanitarian crises will make greater attention to local attitudes and operational control of increasing importance for governments of crisis-affected states.

These governments will become increasingly wary of those outside humanitarian organizations who feel that their biggest contributions will result 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 organizations rather than the UN system or Western consortia. In that sense, the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an aid conduit to Myanmar in the aftermath of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis is instructive.[36]

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34 Mark Malloch-Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Limits of Nations and the Pursuit of New Politics*, Allen Lane, London, 2011.

35 Claire Shearman, '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, 2005.

36 Yves-Kim Creac'h and Lillianne Fan, 'ASEAN's role in the Cyclone Nargis response: implications, lessons and opportunities', in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, Issue 41, December 2008, available at: http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-41/aseans-role-in-the-cyclone-nargis-response-implications-lessons-and-opportunities (last visited 10 December 2011).

Planning from the future

Harford, in discussing evolution as a 'failure of the less fit' rather than 'the survival of the fittest', noted that 'disconcertingly, given our instinctive belief that complex problems require expertly designed solutions, [evolution] is completely un-planned'.[37] For policy-makers, the randomness and unpredictability of the source and solutions of complex problems can, indeed, be disconcerting. As noted earlier in this article, modern social and natural sciences increasingly assume that most phenomena in the universe are somewhere between random and deterministic, and that science has come to accept the messy and the indeterminate. Policy-makers, however, generally have not, and seek solutions that are unambiguous and readily implementable.

That, in the context of theories of complexity and uncertainty, goes against perceived reality. In this instance, those who are responsible for humanitarian policy will have to adjust to an operating environment in which crisis drivers, triggers, and causation are not readily apparent, and where consequences are uncertain and solutions potentially evasive. This is not, however, a call for passive circumspection. On the contrary, the active preparation required by organizations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to deal with new humanitarian dynamics and dimensions is perhaps even more essential and demanding than it might have been in the past.

As one looks to possible humanitarian threats and opportunities to offset them, there are at least five inter-related characteristics that define policies and organizations that will be relevant and fit for humanitarian futures: anticipation, adaptation, innovation, collaboration, and strategic leadership. Each of these involves structural and institutional changes, but, perhaps even more significantly, each of them requires changes of 'mind sets' and attitudes.

The art of anticipation

The art of anticipation is not about prediction; it is about promoting a sense that exploring the 'what might be's' is a recognized asset for the objectives of the organization and its ensuing policies.[38] While it would be wrong to argue against the fact that there are growing scientific and technological capacities to predict a vast range of phenomena – social as well as natural – it would be equally wrong to ignore the ever-present prospect of 'black swan' events and the extraordinary consequences of 'the flap of the wings of a butterfly'.[39] The organization has to be sensitive to the possibility that it will have to contend with the unforeseen and that its conventional standard operating procedures and repertoires will not necessarily be adequate for dealing with the unforeseen.

37   Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts With Failure*, Little, Brown, London, 2011, p. 13.
38   'The point is to challenge our preconceptions about how things will develop – not to predict the future, but to give an array of future worlds that seem to flow from these assumptions'. Liz Else, 'Opinion interview: seizing tomorrow', in *New Scientist*, 1 December 2001, pp. 43–44.
39   See E. N. Lorenz, above note 10.

Anticipation is ultimately about ensuring that the organization and policy-makers promote and foster the flexibility and creativity necessary to deal with uncertainty and complexity. In so saying, there is a combination of inter-related steps that can achieve those aims for the institution as a whole and for individuals within those institutions, two of which are noted below.

From a process perspective, it is essential that throughout the organization there is a sense that speculation – new ways of thinking and exploring at the limits of plausibility – is not only accepted but valued. All too often, the creative essence needed to speculate about the 'what might be's' is sacrificed by managers' pursuit of productivity, efficiency, and control. As noted by the Asian Development Bank's Knowledge Solution,

> To manage for creativity and innovation in ways that keep clients, audiences, and partners satisfied, they have five levers: i) the amount of challenge they give to personnel to stimulate minds, ii) the degree of freedom they grant around procedures and processes to minimize hassle, iii) the way they design work groups to tap ideas from all ranks, (iv) the encouragement and incentives they give, which should include rewards and recognition, and (v) the nature of organizational support.[40]

From a more instrumental perspective, a study of future consequences of climate change suggests that an essential way to develop means to deal with the possible consequences of change is to identify 'a sequence of steps, each with associated uncertainties'. The first emissions of greenhouse gases and aerosols need to be specified, but so, too, will their dependence on *unknown* socio-economic behaviour. These unknowns can be tackled by using scenarios designed to produce indicative rather than definitive analysis.[41]

The scenario – both as a concept and as a practical planning device – accepts the value of relative probabilities. In other words, one accepts that definitive explanation will be less probable in attempting to understand the future and that one will have to accept the need to plan based on a set of compelling probabilities. Scenario planning is intended to help management 'think outside the box', or to serve as 'mind-shifting exercises'. At the same time, it is used to provide 'high-level descriptions that help to clarify very long-term strategic direction, threats and opportunities'.[42] Scenario planning begins with making various assumptions and track them through different worlds, to provide an array of possibilities.

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40 Oliver Serrat, *Harnessing Creativity for New Solutions in the Workplace*, Asian Development Bank, Knowledge Solutions no. 61, September 2009, p. 4.
41 The Royal Society, *Climate Change: What We Know and What We Need to Know*, Policy Document 22/02, August 2002, p. 7.
42 Hugh Courtney, *20/20 Foresight: Crafting Strategy in an Uncertain World*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 2001, p. 1.

There is little acceptable alternative to the ambiguity of probability-based scenarios. It is increasingly regarded as inevitable at a time when

> we are now emerging into another cultural epoch [where] it seems futile to suggest what lies in store fifty years into the future. However, there is a way to prepare for the unexpected so that the appropriate transition is facilitated even if it cannot be foreseen.[43]

The adaptive organization

Many organizations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities make efforts to plan and even to develop longer-term strategies. While one might question whether such planning and strategizing are sufficiently long-term or adequately speculative,[44] there is nevertheless a clear effort by many to set out objectives that reflect assumptions about the values that the organization wishes to pursue, the context in which such values will be pursued, and the ways that it intends to do so. In this context, the difference between an adaptive and a maladaptive organization is indicated by four 'tests': i) the extent to which plans and strategies are understood within and across the organization; ii) the degree to which such plans and strategies relate to the organization's operational activities; iii) the extent to which the assumptions that underpin plans and strategies are regularly reviewed; and iv) the extent to which the results of reviews 'feed back' into operational activities.

The barriers to passing such tests are well known for all who have worked in even small, let alone large, organizations. It is worth reflecting on at least some of these barriers and some possible solutions.

Cross-system organizations

The admission by one large US-based non-governmental organization that there was no real cross-over between the organization's vice-president for policy and the vice-president responsible for emergencies is indicative of the sorts of challenges that organizations face.[45] In this context, organizations may wish to look at recent business experiments with knowledge networks and communities of practice. These two types of structures mesh, based upon recognized needs to share information ('common ground') in order to achieve common goals, purposes, and objectives. Knowledge networks and communities of practice are non-hierarchical, fluid, interactive, and – as opposed to many aspects of organizational behaviour – non-judgmental. As Olson and Sarmiento point out, the world of disaster risk reduction is a key theme for such networks. The field is changing so quickly, according to these

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43   Brian Goodwin, 'In the shadow of culture', in J. Brockman (ed.), *The Next Fifty Years: Science in the First Half of the Twenty-first Century*, Vintage Books, New York, 2002, p. 42.

44   The problem for many planners is that they assume that a plan must reflect relatively firm and fixed steps for a defined period of time. Hence, when one busy executive argued that anyone nowadays with a five or ten year plan is 'probably crazy', he implied that to plan one had to be relatively certain about the environment in which one was operating H. Courtney, above note 42, p. 160.

45   This is based upon a consultancy dealing with preparing for pandemics undertaken by this author in 2005.

authors, that one needs a far quicker and more interactive process than standard organizations can normally provide. Agility is vital.[46]

Promoting inter-disciplinary methodologies

In a related vein, it is highly likely that every humanitarian organization that provides some form of technical assistance has experienced the gulf between its technical experts and its policy-makers and decision-makers. It might be amusing when management – at headquarters or at field level – is teased for not understanding the implications of the 'techies'' language. Those small groups of experts that only understand each other are important, but at the same time the conceptual and linguistic distance between them and others in the organization can prove a serious constraint on broad-based organizational understanding – about the present and about the future.

Every effort at inter-disciplinary analysis faces the hardship of bringing to bear the full weight of relevant perspectives without over-simplifying or diluting the contribution of each individual discipline. It is a test rarely satisfied completely, except perhaps in the planning and making of policy on matters that are principally technical in nature.[47] All too often, though, even the concept of collaboration poses a difficult initial barrier.

One fundamental problem that needs to be confronted in promoting inter-disciplinary methodologies is that of language. It is a well-known issue, yet continues to hamper the contribution of science to the planning process.[48] The mutual challenge for the pure sciences, social sciences, and planners is to break down the language barriers that hinder the establishment of synergy, which is so necessary to understanding and responding to the dynamics of change.

Reducing the impact of unanticipated options

Those responsible for strategic planning and policy formulation need to communicate regularly with decision-makers to ensure that 'the future' fits into a pattern of events that will not come as a surprise. In a recent review of approaches

46 Richard S. Olson and Juan Pablo Sarmiento, *Communities of Practice and Disaster Risk Reduction* (forthcoming). See also Etienne C. Wenger, 'Communities of practice: a brief introduction', available at: http://www.ewenger.com/theory/ (last visited 10 November 2008).

47 It is interesting to note that studies by the RAND Corporation and British Telecommunications Research suggest that technological change will be enhanced by 'multidisciplinary trends and interactions'. See Philip S. Anton, *The Global Technology Revolution: Bio/Nano/Materials Trends and their Synergies with Information Technology by 2013*, prepared for the National Intelligence Council, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2001, p. 35, available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1307.pdf (last visited December 2011). As Ian Pearson has said, 'positive feedback', or the way that technologies will inter-relate and interact, means that different technological disciplines will result in an acceleration of overall technological advance. See Ian D. Pearson, 'What's next?', in *BT Technicology Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4, October 2001, p. 101.

48 Gregory E. van der Vink, 'Scientifically illiterate vs. politically clueless', in *Science*, Vol. 276, 23 May 1997, p. 1175; David E. Blockstein, 'How to lose your political virginity while keeping your scientific credibility', in *BioScience*, Vol. 52, No. 1, January 2002, p. 92.

to strategic planning in post-conflict environments, representatives of the British government's Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Department for International Development agreed that one of the difficulties facing decision-makers is that issues and options are 'dropped on them' with little familiarity and without any frame of reference. In that sense, lack of familiarity relates to what had earlier been described as perceived utility and relevance.

Many participants argued that the inclination of decision-makers working under extreme pressure is to discard issues and options with which they are not familiar. Conversely, a way around this barrier would be to introduce means by which senior decision-makers were regularly briefed on trends and their implications – in order to enhance familiarity and reduce the potential dissonance created by unanticipated analyses, options, and proposals.[49]

Innovation and innovative practices

The importance of innovation and of adopting innovative practices has been emphasized in various ways throughout this article. White has remarked that:

> Currently, humanitarian organizations – responsible for implementing projects over a relatively short time frame (usually 12 to 18 months) – have little time to observe and reflect on the profile and changing needs of their 'customers' and on the efficacy of their implementation of goods and services.[50]

That said, there is no doubt that a growing number of scientific and technological innovations have the potential to expand policy-makers' capacities to prevent as well as to anticipate and respond to ever more complex humanitarian crises. The challenge for those involved in humanitarian policy and practice is how to identify, prioritize, and implement innovation and innovative practices when the very nature of both – as the mobile telephone phenomenon clearly demonstrates – can be so unpredictable.

Despite this challenge, there are ways in which organizations can identify, prioritize, and implement innovation and innovative practices more effectively than they do at present. In the first place, most organizations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities need to devote more time to studying the nature of the problems that they wish to resolve. Second, most need to recognize the fact that innovations and innovative practices that might be relevant to their concerns and needs will probably come from sources well outside the conventional humanitarian sector, reinforcing the importance of what were referred to above as knowledge networks and communities of practice. Finally, the policy-maker seeking appropriate innovation and innovative practices will also have to go to those who, in a seemingly paradoxical way, understand innovation and innovative practices as well as, if not

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49 Personal communication, December 2003.
50 Stacey White, 'Turning ideas into action: innovation within the humanitarian sector – a think-piece for the HFP Stakeholders Forum', Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London, 2008, available at: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/sites/default/files/InnovationsThinkPiece.pdf (last visited December 2011).

better than, most: namely, the vulnerable, who survive in extreme conditions very often because of their ability to innovate. As Lasker points out, it is the innovative capacities of vulnerable populations in situations such as Hurricane Katrina that are too often ignored by presumed experts.[51]

The anticipatory organization will be far more speculative not only about the 'what might be's', but also about the potential means to offset them. 'Exploration competence', or the ability to harvest ideas and expertise from a wide array of sources, is vital for staying on top of innovations and their implications, according to the authors of *Radical Innovation*.[52] Yet Wolpert warns that innovation is all too often 'internalized' and the essential external cross-fertilization necessary to maintain focus and development of ideas is sacrificed to insular institutional interests.[53] Adaptive organizations will need to develop open information and communication linkages with new types of partner, institutionally (e.g. commercial, non-governmental organizations) as well as geographically. They will also need to find ways to institute 'a new kind of go-between', such as knowledge networks and communities of practice, that will be responsible for ensuring the exchange and incorporation into planning processes of trends and innovative ideas.[54]

At the same time, organizations need to make greater efforts to identify and help scale up innovations and innovative practices that can be found within vulnerable communities. With that in mind, 'one method is to learn from the people most immersed in a problem'. This advice from a highly experienced senior civil servant in the United Kingdom underscores the point that:

> Anyone seeking to find an answer to the management of chronic diseases or alienation amongst teenagers may do best by looking at how people are themselves solving their problems, and starting from the presumption that they are 'competent interpreters' of their own lives.[55]

The challenge in this context is to ensure that organizations accept the premise that 'customer-led' approaches are essential to adopting appropriate innovative practices. The potential range of innovations and innovative practices that stem from community-based initiatives is impressive, but too often overlooked by those very external actors who ostensibly have community interests at heart. However, when it comes to vulnerability reduction and disaster preparedness, community-led initiatives can be the starting point.[56]

51 Roz Lasker, *The Expert's Blindspot*, available at: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/tools/mediacent/film/experstblindspot (last visited December 2011).
52 Richard Leifer, *et al.*, *Radical Innovation: How Mature Companies Can Outsmart Upstarts*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 2000.
53 John D. Wolpert, 'Breaking out of the innovation box', in *Harvard Business Review*, Special Innovation Edition, Vol. 80, No. 8, August 2002, p. 78.
54 *Ibid.*, pp. 81 ff.
55 Geoff Mulgan, *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.
56 See Kamal Kar, with Robert Chambers, *Handbook on Community-led Total Sanitation*, Plan International UK, London, 2008, available at: http://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/resource/handbook-community-led-total-sanitation (last visited 12 December 2011). See also King's College, *Talking*

New forms of collaboration

Looking to the spectre of future crises and solutions, it is quite plausible that the humanitarian sector as presently configured does not have the capacity needed to deal with what were described above as the changing types, dimensions, and dynamics of humanitarian threats.[57] In other words, capacity to deal with future threats, to enhance anticipatory and adaptive abilities, and to promote innovation and innovative practices emerges as one of the major challenges for those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities. With that in mind, the issue of capacity directly links to the collaborative partnerships and networks that humanitarian organizations need to develop, and the assumptions that humanitarian actors make about the humanitarian potential of 'non-traditional humanitarian actors'. These non-traditional actors encompass a bevy of new bilateral donors and regional organizations, the military, an extensive range of private sector organizations, the diaspora, so-called 'non-state actors', and virtual online crowd-sourcing and crowd-funding networks.

As the number of such non-traditional humanitarian actors is growing, the challenge for traditional humanitarian actors is how best to engage with them, how to identify the added value that they can bring and their comparative advantages. Similarly, as non-traditional actors become increasingly engaged in humanitarian action, they, too, will have to have a better understanding of the value and benefits of collaborating with those who have, up till now, been regarded as the mainstay of traditional humanitarian action.

There are various hurdles that have to be overcome to foster effective collaboration. One of these concerns 'language'. It is very evident that non-traditional and traditional actors have to have a clearer understanding about what the other means when it comes to engaging in humanitarian affairs. The issue of language can be as simple as the differences in terminology: for example, the private sector's use of 'continuity planning', which for many in the humanitarian sector translates into disaster risk reduction and preparedness. Below such linguistic differences, however, lies a far more complex issue, namely that of perceived motives. In the case of private sector–humanitarian relations, the relationship remains fraught with suspicion about the motives of each.[58] In this regard, there is a crescendo of calls for platforms at community and national levels in which humanitarian policy-makers, private sector representatives, and those from humanitarian and other concerned organizations can discuss openly what each has to offer.[59]

Science, Talking Sense, Humanitarian Futures Programme, London, 2011, available at: http://www.humanitarian futures.org/content/talking-science-talking-sense (last visited December 2011).

57 See, for example, P. Harvey *et al.*, above note 7.

58 Joanne Burke and Randolph Kent, *Commercial and Humanitarian Engagement in Crisis Contexts: Current Trends, Future Drivers*, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London, June 2011, available at: http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/sites/default/files/Commercial%20and%20 Humanitarian%20Engagement%20(EXEC%20SUMM.).pdf (last visited December 2011).

59 A study on the engagement of the private sector in humanitarian action is being led by the Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London. It focuses on the role of global, regional, and national 'platforms' in supporting the private sector to play an effective humanitarian role. Historically, there have

A second such hurdle involves understanding the intrinsic capacities of non-traditional actors, which too often are not recognized by humanitarian practitioners. It is interesting to note, for example, that discussions about the added value supplied by the military in humanitarian action normally boils down to logistics, lift capacities (in terms of humanitarian operations, the amount of weight that can be lifted normally from pallets or from the ground, usually by helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft), and protecting civilians in armed conflict. While this sort of support can indeed be operationally important, for the twenty-first-century humanitarian organization the military's potential added value should also include its strategic capacity and its surge capacity (the ability to intensify operational resources to meet an unanticipated crisis), as well as its ability to undertake institution-wide transformation when it comes to adopting innovations and innovative practices.

A third hurdle relates to the ways in which traditional humanitarian organizations engage with a variety of different actors who form part of loose networks or disparate groupings. One such case is provided by diaspora-based communities. The dependence in many vulnerable countries upon the flow of remittances from families residing overseas is well known.[60] It is interesting to note, however, that, while the remittance and diaspora phenomena are recognized for their importance, few humanitarian organizations use such networks as early warning systems that indicate the onset of crises or as means to undertake support operations to provide assistance in complex relief settings.[61] Towards this end, social networking offers additional opportunities to engage with such communities of non-traditional actors more consistently and system-atically.

been multiple obstacles that have impeded private sector involvement in humanitarian action, including differences in terminology, methodologies, procedures, and timescales. As a result, 'the debate rarely moves beyond general calls for more strategic collaboration with humanitarian actors and for a better understanding of the role and added-value of each sector. Therefore, this study will take this discussion to a new level, producing practical ways of "going beyond the problem" and options on the role that platforms can play in helping the private sector to engage more strategically in humanitarian action' (see http://www.humanitarianfutures.org/content/supporting-private-sector-take-active-humanitarian-role-–-joanne-burke-partnerships-manager- (last visited December 2011).

60   On 15 January 2010, the US Department of Homeland Security announced that it would grant certain Haitian nationals in the United States temporary legal status and permission to work, a designation known as 'temporary protected status'. This, among other things, recognized the importance of maintaining the flow of remittances from the Haitian diaspora to their families in Haiti. Muzaffar Chishti and Claire Bergeron, 'Haiti tragedy raises important immigration issues for the United States', in *Migration Information Source*, 16 February 2010, Migration Policy Institute, Washington DC, available at: http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=771 (last visited 12 December 2011).

61   Randolph Kent and Karin von Hippel, with Mark Bradbury, *Social Facilitation, Development and the Diaspora: Support for Sustainable Health Services in Somalia*, Report for the US Agency for International Development, International Policy Institute, King's College, London, November 2004, available at: http://csis.org/images/stories/pcr/04_hippel_somalia.pdf (last visited December 2011).

Strategic leadership and the enabling environment

In Amartya Sen's review of William Easterly's *The White Man's Burden*, he borrows Easterly's distinction between 'planners' and 'searchers'.[62] The former incarcerate those whom they wish to assist in pre-set planning frameworks and solutions, while the latter are more willing to listen and understand local conditions and needs, and what might be wanted and when. In a world in which complexity and interconnectedness make top-down strategies obsolete, the planner is not an appropriate strategic leader, and the searcher is.

Strategic leadership in the twenty-first century needs, in the first instance, to change present approaches to planning and to focus upon three broad issues: i) new-style planning processes reflecting a range of key uncertainties likely to be faced in obtaining core value-driven goals; ii) diffuse and 'flatter' forms of leadership, where strategic leadership does not collide with 'managerialism', and is sustained by different leaders at various levels; and iii) blending of traditional leadership strengths with new dimensions of leadership.

Strategic leaders of the future will need to position themselves at the node where different networks connect, or where there is maximum overlap between the elements of a collaborative Venn diagram. They will need skills to build multi-sectoral collaborative networks, and also to enable others to learn from them. The strategic leader will have the ability to identify and seize opportunities for innovation, and through 'stakeholders' net assessments' will be better able to understand the value that he or she brings to stakeholders and the value that they in turn bring. Future strategic leaders will have to move beyond their traditional comfort zones and embrace the ambiguity that reflects reality, and consequently will have to develop appropriate anticipatory and adaptive skills.

Strategic leadership in the humanitarian sector will therefore require at least five competencies for enhancing the overall value and purpose of the humanitarian sector in general and humanitarian organizations in particular: i) *envisioning*, or the ability to identify and articulate value-driven goals that have overarching importance for the leader's own organization and a wider community; ii) *posing the critical question*, or the ability to challenge certitudes and seek alternative explanations; iii) *externalization*, or networking on a multi-sectoral and interactive basis; iv) *communication*, or disseminating value-driven goals in ways that become deeply embedded in the objectives of the organization as a whole; and v) *listening*, or the confidence never to pass up the opportunity to remain silent.

Strategic leaders and the organizations that they seek to guide will understand that the emerging agenda that will enable them to be relevant in a rapidly unfolding and ever more complex humanitarian future will not be merely an extension of the past. It will be a future that will require a much greater capacity to listen, to speculate, to network, and ultimately to be responsive to rapidly changing events and contexts. It will require *planning from the future*.

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62 Amartya Sen, 'The man without a plan', in *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006, available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61525/amartya-sen/the-man-without-a-plan (last visited 10 December 2011).