The Future of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Humanitarian Sector

Global Transformations and Their Consequences

Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) Discussion Paper for the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA)

Executive Summary

Penultimate Draft
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The Humanitarian Futures Programme, King’s College, London, is grateful to the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies for the opportunity of sharing views about the future of non-governmental organisations in the humanitarian sector in anticipation of the CBHA’s May 2013 board retreat.

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This paper is presented as a penultimate draft to allow for the incorporation of feedback from the CBHA board and other selected key informants.

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

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The Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CHBA) consists of eighteen NGOs¹, representing a node in an international civil society network which extends to over 4000 organisations, working in over 200 countries and territories. The consortium was formed in 2010 with an initial two year pilot grant from the UK Department for International Development. The long term vision is to strengthen civil society’s pro-active capacity to respond and prepare for crises, to transform the way NGOs approach capacity building, and to create platforms through which humanitarian actors can collaborate. These objectives aim to help civil society innovate, adapt and respond to the growing demands of the future.

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Executive Summary

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

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

Section II: The changing global context proceeds with the assumption that global change is not happening incrementally but rather exponentially. For NGOs in the future this has to be seen in the context of (i) the post-Western hegemon, (ii) the political centrality of humanitarian crises, (iii) the globalisation paradox, (iv) the resurgence of sovereignty and (v) emerging technologies and their consequences.

The post-Western hegemon. A continuing blindspot in the world of traditional humanitarian policymakers is reflected not only in the ways that they identify potential risks and solutions, but also in the assumptions they make about the context in which such risks and solutions might occur. This is not to say, for example, that they are not aware of the rise of such emerging powers as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, 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 to find ways to have traditional systems and approaches fit into new contexts instead of seeking new systems and approaches for accommodating changing contexts.

Political centrality of humanitarian crises. Today, humanitarian crises now have far greater political significance than they had in much of the latter part of the 20th century; and, as Hurricane

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

Daniel Kahneman – Nobel laureate
Katrina in 2005 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill five years later demonstrated, even the most powerful governments have to deal with serious reputational and ‘survival’ issues if they fail to respond adequately to humanitarian crises. As humanitarian crises move to centre-stage of governmental interests, they are imbued with high levels of political significance – both domestically and internationally. While a government’s survival may depend upon the way it responds to a humanitarian crisis, the way that other governments and international actors respond to that crisis will, too, have increasingly political consequence.

The globalisation paradox. There is a ‘globalization paradox’, namely, that the more globalized the world becomes, the more ‘localized’ it will also be. This is increasingly countered by new waves of nationalism, 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. Governments of crisis-affected states will become increasingly wary of those outside humanitarian organizations who feel that their biggest contributions will stem from ‘boots on the ground.’ In those instances where external involvement is acceptable, prerequisites might include proven competencies in local languages and an appreciation of local culture. Increasingly, external assistance will be driven less by supply and more by demand, and the conduit for such assistance might well be through acceptable regional organizations rather than the UN system or Western consortia.

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

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

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

Section III: The expanding nature of humanitarian crises assumes that the types of crisis drivers and ultimately the types of crises that need to be anticipated will change in many respects the concept of vulnerability. In a very fundamental way, assumptions about the nature of ‘hazard prone countries,’ hazard propensities and the vulnerable, themselves, will have to be reassessed as one begins to speculate about the changing types of crises drivers and their dimensions and dynamics. With this in mind, Section III considers (i) the types of crises that will have to be faced, (ii) their dimensions and dynamics, and (iii) the capacities challenge that such factors will pose for the humanitarian sector.
Types of future humanitarian crisis drivers. The dimensions and dynamics of conventional crisis drivers, such as volcanic eruptions, floods and earthquakes, will increase exponentially, principally because of a confluence of these hazards with what can be described as ‘context factors.’ The short-term perspectives of government policy-makers as well as the effects of environmental changes, including climate change, will further exacerbate the potential impact of these standard crisis drivers. They will join a growing number of technological and infrastructural threats that will intensify vulnerability across the globe. Such crisis drivers may in turn add to the fragility of states, intensify disillusion about government interests and competencies, exacerbate ethnic and social divides, generate large-scale flows of migration and ultimately may end in violence and conflict within and across borders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Funding in the future.** There are a host of challenges that surround the issue of funding in the future. One example is that NGOs will have to deal with a paradox that inevitably will impinge upon future funding. Increasingly their value-addeds will be underpinned by promoting trust between partners encompassing a broad spectrum of actors. The paradox, therefore, will emerge when the persistent search for funds, perceived as necessary for NGOs to maintain their influence, undermines potential partners’ sense of trust. Other funding challenges will arise when NGOs also will have to confront the full implications of social networking technologies where, for example, crowd-sourcing projects will enable donations to be filtered ‘directly’ to projects without an NGO intermediary. A further consideration – one by no means unknown to NGOs today – is that traditional donor government sources may in the foreseeable future be on the wane. As part of this trend, the roles that NGOs might see for themselves in the future, possibly less focused on direct operations “in the field,” may not be as compelling for traditional donors as the perceived role of NGOs as deliverers. Furthermore, “non-traditional” donor governments may be inclined to fund their own, more ‘local’ NGOs, and similarly private sector organisations may replace NGO actors and also may feel more interested in funding local partners.

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

**New types of dialogues.** Innovations and innovative practices, so increasingly essential for humanitarian NGOs interested in dealing with
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future challenges, suggests the importance of promoting dialogues between the sciences and humanitarian actors. That sort of dialogue should not be seen as ‘one-offs,’ but its importance will lie in systematic interaction. Similarly, the NGO of the future will look more and more for ways ‘to discuss’ how the core business of the private sector can enhance NGO efforts to reduce vulnerability and foster resilience. In noting these two sectors, the reality is that the number of partnerships that will deserve greater interaction between NGOs and others is considerable, but the key point is to identify with whom one should engage consistently and systematically over time.

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

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

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

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

Purveyors of expertise and innovation. Replacing a ‘boots on the ground’ mindset with a commitment to providing innovations and innovative practices to help countries and communities deal with ever more complex crisis threats is an NGO model that will increasingly be valued by a growing number of governments and regional authorities. The NGO of the future will understand that much of this capacity-building and knowledge transfer can be done on-line as well as in-country;
**Integrated platforms.** Based principally in areas of anticipated vulnerability, NGOs could facilitate the creation of platforms that would consist of a range of potential responders and providers from, for example, the private sector, local authorities and communities that would undertake, monitor and test prevention and preparedness planning on a regular and systematic basis.

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

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

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

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

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