

ESSAYS

Old-World Humanitarianism Faces New-World Challenges

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Lord Mark Malloch-Brown

Foreword

by Owen Barder

In this essay, Lord Malloch-Brown, a CGD board member, explores the theme “Old-World Humanitarianism Faces New-World Challenges.”

Lord Malloch-Brown suggests that we have come too readily to accept failure in humanitarian aid. He reminds us that the problems of the humanitarian system are “at the smaller end of the world’s problems,” and yet tackling them would make a big difference for the people affected. He asks whether the humanitarian community currently has the mandate, competencies, and resources necessary to address these challenges. He calls for a collective restatement of the world’s responsibility to help the victims of conflict and disaster, and for a reinvention of the agencies which dominate the humanitarian system.

The World Humanitarian Summit, which will take place in Istanbul in 2016, is an opportunity for the world to rise to Lord Malloch-Brown’s challenges.

I have the privilege of chairing the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, which is exploring the use of cash transfers for humanitarian assistance and what this could mean for national and international humanitarian organisations. In many, though not all circumstances, meeting basic needs primarily through cash promises more effective and efficient assistance which gives people affected by disasters greater choice, dignity, and control in rebuilding their lives. Much greater use of cash transfers may well contribute to the reinvention of the system of humanitarian assistance for which Lord Malloch-Brown calls in this essay.

Mark Malloch Brown has experience and knowledge which entitles him to be listened to carefully. Internationally he is best known for his time as deputy secretary-general and chief of staff of the UN under Kofi Annan. But his connection with humanitarian work goes back a long way: in the 1970s and 1980s he worked in Thailand for the UN High Commission for Refugees, where he supervised the construction of refugee camps for Cambodian refugees. Later on he served as the administrator of the UNDP, leading the UN’s development efforts around the world. He went on to be minister of state in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, covering Africa and Asia, in which position he was a member of Gordon Brown’s cabinet. He has also been vice-chairman of George Soros’s Investment Funds, as well as his Open Society Institute; a vice-president at the World Bank; the lead international partner at Sawyer Miller, a political consulting firm; and vice-chairman of the World Economic Forum. He now sits in the House of Lords and remains active in the business and nonprofit spheres.

A World Humanitarian Summit is to be held in May 2016 in Istanbul. Those involved in humanitarian work are looking to it to provide new direction. And rightly so, as with the right kind of support we could, as an international community, easily do better in this area. We have allowed ourselves to believe the hype that surrounds each tragic disaster of earthquake or persecution and to fall into the comfortable excuse that these vast complex disasters have to overwhelm us. Images of teeming victims have sowed the idea that these disasters are too big to do anything but fail.

In fact refugees and victims of natural disasters account for such a small fraction of the world population, less than half a percent. There is no excuse for not providing adequate timely funding for disasters whose numbers if not locations are relatively predictable. The costs are manageable, or at least they are a fraction of, say, the costs of ending poverty or combating climate change. This is at the easier end of world problems. And therefore fashioning the political will to act in a timely and effective way should be possible.

If there is a second deterrent to action, beyond an impression of overwhelming size, it is a sense that even when we do act we are not always that effective, that we are either too late to save lives or that we bustle in with help which serves to undermine the victims' self-sufficiency, making them dependent on camps or other forms of debilitating long-term help. To counter this, we need to make the case that these problems are both manageable and temporary. There are solutions available, even when, as is currently the case with Syria, the UN Security Council denies the humanitarian community a proper mandate to reach and help the victims. We do not have to create a growing mountain of human displacement and dependency. There are answers.

At the end of the 1970s, I found myself in the midst of the Indochinese refugee crisis. By boat and land the losers, allies of America in its war against the North Vietnamese, poured into the neighbouring countries of South East Asia. There were widespread fears of a huge wave of illegal immigration that might virtually empty out Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and throw a huge burden of care and resettlement on their neighbours as well as further away destinations such as the United States, Europe, Canada, and Australia. There was agonised debate about doing the right things for these victims of American defeat and Communist triumph versus the risks of encouraging even more to leave; of making the problem worse and of overwhelming social services and local employment opportunities. I heard the same fears next door in Thailand and across the world in the United States.



Vietnamese refugees on US carrier, Operation Frequent Wind. Wikimedia Commons.

Over 35 years later it looks a little different. That diaspora has paid for itself many times over as the refugees, and particularly their children, have become economic dynamos wherever they settled. The hard work and struggle to assimilate has made for yet another immigrant success story. There were problems, such as the difficulties of the Laotian Hill Tribe refugees who were, even at that dangerous time, particularly reluctant refugees, nursing strong ties to the mountains of Laos that were their rural heritage. But the vast majority of the caseload has long since thrown off the weight of the past, relishing the challenges and opportunities of their new homes. In the United States, 1.2 million Vietnamese refugees transformed many business and retail sectors, whilst also receiving the lowest rate of public assistance among Southeast Asian groups. [i] Many of their children have continued with the same energy, taking on further roles as entrepreneurs and innovators by using the networks of family capital and trust that shared adversity reinforced.

The United Kingdom experienced a smaller but no less instructive set of new arrivals in the form of the 28,000 Ugandan Asians, admitted over three months in 1972, after many more were expelled by Idi Amin. Just four years after Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, the British government of the time was initially reluctant to accept the refugees, despite the fact that many of them held valid British passports. But, as with the Vietnamese diaspora, initial fears ultimately proved unfounded: despite the trauma of exile, widespread confiscation of capital by Amin, and the often hostile environment of 1970s Britain, many found work and thrived, especially in entrepreneurial sectors. A study in 1996 found that 37 percent of men in the cohort had found managerial positions just nine years after arriving. [ii] Today the events of 1972 are not often remarked upon in the United Kingdom, and Ugandan Asians or their descendants occupy top positions in many different areas of public and business life.

It has also been a surprise to see how many of both these refugee groups seized the opportunity to go home when politics allowed, and indeed a later Ugandan Government wanted back the entrepreneurship and capital that Idi Amin had so willfully cast out. Similarly, as the long process of rebuilding followed by dynamic growth and economic advance has occurred in Indo China, the original refugees and their children have in many cases made their way home. On a visit to Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, I was amazed to be greeted by ex-refugees who remembered me from the camps. Even a presidential adviser broke the formality of a meeting with his boss to greet me. Even more extraordinarily, he was working for a man whose first actions as national leader years earlier had been part of the reason why men like the adviser had fled in the first place.

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I make these points because when refugee and other humanitarian crises come crashing into our conscience, the tenor of the discussion is usually “burden and problem without solution.” The refugees will never go home, it is too easily assumed, and like migrants more generally, will take jobs and housing away from locals. And if there is anxiety about refugees fleeing a justified fear of persecution, then that anxiety is intensified when refugees are confused with the much bigger, less containable flow of economic migrants. This has taken European and American politics in strange and angry directions. In the United States, immigration reform has defied congressional solution eased only, and controversially, by presidential executive action. But such actions have adversely impacted generosity towards refugees. Political debate is now a long way from US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s affirmation in 1979 that, “we are a nation of refugees.” Yet America is so self-evidently a nation built on immigration and has built arguably still the most successful nation on Earth on that immigrant foundation.

But emotion often swamps evidence when it comes to such matters. And while in fact western countries, led by the United States and United Kingdom, have always been generous providers of humanitarian assistance to distant human dramas of displacement and exodus, when the problem laps too close to the home shores other instincts too often come out on top.

One derivative of this is the refugee problem tends to get magnified. There are, by UNHCR’s count, just over 51 million people homeless and displaced either inside their countries or abroad by political upheaval or fear of persecution. [\[iii\]](#) That is the most since the post–Second World War period, but it is still a fractional proportion of global population.



Boys at a camp for displaced Syrians,
in the village of Atmeh, Syria, Monday,
Dec. 10, 2012. CC BY 2.0 / SyriaFreedom

But while this may be a small problem globally, it is a big problem locally: for the affected countries, the numbers are often overwhelming. But this only makes it all the more rational for us to better share the costs and responsibilities, rather than let troubles intensify in certain areas. Lebanon, next door to Syria, has 257 refugees for each 1,000 of its own population. [\[iv\]](#) Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt share the burden of Syrian refugees with Lebanon. For each, the economic and political costs are severe. And although there has been significant financial support, the faltering international political attempts to end the civil war in Syria have, for the most part, treated the worst humanitarian and refugee crisis in decades as a sideshow. And the affected countries would count neither the money nor the political support as adequate.

“Natural” disasters, those purportedly generated by weather or geology, claim more victims. While the numbers vary year by year, since 2008 there has been an average of 200 million or so people annually affected. [\[v\]](#) Some 80 percent of those so severely hit that they are forced to move are, most years, in Asia. [\[vi\]](#) That considerably exceeds Asia’s share in population terms. It reflects how “unnatural” these disasters increasingly are. It’s the pressure of demography on a straining resource base of water, food, forest, and land that can turn a small flood or earthquake into a mass killer. Whether it was the 2015 earthquake in Nepal which struck Kathmandu as well as more outlying areas or the terrible earthquake of 2010 in Haiti which devastated that country’s capital Port-au-Prince, natural disasters exploit the growing weaknesses of human settlement and governance.

And as the world becomes more urbanised, so do its natural disasters. This means that different responses are needed. Instead of long, snaking logistic lines with light relief goods seeking to reach dispersed rural populations, the new disaster relief images are often of cranes, bulldozers, and other heavy earth-moving equipment desperately trying to clear urban rubble as victims lie buried beneath. And as cities become the secular Mecca of modern life, refugees will head to them if they can. All major recent refugee flows have ended up swelling city populations. [\[vii\]](#) In cities there are more opportunities for work, legal or otherwise, and for some degree of self-sufficiency. By contrast, refugee camps smack of incarceration and cut people off from opportunities of empowerment or assimilation. As Palestinian or Afghan refugees show, families can become stuck in camps for generations after their initial displacement.

Behind this urbanisation lies an increasing demand for the food, water ,and energy. Rapidly urbanising populations tend towards higher resource consumption per capita than their rural counterparts. Urban expansion is one of the primary causes of habitat loss and

species extinction, destroying forest cover and leading to increased water consumption and CO₂ emissions. [viii] The growing risks of environmental disasters are linked to our changing lives, both in precipitating them and leaving us more vulnerable to them.

What is concerning today is the Venn Diagram-like coincidence between conflict and environmental disaster: in 33 out of 36 countries that experienced armed conflict between 2008 and 2012, there were also people who were forced to leave their homes because of natural hazards. [ix] At the heart of this blurring between the natural and the man made is the shared condition of weak states and a failing economy. Ebola in 2014 challenged a wider West Africa, but it took root, and did the most damage, in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. It was held at bay or quickly expelled from better-organised and more prosperous neighbours like Nigeria and Senegal. Haiti and Nepal, the scenes of devastating earthquakes, were particularly vulnerable because of chaotic and ineffective planning codes that allowed bad homes to be built in geologically dangerous areas.



Members of a burial team disinfect each other after they carried the body of a suspected Ebola victim in a new cemetery. CC BY-ND 2.0/ UNMEER

How do we, as an international community, deal with this? A good place to start is to see these crises, whether they are the consequence of political commission or incompetent omission, as the tragic by-product of broader changes in the global political economy. They are concentrated in countries that have been left behind, or in places where the politics labours under a legacy of sectarian or ethnic suspicion that has too often been reignited by modern political leadership. Iraq, the Middle East more broadly, former Yugoslavia, and a range of modern African crises share the embers of old grievance fanned by new leaders.

And, like the refugee flows they set in motion, these disasters do not need to be overwhelming in the way they are often presented. The bigger natural disasters, in terms of population impact, can be mitigated by often simple prevention. Bangladesh used to lose tens of thousands to annual monsoon flooding through its funnel-shaped land that brought the Ganges sweeping through Dacca its capital. Now disciplined and well-rehearsed early warning systems along with improvements in housing design have cut death tolls from over 2,300 in 1988 to just 17 during a comparable flood in 2014. [x] Obviously other changes where a city has allowed urban sprawl into flood or earthquake prone areas will be more costly to correct, but hardly insuperable.

On the refugee side, 38 million of those 51 million people fleeing persecution remain in another part of their country of origin, which means they are not even thrown directly onto the mercies of the international community. The maintenance costs are an affordable toll on a world which finds itself forced to tolerate stubborn pockets of conflict and coercive rule. Of course, the danger is when the charge on donors becomes permanent, and the situation of refugees is allowed to settle into a long-term exile.

But a measure of hope can be found in the fact that there are really just a small handful of refugee-producing countries. UNHCR, which does not include Palestinians, who are tragic multi-generational refugees, in its mandate or therefore its statistics, points out that 78 percent of its caseload is generated by just ten countries and that the top producer in this Rogues Gallery, Syria, produces almost a quarter. Combined with Afghanistan and Somalia, those three countries produce more than half of all refugees. [xi]

So, a much more vigorous effort to tackle the political roots of these disputes might have a disproportionate dividend. Obviously Afghanistan and Syria particularly have been at the receiving end of multiyear international military and development efforts to produce stability. But as a veteran of such efforts it is frustrating to acknowledge that Big Power interests have time and again thwarted real progress. Restoring a decent inclusive polity and an economy to support it has always played second fiddle to the Great Game

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dimension of international diplomacy. Outside powers are too often overly concerned with backing their own local proxies rather than finding workable compromises, and so resolving human suffering too often takes a back seat.

But it is also a little too glib to tell the world to bury its hatchets and encourage the local parties to do the same for the sake of the desperate civilians. Sometimes the hate runs too deep. But, even in these intractable situations, the case for a renewed humanitarian effort needs to be powerfully made. Perhaps we have the solutions but are reticent about using them.

This is because our starting points too often remain the wrong ones. We begin by still relying on a sizeable expatriate establishment. From Afghanistan to Somalia the security costs of development teams peering from behind heavily armed security details is prohibitive, but more importantly the psychological costs — when you are trying to sow a sense of local ownership and returning stability — are counterproductive. Our frontline needs to be made up of individuals with the social science and language skills to identify local partners and to align our financial support not just behind the metrics of aid delivery but, much more importantly, behind the incentives of local peace building.

These conflicts usually begin when neighbours are reminded by agitators of differences in religion or ethnicity that had lain dormant or at least remained manageable. The road back to peace lies in reversing that process through being reminded of the mutual human security that only comes from recovering respect and trust. That has to be as local a matter as possible. So squaring the circle of how to help without a retinue of international programme officers to guard and husband international assistance rests primarily on understanding that the task is only likely to succeed if the expatriate touch is light, focused intelligently on facilitating conflict resolution rather than the work of aid delivery. Indeed, the latter is best left to emerging local leaders who are informed about their communities and would benefit from the experience.

Fears that undersupervised dispersal of funds will lead to corruption may have some justice, although enough foreign contractors have been caught in Iraq and Afghanistan with their hands in the cookie jar, making it clear that the issue is not the nationality, or even the economic circumstances of those directing funds, but rather character and opportunity.

And opportunity can be reduced, even in circumstances of weak institutional controls, by two changed circumstances. The first is that move of victims to cities which puts them in touch with a much wider set of delivery systems for assistance than in the old camp settings. The private retail and financial sectors, local community groups, churches, and others offer pluralistic, adaptable, and competitive alternatives. And new technology offers dramatically improved ways of fine-tuning delivery controls. Notably, as in programmes to reach poorer citizens in countries such as Brazil or Mexico, government- or agency-issued debit cards can be used to give victims either direct access to cash, or to services in kind from approved providers. The same system has been used to help Syrian refugees in Turkey, who have been able to buy their food using World Food Program debit cards, empowering them and also contributing to the local Turkish economy.

The old images of white relief workers tipping rice bags off the back of trucks to outstretched black and brown hands should now be consigned to history. We have smarter ways of doing things, ways which don't just keep people alive but start to put lives back together. And innovative thinking about sufficiency and recovery should not stop there. Some 45 percent of five million refugees recently surveyed by UNHCR did not have a legal right to work. [\[xii\]](#) Given the economic contribution they are likely to make once engaged in the host economy, that is lost output. But increasingly tools of modern migration, temporary visas for skills, scholarships in third countries which don't confer long term rights of residence — all these may be part of an arsenal of how to take talented refugees off the bench and offer them skills and work experience in return for a commitment that they will come home when circumstances permit.

[\[xiii\]](#)

UNHCR began life after the First World War and its work dealt with finding solutions for individual refugees. They were like a large international law practice supporting the claim of their many refugees for asylum. It was in the chaotic decolonisation era of the sixties, and particularly the 1970s and 80s, that its character changed as I and many colleagues were recruited to provide survival support to mass movements of humanity. Out of urgent necessity, the skill set became that of the logistician or public health expert, rather than of the lawyer.

One value got trampled on in that change. We sometimes lost the capacity to look at the individual as we became slaves to the numbers. Caseloads became forbidding in their sheer size, and with that dehumanisation came dehumanising solutions. Again, technology strangely might offer an antidote. Not only has it revolutionised the old shoebox and filing card systems of family reunification after conflict, but it also can allow beneficiaries of assistance programmes a voice in determining their effectiveness: Ground Truth, for example, is one cell phone-based survey tool, which using deceptively simple questions, gauges victims' confidence and satisfaction in the assistance they are being offered. [\[xiv\]](#) These kinds of tools help shift the patronising paradigm of humanitarian aid, improving accountability, and as a result the services that refugees receive.

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Together, what I have just described are some of the steps towards changing refugees and IDPs from helpless victims into empowered seekers of fitting solutions to the challenges they face. It's all about accelerating that journey that I described at the start, of refugees and other victims of disaster and displacement from dependent to triumphantly independent; from burden to contributor — both in their own lives and in the way they are perceived by host states, donors, and international agencies. It sounds a bit glib, but we need to move the relationship between agency provider and refugee from victim to customer.

We also need to fashion a smoother transition from relief to development. This has been the bump in the road that has unseated too many operations. Different agencies with different mandates and budgetary sources have found it difficult to offer joined-up solutions that assist people to make that journey in a steady and seamless way.

There are two rails to international engagement which do need to be in place if we are to improve how we deal with these crises. The first is to be clear as an international community about the shared costs of these crises. They are a charge on us all. The neighbouring states usually bear the greatest cost as voluntary, or involuntary, host. There needs to be constant and steady financial backing, rather than annually negotiated funds, which arrive in reluctant dribs and drabs from donors, as this does not allow a thoughtful multiyear strategy for getting victims back on their feet. Programmes get trapped in a stop-start cycle of handouts as money becomes available or dries up. UNHCR needs have grown by 130 percent since 2009, but actual funding has only grown by 70 percent. [\[xv\]](#) And above all, as the relief phase ends, too often there is nobody there to pick up the development costs that follow.

There is a need for an international ethic of adequate help to those in situations of such extreme vulnerability. But it also needs a delivery system that is cost-effective and accountable. The international agencies, in this case the World Health Organisation, creaked their way through the Ebola crisis. The real response was pockets of effective local health professionals from the public and NGO sectors supported by bilateral donor governments and NGOs. The international agency — which claimed a mandate but had no competency in operation — was pushed to the side. All such large agencies face the same challenge of reinventing how they operate, who they help and how. That shift of large parts of caseloads to cities, the rise of new public and private actors, and the infiltration of technology into operations are pushing away from the mass relief of the past towards more individual-centred, but also more decentralised and networked, models of assistance.

The old hangs stubbornly on, however, in some places. In Syria conflict rages around those displaced inside and outside the country. And here the challenges remain how to deliver help to war-torn communities, some in cities but many in camps or scattered across the countryside. The UN Security Council has proved itself not up to the task of either making peace or at least imposing a duty of allowing humanitarian access on the combatants. Some 35 percent, or 7.6 million people, are displaced in the country. [\[xvi\]](#) It is, relatively, the most disruptive conflict in years. However, the compelling case for conscience overriding politics in bringing relief falls on deaf ears in a divided Security Council. The Russians won't desert their ally, President Assad, and the West will do nothing that could be construed as acknowledging his continued presence as President. So as the cocks strut their stuff the unbearable suffering is prolonged.

A diplomatic solution has always been only one small step away: Assad is allowed to represent his country at the beginning of peace negotiations, but there is a condition from the start that a transitional government that replaces his regime must be led and made up of individuals acceptable to all sides. So he then goes. But this diplomatic two-step was which has been on the table since Kofi Annan was the UN envoy in 2012 remains too much for the vanity and face of the different players to accept, so the conflict grinds on.

And in truth the Security Council's gridlock with a resurgent Russia, an assertive China, and the emergence of a range of underrepresented regional players is more generally beyond fixing by dab diplomatic finesse. It is in deeper trouble. And hence to the second part of a refashioning of international humanitarianism, that goes hand in hand with adequate predictable smart funding, and that is remaking the case for nonmilitary humanitarianism — not on the permission of the highly political and highly conflicted Security Council but rather on principles of international law. There is a well developed strand of principles and precedent for the protection of civilians in conflict, from the UN Refugee Convention, to human rights law more generally, and regional instruments such as the Constitutive Act of the African Union that could provide adequate grounds for nonpolitical assistance to victims of conflict without any reference to the Security Council.

Seeking the permission of such a highly political body for humanitarian operations is a relatively new development that came about as a result of the apparent consensus that had broken out in its ranks post-1989. It has proved a costly error. Recovering nonpolitical legitimacy and authority for a humanitarian activity that is divorced from the Security Council has become vital. Because even if Council members revert to pre-1989 attitudes, showing a convenient blind eye to such operations, combatants must also accept the neutrality and ethical and legal imperative to let such assistance through. Unarmed Red Cross or UN workers and their NGO allies need to be rebadged again with the sacrosanct status of noncombatants, allowed free movement and obliged to accept the neutral nature of their work.

Next year's World Humanitarian Summit seems a good time for a solemn international agreement that reasserts the world's responsibilities for stable funding and an inviolate right of access to victims of conflict and disaster, while at the same time insisting on

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a reinvention of the agencies that dominate this world, so that they can provide a better fit to urgent and changing needs. As I argued at the start, this is at the smaller end of the world's problems, but handled effectively it has a high return: making it possible for able, self-reliant people to resume their lives.

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[ii] Mayerlen Frow, *Roots of the Future: Ethnic Diversity in the Making of Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1996).

[iii] UNHCR, *UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2014* (2015), 3.

[iv] Ibid, 6.

[v] Debarati Guha-Sapir, Philippe Hoyois, and Regina Below, *Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2013: The Numbers and Trends* (Brussels: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, 2014), 4.

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[ix] *Global Estimates 2014*, 10

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[xiv] Nicholas Van Praag, "Ground Truth: How Frontline Workers See the Ebola Response in Sierra Leone," CDAC Network blog post, November 28, 2014, www.cdacnetwork.org/i/20141128165809-beqih.

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