

# PLANNING FROM THE FUTURE

Is the Humanitarian System Fit for Purpose?

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**HPG**

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Policy Group

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are the authors' own.

# Acronyms

<b>ACAPS</b>	Assessment Capacity Project	<b>HRR</b>	Humanitarian Response Review
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of East Asian Nations	<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>AU</b>	African Union	<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>CAP</b>	Consolidated Appeals Process	<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>CARE</b>	Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, later Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere and then Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere	<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organisation	<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>CMAM</b>	Community-based management of acute malnutrition	<b>IHL</b>	International Humanitarian Law
<b>CERF</b>	Central Emergency Response Fund	<b>IRL</b>	International Refugee Law
<b>CHS</b>	Common Humanitarian Standard	<b>ISP</b>	Internally stuck person
<b>CRB</b>	Committee for the Relief of Belgium	<b>MSF</b>	Médecins Sans Frontières
<b>CRED</b>	Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters	<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>CRS</b>	Catholic Relief Services	<b>NRC</b>	Norwegian Refugee Council
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development	<b>OCHA</b>	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
<b>DHA</b>	Department of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)	<b>ODA</b>	Official development assistance
<b>ECOSOC</b>	Economic and Social Council (UN)	<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>ELHRA</b>	Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance	<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>ERC</b>	Emergency Relief Coordinator	<b>OIC</b>	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization (UN)	<b>PFF</b>	Planning From the Future
<b>HAP</b>	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership	<b>PLA</b>	Chinese People's Liberation Army
<b>HEA</b>	Household economy approach	<b>RC</b>	Resident Coordinator (UN)
<b>GWOT</b>	Global War on Terror	<b>R2P</b>	Responsibility to Protect
<b>HC</b>	Humanitarian Coordinator (UN)	<b>RUF</b>	Rights Up Front initiative
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team	<b>TA</b>	Transformative Agenda
<b>HPG</b>	Humanitarian Policy Group	<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
		<b>UNISDR</b>	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
		<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
		<b>UNRRA</b>	Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UN)
		<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme (UN)
		<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

# Foreword

Four concerns explain the origins of the *Planning from the Future* project. The first is the increasingly accepted fact that, in the foreseeable future, humankind will be faced with unprecedented technological and societal change. These transformations may well have positive effects that will enhance the lives of a growing number of people around the world. At the same time, as with all such transformations, there, too, is a downside. That downside will be reflected in the vulnerabilities that are frequently concomitant with change. Hence, the second concern that led to the *Planning from the Future* project was the plausible prospect that the dimensions and dynamics of disasters and emergencies in the future will increase, perhaps even exponentially.

From this concern came the third. To what extent is the global community sensitive to such prospects? Beyond even those who are directly responsible for dealing with disasters and emergencies, is society more generally prepared to anticipate and mitigate the sources of future crisis drivers? Finally, this concern led to the more immediate issue that underpins the overall *Planning from the Future* project, namely what does the humanitarian sector's past and present record suggest about its capacity for adjusting and responding to rapid, complex change in the future?

We, the *Planning from the Future* partnership, believe that these concerns in general, but more specifically the last, need wherever possible to be brought to the attention of all those who have roles and responsibilities for dealing with ever-more complex and uncertain disasters and emergencies. In no sense are we suggesting that the analysis that follows is definitive, but we are suggesting that a debate needs to be generated to test a proposition that has grave and, in a growing number of instances, existential humanitarian implications.

We would hope that in the aftermath of the World Humanitarian Summit, there will be increasing interest in testing the viability of the humanitarian community and the challenges that lie ahead. With that in mind, the partnership will maintain a website, [planningfromthefuture.org](http://planningfromthefuture.org), as one step towards promoting humanitarian futures-oriented discussion and debate. So, too, is the partnership committed to joining with others in a wide range of forums to present its findings and their implications.

As the acknowledgments above suggest, a broad spectrum of expertise was sought to develop this analysis. In many instances, that expertise has gone well beyond the confines of the humanitarian sector. It has involved the natural and social sciences, the private sector as well as the military, social networks and local communities – all to assess whether the past and the present should or should not be a guide to a humanitarian future. And, if the latter, what needs to be done to make the sector fit for the future?

This is the question that ultimately underpins the efforts of the *Planning from the Future* partnership.

*Randolph Kent*  
*Planning from the Future*  
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# Executive summary

Is the humanitarian sector fit for purpose? Does it have the capacity and vision to tackle the crises of today, tomorrow and deep into the future? The scale and complexity of the conflicts and disasters confronted by humanitarians and the populations they aim to help leave them bruised and sometimes abused. There is a widespread feeling of frustration among humanitarian organisations and donors, both in the field and at their headquarters.

If the humanitarian system is unable to deal with the challenges of today, what does this tell us about its ability to prepare for the challenges the next generation will face? Imperfect as it is, buffeted by politics and chronically underfunded, humanitarian action remains essential for people in extremis. The question that Planning from the Future (PFF) raises, therefore, is how will these tensions and interactions be managed in the future – twenty or thirty years from now? What do we need to do now to prepare for then – for a humanitarian future that will be paradigmatically different from the past? The PFF project explores the reasons why fundamental reform is critical to achieving a more modern, effective and adaptive humanitarian system, and argues that this goal requires a rethink of how the sector looks and operates.

The report is organised into three main chapters. Chapter 1 – A history of game changers identifies key moments in the history of the humanitarian system and discusses how they influenced its structures, power dynamics and processes, laying the foundation for the analysis that follows in the rest of the report. It highlights continuities in the system: many of the problems and pathologies that it suffers from today are deeply rooted in its history. While the system has expanded and diversified, its basic power, structures and approaches have largely remained the same. The humanitarian architecture looks remarkably similar to the way it did in the 1950s – only much bigger.

Chapter 2 – The current humanitarian landscape describes current global trends affecting the sector, what works well and what doesn't, and makes the case for change. The total number of people in need has risen sharply, especially the caseload resulting

from violent conflict, but so has the gap between need and coverage. Institutions have grown apace and significant advances have been made in the technique of humanitarian response; the growing use of cash and market mechanisms is perhaps the most significant game changer in how the system works. There has been some streamlining in the humanitarian architecture, but key issues of leadership and decision-making have not been addressed. The system remains over-proceduralized and complex. At the same time, counter-insurgency agendas have heightened the securitization and militarisation of humanitarian action. Principles are continuously threatened by the conduct of war and, notwithstanding increased commitment, the system remains essentially reactive on protection issues.

This report analyses the malaise in the humanitarian community driven by the over-arching realization that the system is not 'fit for purpose'. Much of this pessimism results from the fact that humanitarian action cannot break out of the space that politics assigns to it. New practices and changes have not made old problems go away, whether it is in terms of failures of leadership, governance or the power relations in the system. These relations are still largely dominated by a small number of core actors, a kind of self-governing 'oligopoly' of mainly Western donors and large international and non-governmental aid agencies – over which the formal intergovernmental system has only limited oversight.

Chapter 3 – Planning from the future looks at future threats and risks and how they might be addressed by a more adaptive and responsive humanitarian sector of tomorrow. While attempting to predict the future is hazardous and all too often futile, there are few analysts who do not recognize that disasters and emergencies over the next two decades will be more complex and uncertain, and their dimensions and dynamics far more extensive. Chapter 3, reflecting on the mixed record of the humanitarian sector's past and present, suggests that the present humanitarian sector is faced with a serious capacities challenge – one that requires fundamental institutional change. Humanitarian organisations will have to be more anticipatory and adaptive, and will have to adopt new ways of working and certainly new approaches to leadership. This is followed by

conclusions, including a six-point vision for future humanitarian action that takes a more anticipatory, protective and accountable approach to crisis response, and recommendations that offer a roadmap of quick wins, systemic overhaul and future-proofing for achieving that vision.

PFF shares the sense of outrage expressed by the UN Secretary-General in his report to the World Humanitarian Summit about the suffering of civilians and the failure of the international community to do enough about it; about the fact that all too often humanitarian action is subordinate to, or substitutes for, politics; that sovereign interests trump individual rights – even in cases of mass atrocities; and the blatant inequities that privilege some lives – some crises – above others in terms of money and attention. The findings of the PFF project also point to a sense of frustration that, despite vast improvements in analytics and forecasting, humanitarian action is still reactive and that, despite the dedication of individual aid workers and some attempts at reform, the humanitarian system as a whole still under-performs, and lacks the trust of the people it aims to help.

Current frustrations with the sector are the result of a recognition that humanitarians alone have neither the depth nor the breadth of knowledge or ability to address humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities in all their complexity, now and in the foreseeable future. The result is a systemic discontent that has called into question the foundations of humanitarian action – its ethos, its emblems and the constellation of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals.

The PFF partner institutions recognise that major change is difficult, and perhaps even unlikely in the current context. If the past is any guide, radical change in international institutions only happens in the context of a major shock, such as the two world wars and the consequent reshuffling of international institutional tectonics. Since then, change in the international system

has only happened by accretion and, with few notable exceptions has lacked depth. Fundamental reform is necessary but there are too many vested interests within the system and too much resistance to thinking beyond the institutional box. The trigger for change will likely come from without, starting from a balanced analysis of what needs to change and related remedies. A constituency for change will need to emerge in civil society and among those affected by crises themselves.

This Planning from the Future report offers a diagnosis of what ails the system and a broad outline of what change could look like, what needs to be done to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and protection today and to boost its capacity to adapt and equip itself for an uncertain future. The appointment of a new UN Secretary-General with years of humanitarian experience provides an opportunity to put change on the international agenda. Whether ‘broke’ or ‘broken’, the humanitarian system of the future needs to do more than simply muddle through.

Based on the vision outlined above, this study proposes three levels of recommendations: (i) ‘Practical Measures for Immediate Implementation’, that is, high-impact improvements for which there is already near-universal support; (ii) ‘System Overhaul’, which calls for major reform of the structures, governance and modus operandi of the system, including an independent review that would identify how change could be implemented; and (iii) ‘Planning from the Future’, to help the humanitarian sector adapt and plan for an ever-more complex and uncertain future.

The report is the final output of the Planning from the Future project, an 18-month study conducted by King’s College London, the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition, Tufts University and the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute. This synthesis report, and its supporting research and case studies, can be accessed at <http://www.planningfromthefuture.org>.

# FUTURE HUMANITARIAN ACTION. A 6-POINT VISION:

## 01 REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL HUMANITARIAN STAKEHOLDERS

- It is 'of the world' – neither 'of the North' nor partial to any agenda. It is directed to all crisis-affected people in need of humanitarian action.
- It is local, but external experience is valued and available to support locally-led action, or to act where local parties cannot.
- Its alliances are based on strategic partnerships between international, national and local organisations, from a wide range of sectors.
- Its activities, where possible, are based on the principle of subsidiarity, which puts control and decision-making as close as possible to whose actions on the ground.

## 02 PRINCIPLED

- It is guided by the humanitarian principles embodied in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), international refugee law and the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct.
- It is always impartial. It is able to act in an independent and neutral manner when required, particularly in conflict situations.
- It is honest and transparent in the way it invokes those principles and respects them.
- It works flexibly to protect life, rights and livelihoods, both in contexts where IHL requires a narrow focus on protecting life and dignity and in those where longer-term strategies can be developed. ►



# FUTURE HUMANITARIAN ACTION. A 6-POINT VISION: *(continued)*

## 03 PROTECTIVE

- It is focused on the dynamics and circumstances that threaten the safety and dignity of people affected by armed conflict, displacement and other crisis situations
- It is informed by the aspirations and agency of those at imminent risk – whether displaced, besieged or unwilling to flee.
- It develops crisis-specific strategies that prioritise issues of greatest concern to affected groups, while investing in relationships and initiatives that safeguard the space needed to uphold humanitarian values.
- It focuses on protection outcomes not agency interests and rhetoric.
- It invests in evidence-based advocacy and mechanisms to maximise compliance with IHL, refugee law and human rights norms.
- It puts the protection of at-risk groups – in situ, displaced, refugees – at the centre of all humanitarian action, within and beyond the immediate crisis setting.

## 04 ACCOUNTABLE

- It is accountable to affected people and prioritises their interests and needs over mandates and agency interests. It puts dignity and choice over paternalism and control.
- It is accountable to its funders to take, and manage, calculated risks while making effective use of limited funds.
- It is accountable to its peers, working in complement with organisations that supplement its skills and resources toward collective outcomes.

## 05 NON-PARTISAN

- It is mindful of politics but is non-partisan in all its activities, including public pronouncements.
- It is able to work with a broad constellation of actors, including warring parties, national and regional disaster management authorities, civil society and the private sector, while retaining its independent character.
- It is able to support resilience programming, social protection and livelihoods initiatives when applicable to the context.

## 06 PROFESSIONAL

- It values professionalism, but embodies the voluntary spirit that lies at the root of the humanitarian imperative.
- Its programmes and decision-making are informed by evidence – independently verified where possible.
- Its actions are driven by a deep understanding of the context in which they are taking place.
- It is governed by independent, transparent and accountable institutions, with leaders that embody the humanitarian ethos and strive for excellence in management practice.
- It is able to mobilise sufficient funds to anticipate, prepare for and respond to crises irrespective of their causes or human impacts.
- It is honest and transparent about its mistakes – and applies the lessons inferred by them.
- It develops strategies that are designed to anticipate emergencies and disasters in the longer term.

# Introduction

Is the humanitarian sector fit for purpose? Does it have the capacity and vision to tackle the crises of today, tomorrow and deep into the future? From Afghanistan to Ukraine, from Syria to Greece and Turkey, from South Sudan to the Central African Republic, the scale and complexity of the conflicts and disasters confronted by populations they aim to help humanitarians and leave them bruised and sometimes abused. There is a widespread feeling of malaise and frustration among humanitarian organisations and donors, both in the field and at their headquarters. The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), which took place in May 2016, set out to address some of the flaws in the system. Its preparations catalyzed much-needed discussion about fundamental change, but its outcomes fell short of delivering a comprehensive change agenda.

If the humanitarian system is unable to deal with the challenges of today, what does this tell us about its ability to prepare for the challenges the next generation will face? Imperfect as it is, buffeted by politics and chronically underfunded, humanitarian action remains essential for people in extremis. The question that Planning from the Future raises, therefore, is how will these tensions and interactions be managed in the future – twenty or thirty years from now? What do we need to do now to prepare for then – for a humanitarian future that will be paradigmatically different from the past? These questions underpin the PFF project, which explores the reasons why fundamental reform is critical to achieving the more modern and effective vision of humanitarian action outlined in the conclusions and recommendations of this report. Tinkering with current structures will yield some quick improvements, but achieving the vision requires a rethink of how the sector looks and operates.

## About this study

This report is the final output of the Planning from the Future project, an 18-month study conducted by King's College London, the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition, Tufts University and the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute. The project lays out the reasons why the humanitarian system is not fit for purpose, and suggests

both immediate and longer-term remedial measures that will make it fit for an ever-more complex, uncertain, and in many respects unknown, future. This synthesis report, and its supporting research and case studies, can be accessed at <http://www.planningfromthefuture.org>. As such, the study is organised into four chapters. This introduction summarises the impetus and inspiration for the Planning from the Future project. Chapter 1 – A history of game changers identifies key moments in the history of the humanitarian system and discusses how they influenced its structures, power dynamics and processes, laying the foundation for the analysis that follows in the rest of the report. Chapter 2 – The current humanitarian landscape describes current global trends affecting the sector and makes the case for change. Chapter 3 – Planning from the future looks at future threats and risks and how they might be addressed by a more adaptive and responsive humanitarian sector of tomorrow. This is followed by conclusions, including a six-point agenda for future humanitarian action that takes a more anticipatory, protective and accountable approach to crisis response and recommendations that offer a roadmap of quick wins, systemic overhaul and futureproofing for achieving that vision.

## Methodology

This study is based on the accumulated research of the three PFF partner institutions over the past decade. It builds on a thorough literature review, hundreds of interviews with practitioners and other informants and numerous brainstorming sessions and events held in the African, Asian, Middle Eastern and North African and Latin American regions as well as in London and Geneva. Importantly, it incorporates the findings of new research specifically commissioned as part of the project. This includes case studies in Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and in the Sahel and briefing papers on protection in the context of humanitarian action and on the Cuban approach to disaster response. These studies are referenced as appropriate in the following pages. It also included a series of roundtables and small group discussions held in 2014 and 2015 to consider alternate humanitarian futures and paradigms. All outputs are available at the PFF website. A summary of the PFF findings was presented at a side event at the WHS in May 2016.

The PFF research focuses primarily on Western-organized humanitarianism. This choice was deliberate because of its dominance and because any reform agenda will need to engage with the power holders in the humanitarian system. Moreover, there is as yet an imperfect understanding of non-Western humanitarian traditions and practices. The PFF team recognizes that this is a research gap that needs to be urgently addressed, but this was not the primary purpose of this report.

The analysis and conclusions were also guided and facilitated by an external expert advisory group made up of the project's donors, representatives from Western and non-Western organisations involved in humanitarian policy and practice and professionals from academic institutions, media organisations and private sector companies. The advisory group helped to set the report's direction and reviewed and commented on the study's drafts. A previous version of this report was also peer reviewed by a selection of academics and humanitarian policy experts.

The Planning from the Future project comprises:

The PFF report:

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Humanitarian history and its game-changers
- Chapter 2: The current humanitarian landscape
- Chapter 3: Planning from the future

Briefing papers:

- Can revolutionary medicine revolutionise the humanitarian system?
- Protection in the context of globalisation
- Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy: Implications for humanitarian response

Case studies:

- The Somalia famine of 2011-2012
- The return to violence in South Sudan
- No end in sight: A case study of humanitarian action and the Syria conflict
- Regional humanitarian challenges in the

Exploratory roundtable discussions:

- Testing the future toolkit
- Exploring alternative ways of understanding crises and solutions



# 1. A history of game changers

The international humanitarian system<sup>1</sup> has developed significantly over the past decades, in no small part due to key moments in its history that frequently encourage it to introduce change. The two world wars catalysed the formation of the formal humanitarian sector; conflicts in Biafra and the genocide in Rwanda raised fundamental ethical questions about the role and impartiality of international humanitarian aid; large-scale disasters such as the 1970 Peruvian earthquake, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and the 2010 Haiti earthquake all tested the response capacity and effectiveness of the current system to its limits; while the civil wars in Spain, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Sri Lanka and Syria have all challenged the presumed universality of humanitarian action and highlighted the lack of consistent political solutions to situations of extreme violence.

These events, along with slower, systemic shifts, such as decolonisation, the increase in global trade, the rise of middle-income states and mobile technologies, have prompted changes both in the structure of the formal, Western humanitarian system, and in the nature of its practices and relationships. Critical among these have been its interactions with non-Western individuals and organisations, many of whom have parallel humanitarian histories of their own.

What is striking about this collection of histories is the extent to which there is a commonality in the notion of shared humanity, compassion and an imperative to address human suffering. What is also striking are the many different forms that such compassion can take, in its underlying ethos and the practical expression of care, and in the ways in which such differences have shaped state and civilian perceptions of and behaviour in humanitarian action today.

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<sup>1</sup> While there are myriad definitions and interpretations of the word 'system' as applied to the humanitarian sector, this analysis follows the most recent State of the System report by ALNAP, which defines the humanitarian system as 'the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis' (ALNAP, 2015). Unless indicated otherwise, the use of the term 'system' here also refers to the formal, Western-inspired humanitarian system that operates today

## 1.1 Why history matters

Circumspection, self-reflection and self-criticism are ingrained in the humanitarian psyche. Evaluations have a well-established role within the humanitarian system: the sector publishes hundreds of formal evaluations and lessons learned studies each year<sup>2</sup> and pages upon pages of grey literature exist as internal documents within humanitarian organisations (Borton, 2009; ALNAP, 2016). However, despite the wealth of critical reflection and self-examination, the sector has difficulty applying the lessons learned from its mistakes. This is, in part, due to the fact that it is decidedly a-historic, as humanitarians operate in a perpetual present that discourages looking back. The immediacy and instability of crises and the fast-paced nature of response give the impression that information is rapidly obsolete. Fundraising pressure and the instinct to dub each new crisis 'unprecedented' obscures analysis of historical precedents. The doomsday narrative often promoted by operational agencies – 'we've never had it this bad' – effectively cuts off organisations from history and the lessons it can teach. Such a-historicism also maintains a short-term view of the humanitarian role, when today's recurrent and protracted crises demand that humanitarian practice must be grounded in long-term analytical perspectives (Davey, 2014).

Such historical amnesia has operational consequences, including a lack of preparation and institutional memory, the assumption that problems are all new or different, and the perpetuation of certain myths (for instance that humanitarian space is shrinking, when it is the nature of humanitarian engagement that has changed) (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). It is harder to think of new responses to challenges without knowledge of how and why current methods were developed. It is also harder to recognise or analyse the precise dynamics you are dealing with when you can't compare them with other examples in different times and places. Living in a perpetual present inhibits your thinking about your own identity, it narrows your

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, 446 evaluative resources were submitted to ALNAP's resources library, up from 243 in 2013. However, this may be more of an indicator of the numbers of evaluative reports being shared, rather than being undertaken.

horizons to what you are able to experience directly, depriving you of the bigger picture.

Engagement with history, on the other hand, can help to sharpen analysis of cause and response factors (for example, for multiple layers of displacement) and help in finding creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems. It may also suggest alternative operational concepts, approaches and tools by drawing out the conditions under which current practices and concepts have emerged (Davey, 2014). For instance, humanitarians working in Syria might find resonance in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, when the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and various Red Cross National Societies worked on behalf of the victims on the Ethiopian side, while their offers of assistance were refused by the Italians. Italy used mustard gas, which had been banned in international law, and attacked aid installations. The League of Nations took no action despite the impact on civilians and relief workers, and the ICRC concluded that it could not speak out about what was happening (Bridel, 2003). In other words, understanding the complex historical context within which the structures, cultures, practices and principles of humanitarian assistance have evolved will enable the sector to see that the problems identified and analysed in subsequent chapters of this study have been present from the start.

Finally, as ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ governments, individuals and institutions become more significant and active humanitarian players, a fuller engagement with what are myriad humanitarian histories can help the humanitarian system more accurately see its origins and identity as part of a long and truly global story of concern for the suffering of others. In this way, an analysis of history contributes to our *planning from the future* by providing a more comprehensive understanding of its past.

## 1.2 Historical game changers: triggers and trajectories

While the idea of ‘game changers’ is often associated with events and single points in time, the history of humanitarian action demonstrates that change within the sector might be best characterised as an interplay of

concepts, trends and events. It is impossible to cover all of the geopolitical, economic, social and technological changes that have influenced humanitarian action since its origins. Below is a selection of the more prevalent game changing themes that still operate in the sector today.

### ***A continuity of empire?***

Indeed, the colonial legacy and post-colonial power dynamics have profoundly shaped contemporary humanitarian action, and many of the institutions and practices of the current, formal humanitarian system have their roots in colonialism and the post-colonial era. What historians have called the ‘dominant narrative’ of humanitarian history is often told as a story of colonialism and charity.

### ***Architecture and institutions***

The architecture and institutions of the formal humanitarian system are specifically Western constructs that have changed very little since their origins. From the sector’s so-called ‘inaugural moment’ (Barnett, 2010) of the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 to the establishment of the Committee for the Relief of Belgium (CRB) as the first international cross-border relief operation, the League of Nations (1919–20), and League of Red Cross Societies (1919) and the formation of the Save the Children Fund (1919), the sector consisted largely of Western institutions providing charity and material relief to war-ravaged nations in Europe. This expanded in the aftermath of the Second World War with the creation of the United Nations itself, and notably the Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), as well as key specialised UN agencies such as UNICEF, FAO and WHO. European and American NGOs such as Oxfam (1942), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) (1941) and Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE) (1945),<sup>3</sup> flourished as relief providers in Europe in aftermath of the war. Faith-based mission societies also provided humanitarian assistance. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which began life in 1947, focused much of its early work on responding to the needs of Lutherans displaced by the war (Ferris,

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<sup>3</sup> In 1953 the name was changed to Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere and in the 1990s to Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, enabling the retention of CARE’s well-known acronym.

2005). Reverend Bob Pierce founded World Vision in 1950 following a visit to an orphanage in Nationalist China on 'a vision of evangelicals combining personal evangelism with social action' (Barnett, 2011). Other Christian organisations, such as the Quakers and the Mennonites, disavowed their evangelical work to implement their humanitarian mission. The American Jewish Committee lobbied the US government against the Russian treatment of US Jews applying for Russian visas, forcing the US Congress to overturn an 80-year-old treaty regulating US commercial ties with Russia (Ferris, 2005).

From mid-century onwards, humanitarian institutions expanded their 'reach and remit' (Borton, 2011). Driven by the combined effects of decolonisation and the animosities and rivalries of the Cold War, they worked in conflicts and natural disasters in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in the name of 'saving' people from their own under-development and driven by a fear that the Soviet Union and socialist rhetoric could turn the newly independent states towards Soviet influence. Emblematic of this era was the war in Biafra (1967), deemed the first great modern humanitarian emergency, where an unprecedented humanitarian response 'was refracted through the prism of decolonisation and its impact on both the West and the Third World ... [creating] a role for NGOs based on the primacy of intervention and the immediacy of emergency relief' (O'Sullivan, 2016).

### **Tools and techniques**

Many of the techniques of assistance today, including famine relief, cash assistance and disease control, were pioneered in the colonies in the late nineteenth century (Davey 2012). Famine relief and cash assistance were pioneered in colonial India, where the British drew up a set of regulations and procedures designed to identify and control famine victims (Simonow, 2015). In the French empire, assistance efforts tended to focus more prominently on medical relief and disease control in the shape of 'the good white doctor', the emblem of a 'civilising mission' that, like its British colonial cousin, legitimised itself through the supposed benefits Western control brought with it (Davey, 2012). Growing affluence in the United States and Western Europe made charity affordable, bilateral and multilateral aid increased and Official Development Assistance (ODA) emerged as an

early model of concessional giving between powerful Northern organisations, individuals and governments and the newly established Southern states, many of whom were struggling with inadequate resources and infrastructure after the rapid withdrawal of the colonial powers (Davey, 2012).

### **Protection and solidarity**

But the early narrative of Western humanitarian history could equally be told as a way of mitigating the effects of colonialism, protecting the security and rights of civilian populations and creating solidarity with governments and movements in the service of broader societal change. The ICRC's foundation and the adoption of the Geneva Conventions, although Western in their origins and construction, were intended to promote acceptable conduct in warfare based on growing public concern for its human impacts. The normative framework, including the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), and the expansion of the Geneva Conventions (1949), developed in the immediate post-war world in direct response to the inhumanity of the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust and the Hiroshima bomb (Barnett, 2010).

At the same time, many organisations offered relief for civilians and displaced people affected by the war on the basis of solidarity as well as humanity. The Soviet Union sponsored a network of left-wing humanitarian associations under the banner of 'International Red Aid', a so-called 'People's Red Cross' in direct opposition to the ICRC and national Red Cross Societies, which the Soviets considered bourgeois, counter-revolutionary and too dependent on the European middle classes and nobility. In a similar vein, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), founded in 1939, came out of the trade union movement and support for the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War (Davey, 2012).

The rise of 'new wars' and intra-state conflicts led to a more muscular form of international engagement and prompted a shift in the emphasis of humanitarian response that put aid workers increasingly in the centre of conflicts. It also put more emphasis on civilian protection and initiated a number of normative shifts



that recognised that protecting the rights and dignity of victims was as important as upholding the sovereign rights of states. Wars in the Balkans, including the Srebrenica massacre, and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and more recently the final years of the conflict in Sri Lanka (2008–2009), in particular, catalysed landmark changes in humanitarian norms, policies and practices. These generated increased focus and programming on civilian protection in conflict, such as the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Guiding Principles (1999), a dedicated agenda on the protection of civilians in the Security Council (1999), a suite of international conventions on particular protective elements, such as banning landmines and cluster munitions or granting protection to children, the Arms Trade Treaty, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Human Rights Up Front Initiative in 2013. The effects of decolonisation and the Cold War also brought about a new ‘development agenda’, and with it an increasing public awareness of needs in what was increasingly referred to as the ‘Third World’ and more active campaigning by NGOs and solidarity movements on broader issues of poverty reduction. An increasing focus on human rights in the global North saw increasing numbers of NGOs as purveyors of human rights in addition to more narrow forms of essentially material support (Gordon and Donini, 2016). In Latin America, for example, humanitarian action has largely been synonymous with solidarity with the poor and its duty toward the community. In Colombia during the 1980’s, for example, many Oxfam partner organisations refused to take part in humanitarian work, choosing instead to hold government to account for their responsibility for disaster relief on behalf of the country’s poor (Vaux, 2016).

### ***Instrumentalisation and politicisation***

An analysis of events across the history of humanitarianism is also a sobering reminder that the manipulation and politicisation of humanitarian action in countries of strategic interest is not as new as some contemporary commentary would like to suggest (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012).

Key historical events such as the Boer War (1899–1900), the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the

Second World War, the Biafran Civil War (1967–69), the Vietnam War (1955–1975) and the US intervention in Somalia (1992–94) all point to the consistent use of humanitarian assistance ‘as a tool to pursue political, security, military, development, economic and other non-humanitarian goals’ (Donini, 2012). Likewise, the idea of using aid as a way of winning ‘hearts and minds’ and local support, seen today in Afghanistan and Iraq, has historical precedents in Algeria’s independence war, when the French provided services in rural areas thought to be sympathetic to the nationalist cause, and in Malaya in the 1950s, when British troops provided medical care and built infrastructure as part of the counter-insurgency campaign against the Malayan Communist Party (Jackson and Davey, 2014).

The intersection of decolonisation and Cold War competition for influence led key NGOs into close relationships with their home governments, particularly in countries of strategic interest. In Vietnam, for instance, US NGOs such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and CARE were explicitly part of the US government’s political and military effort. CRS in particular had close ties with the US-backed regime in South Vietnam, and channelled food aid to a US-supported militia group. As the Planning from the Future case study on Cuba attests, Cuban doctors were deployed in pursuit of ‘health diplomacy’ in 1962 in newly independent Algeria and in alignment with the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

The uneasy relationship between civilian and humanitarian activities and military intervention, which began with the rebuilding post-war Europe and the codification of the use of force in the UN Charter, came to prominence with the first Persian Gulf Crisis in 1991 and a Security Council-authorized expansion in peacekeeping (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). This ushered in a more assertive and partisan form of military intervention for humanitarian purposes, with UN-sanctioned operations by ECOWAS in Liberia and NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and then the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslav forces in Kosovo without Security Council authority, finally culminating with the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which explicitly provides for ‘the use of collective force’ in cases of mass atrocity.



NGOs' experience during the war in Biafra, Nigeria, when the humanitarian effort was co-opted by the Biafran leadership, serving their campaign for international recognition and providing resources for their war effort, exposed how easily and effectively humanitarian actors and humanitarian assistance could be manipulated by belligerents to further their political and military objectives (Barnett, 2011). In Somalia during the 1980s, the Barre regime ran a lucrative racket out of the aid resources delivered by UNHCR and NGOs into camps accommodating Somali Ethiopian refugees (Menkhaus, 2010). The regime also recruited large numbers of refugees into its military, turning the refugee camps into de facto training bases and international aid into logistical support for the military units established there.

History therefore explodes the oft-cited myth that there was a 'golden age' when humanitarianism could operate in a principled manner and enjoy greater security and freedoms as a result. For Western governments, aid has always offered a way to support client regimes and strategic interests, and for Southern governments, the non-aligned movement (NAM) and non-state actors, aid has been a source of funds, legitimacy and power. While aid agencies themselves have secured public support by presenting themselves as non-political, they have always found it difficult to uphold such claims in practice.

### ***Systematisation, professionalisation and growth***

The history of humanitarian action is also one of systematisation, professionalisation and growth, which over the course of a century took the sector from its modest and voluntary roots to an increasingly bureaucratic and institutional 'enterprise' (Smillie, 2012) of more than 4,000 known organisations and tens of thousands of aid workers in an industry worth at least \$24 billion in 2015 (ALNAP, 2015, GHA, 2015).

The massive expansion of the humanitarian 'marketplace' prompted an increase in the number of organisations and levels of funds involved in humanitarian work. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Barnett (2011) estimates that nearly 200 relief NGOs were formed in the US and Europe to handle the scale and severity of post-war suffering. As needs in Europe declined, NGOs sought to expand their operations beyond Europe

(Borton, 2011). In late 1948, for instance, Oxfam (originally established in response to famine in Nazi-occupied Greece) decided to refocus on 'the relief of suffering arising as a result of wars or of other causes in any part of the world' (Barnett, 2011: 120).

For US-based NGOs such as CARE and CRS, the impetus for expansion came from US government legislation in 1949 allowing the use of surplus agricultural production for relief and development purposes, enabling US NGOs to distribute government-funded food aid in response to famine in India in 1950 and the displacement and suffering resulting from the 1950–53 Korean War. These arrangements were expanded and institutionalised through the 1954 Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act (Public Law 480), which still governs US food aid today (Walker and Maxwell, 2009).

With the expansion of the sector has come a greater focus on professionalisation. This was in part due to highly visible response failures in Biafra, Ethiopia, East Pakistan and Rwanda, where the need for more procedure, transparency and accountability in aid operations led to more standardised and formalised humanitarian operations and practice. This included the establishment of dedicated disaster response units in UN agencies and bilateral donor organisations, and the development of groups, research centres and publications dedicated to improving understanding of disasters and disaster response. International shock at the Rwandan genocide in particular prompted a group of donors to undertake a comprehensive and ground-breaking joint evaluation of the international response, leading to a slew of initiatives intended to improve accountability and standards in the sector. Key improvements include the establishment of People in Aid (1997), the Sphere Project (1996) and Handbook (1998), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) (1997), the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) (2015) and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP – 1997).

Some of the results have been positive: humanitarian standards gained currency, programmes became more contextualised and professionalism improved (Donini et al., 2008). University courses were established, jobs were

created and 'humanitarianism' became a profession and a career, in addition to being a movement and an ideology. At the same time, as governance by large, international humanitarian organisations, including UN agencies and international NGOs, became more centralised and bureaucratic, the system became overly focused on organisational priorities and competition and increasingly distanced from those it was meant to help. Through the creation of industry jargon, complex coordination structures and costly compliance mechanisms, professionalisation created high barriers to entry. These were designed to identify who should provide assistance, when and how based on Western models of care, ethics and values and the nature and limits of the state's responsibilities towards affected groups in times of distress (Simonow, 2015).

Finally, professionalisation, as colonialism had done before it, prioritised international solutions over more indigenous solutions and local knowledge, and technical fixes over understanding and addressing the political problems that led to crises in the first place. For example, when sleeping sickness broke out in South Sudan in the 1930s, it was treated first through a series of mass screenings and coercive methods that mirrored the colonial power dynamics and security concerns of the time. By the time the disease resurfaced in the 1990s, control of the outbreak involved a highly medicalised approach involving a global logistical supply chain to bring diagnostic tools and medicines from Europe to Africa and was held hostage by large but reluctant pharmaceutical companies who produced the medicine for this deadly but commercially unviable disease. In both cases, treatment denigrated more local, holistic strategies which combined medical and environmental approaches, along with broader attempts to encourage agricultural development (Palmer and Kingsley, 2016).

### **One humanitarianism or many?**

At the core of the notion of 'humanitarianism' as a concept, an ethos and a practice is an assumption of universality: because being humanitarian is first and foremost about humanity, its principles, norms and practice are valid for all people, at all times and in all places. There is also an assumption that humanitarian principles are immutable, monolithic and set in stone,

and must be maintained to preserve the universality of the humanitarian cause, to promote respect for its emblems and methods and to render humanitarian assistance more effective for the people it serves. A closer look at humanitarian history beyond the Western narrative shows that, while humanitarian action may be universal in its concern for humanity, it is, and has always been, distinctive in its interpretation, adaptable to its circumstances and driven by a variety of motivations and practices.

For example, the evolution and interpretation of humanitarianism as a concept differed across cultures and regions. In the Arab world during the twentieth century, the term 'humanitarianism' does not have a single accepted rendition in Arabic, with different, more secular translations including *khayir* (charitable), *(al)-insaniyyah*, *(al)-shafaqa* (pity) and *(al)-honow* (compassion). Islamic notions of philanthropy and charitable giving may have influenced the development of humanitarian action among local actors, with historical use of *zakat* and *waqf*<sup>4</sup> to provide assistance to refugees (Moussa, 2014). The Jewish *heqdes* (similar to the Islamic *waqf*) was designed to benefit both the religious institution itself and the poor (Cohen, 2005). In China, the word 'humanitarian', *rendao*, has its linguistic origins in Confucian ideas of humaneness, benevolence and philanthropy. Japanese humanitarian thinking has been shaped by Shintoism, Confucianism and Zen Buddhism, alongside 'a moral duty to other less fortunate members of one's social group' (Yeophantong, 2014: 9).

Different interpretations of humanitarianism also mean that the roles and attitudes of the state as a humanitarian actor differ profoundly. The concept of 'humanitarianism' in China has been shaped by the ancient Confucian notion of legitimacy and responsibility. For centuries, China's emperor bore

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<sup>4</sup> Commonly translated into English as 'Islamic alms', *zakat* constitutes one of the five pillars of Islamic worship. It involves the giving away of material or financial wealth, in an act of devotion to God. *Waqf* is defined as 'religious endowment,' a charitable act of giving up one's property 'for the sake of God'. *Waqf* endowments led to the building of 'mosques, Sufi *khanqahs*, hospitals, public fountains, soup kitchens, traveller's lodges, and a variety of public works, notably bridges (Davey and Svoboda, 2014). *Zakat* is a religious obligation whereas *Waqf* is voluntary.

ultimate responsibility to provide relief following disasters, and his ability to do so effectively constituted state legitimacy. Conversely, failure to do so could, and often did, lead to the loss of the emperor's right to rule (Krebs, 2014). In pre-colonial India, the distribution of food, the practice of sharing wealth with the poor or needy and the public financing of educational, medical or religious institutions was common among rulers and merchant groups (Simonow, 2015). In Ottoman Palestine *zakat* was both a private obligation and a form of public provision governed by legislation (Schaeublin, in Davey and Svoboda (eds), 2014).

Humanitarianism across different cultures also expresses a variety of different philosophies. Within the formal sector, the more 'classic' or 'Dunantist' form of crisis response, based on the humanitarian principles and enshrined in IHL, has always sat uneasily with a more expansive form of support and solidarity. This so-called 'consequentialist' form of humanitarian action, as the name suggests, is as concerned with the consequences of aid interventions as much as the provision of aid in its own right. Such an approach eschews neutrality, champions human rights and aims to tackle the structural causes of suffering and poverty in solidarity with the poor (Gordon and Donini, 2016). These dual forms of humanitarian action – and the tensions between them – often coexist within the same organisation.

Oxfam's experience in Africa during the 1980s is emblematic of such tensions. During the Ethiopian famine, Oxfam aspired to a more classical form of humanitarianism disconnected from politics when it maintained a relationship with the government, while engaging in illicit cross-border operations from neighbouring Sudan to bring relief to rebel-held areas. However, during the same period Oxfam took sides in the conflict in Mozambique, publicly aligning itself with anti-apartheid forces on the grounds that aid agencies should not associate with organisations guilty of large-scale violations of human rights (Vaux, forthcoming 2016).

Outside the formal system, humanitarianism has never been monolithic, but rather has evolved as a by-product of the politics and political culture of its time and place.

The well-known work of Cuban doctors, who have provided medical personnel, supplies and support to crises across the world since 1960, is based on a strong political culture of solidarity and altruism and therefore has always been, by design, an extension of socialist ideology (Dahrendorf, 2015). A key feature of Nordic humanitarianism is its close and positive relationship between government and civil society, derived from a political culture that involves civil society in policy-making processes (Marklund, 2016).

It is important to look beyond the historical narrative of codified IHL to other instances of the promotion and adoption of humanitarian values and practices. Amir Abdel Qader, who lived in Algeria and fought against the French in the nineteenth century, is remembered for his treatment of the weak and his protection of the innocent, for urging his troops to show patience and forgiveness even in the midst of battle and for ensuring that prisoners were treated humanely. This was before the first Geneva Convention and the creation of the ICRC (Jackson and Davey, 2014). During the Chinese Civil War (1927–50), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) adopted a number of measures related to the conduct of war and the treatment of prisoners intended to maintain popular support as well as military discipline. The PLA, and other armed groups in a wide range of countries, articulated their own codes of conduct, often without reference to IHL (Xiaodong, 2001).

### **1.3 Conclusion: What history tells us**

The global history of humanitarian action tells us that adaptation and change have always been part of humanitarian culture. But what history also tells us is that, while the humanitarian system is highly adaptable to external changes, enduring tensions that have been present from the sector's origins perpetuate outdated assumptions, dynamics and practices – and the institutions that maintain them – that prevent it from implementing more fundamental change.

#### ***Tensions between charity and solidarity***

On the part of humanitarian agencies, operating according to 'pure' humanitarianism has always been difficult; in particular, the concept of neutrality has

always been an elusive goal. Fundamental disagreements about the sector's underlying ethos continue to contrast impartial, material assistance against wider views of protection, human rights and solidarity with the poor. This was equally true for international NGOs during the Biafran war in the 1960s and the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s as it was during the final days of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2008 (Niland, 2014). Within the formal system, principles of neutrality and impartiality are not always applied in practice. Outside the system, humanitarian principles are either rejected as Western constructs or adapted to fit a more appropriate and relevant interpretation of their meaning.

### ***Tensions between politics and principles***

Humanitarian action has been used to political advantage and disadvantage for centuries. Experiences in Vietnam resonate with the more recent challenges that have faced humanitarian actors in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. While the ideological stakes are different, many of the operational and ethical dilemmas remain. The association between Western liberal democracy and humanitarian action was and is extremely strong. The same could be said of non-Western humanitarian organisations and their political-religious affiliations: the health diplomacy of the Cuban doctors; the fact that Islamic organisations frame their own deeply ingrained version of humanitarian assistance in terms of solidarity with fellow Muslims in places such as Palestine and Somalia; and the importance of Confucian ideals of responsibility and state legitimacy in Chinese notions of assistance all point to the fact that other actors from other traditions may work to very different priorities and principles.

### ***Tensions between voluntarism and enterprise***

The humanitarian sector, while voluntary in its origins and altruistic in its aims, has often focused on the perpetuation of its own interests to the detriment of more effective action and accountability to the people it serves. The growth and professionalisation of the humanitarian industry, its orientation towards donor funding and interests and its high barriers to entry are forcing a systematisation of humanitarian action that prioritises certain types and styles of assistance over others, and widens the distance between aid

organisations and their 'clients' on the ground, overlooking local organisations and indigenous practices because they do not conform to formal principles and practices and may not speak the same language, and because they risk diverting power and market share away from well-established organisations. This was equally the case in international efforts to control sleeping sickness in South Sudan throughout the twentieth century as it was during the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2015.

### ***Tensions between diversity and control***

Adopting a historical lens demonstrates that there is no homogenous, 'pure' or 'traditionally' correct conception of humanitarian action. Instead, there are multiple traditions, driven by a variety of philosophical, moral and political positions, which have evolved through contact with each other over time. However, formal, Western-inspired humanitarianism continues to put humanitarian action into a monolithic container that conforms to narrow, Western-inspired concepts of what humanitarian action should and should not be.

Viewing humanitarian history through a wider historical lens tells us that many of the cultural, structural and financial foundations upon which the formal system operates today – the charity model, the dominance of UN agencies and large NGOs, the predominance of Northern and Western concepts of care and the impulse to create parallel structures and impose petty sovereignty – find their direct roots in the dynamics of the immediate colonial/post-colonial and Cold War periods. However, it is too simple to see the history of humanitarian action as a mere continuation of empire: humanitarian action has been shaped by a wider variety of influences. Claims to a timeless universalism of humanitarianism as a concept and ideology are just that.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, history can help in critically exploring some of the foundational assumptions on which the current system rests, and help us find creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems. It demonstrates that there is very little about humanitarian action that is 'unprecedented', and approaching current events and responses as though they are makes our understanding of them incomplete, narrows

the scope of analysis and limits the chances of progress. History also allows us to find a more sophisticated understanding of perceptions and identity and allows for more sympathetic engagement with traditions of humanitarianism outside the dominant Western narrative.

In fact, few humanitarians would deny the importance of understanding at least some aspects of past experience in their work. However, the sector's engagement with history is tenuous and unsystematic. As the World Humanitarian Summit aims to chart a new course for a more effective humanitarian future, those governments,

humanitarian organisations and individuals that will be charged with implementing it should consider, as a first step, a deeper and more methodological engagement with the past. This might be achieved through training modules, through deeper and far-reaching context analysis, through prioritising historical and anthropological understanding and knowledge in hiring for humanitarian positions and by supporting decision-making with historical reference guides and tools. The humanitarian sector would also benefit from a closer examination of the very different humanitarian traditions that have inspired it.



## 2. The current humanitarian landscape

Chapter 1 explored the lessons of history and what we can learn from the blockages and game changers that have affected humanitarian action in the past. It highlighted that many of the tensions and pathologies affecting the humanitarian sector today are not new and that there is a remarkable continuity in the way in which the sector functions. In this chapter we delve deeper into the qualitative and quantitative changes that are affecting humanitarian action today. The humanitarian landscape is rapidly changing: growth and institutionalization have reached unprecedented levels, much progress has been made in humanitarian technique but, as we show below, humanitarian action is still beset by the familiar problems of the past. Politics still defines the space that humanitarians can occupy, perhaps as never before. Humanitarian response is hostage to the availability of funds, whose use is often subject to political or military agendas rather than to impartial response. Principles are under threat and IHL violated despite much rhetoric to the contrary. As a result, a growing malaise is perceptible in the humanitarian community the main elements of which are highlighted in this chapter.

### 2.1. The changing nature of crisis

The scale, scope and nature of crises with humanitarian consequences have undergone major shifts in recent years. These changes have challenged humanitarian efforts in preparedness, and mitigation – and have generated much higher demands on humanitarian action, both within and outside the formal humanitarian system. With regard to disasters resulting from both ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ hazards, the trend seems to be one of increasing magnitude but (at least over the past couple of years) decreasing frequency (ALNAP, 2015). These trends are a function of global dynamics that include interrelated patterns of climate change, resource competition, fragility and political instability, conflict and chronic insecurity, underdevelopment and rapid urbanisation (Bernard, 2013; Burkle Jr, Martone and Greenough, 2014; McGoldrick, 2011; Thow et al., 2013). The trend towards protracted or long-lasting crises – while more a symptom of change than a cause *per se* – is also a major consideration in understanding the changing nature of crisis. This section summarises these changes.

While the *number of crises* appears to be declining, albeit modestly, the total *number of people in need* has risen sharply, as have budgets and, critically, budgetary shortfalls. Table 1 summarises these trends. The assessed number of people requiring assistance has tripled in the past eight years, as has the total budget of the formal humanitarian response system. However, the gap between assessed need and budget allocations has grown as well. By 2015, the humanitarian system had never had larger budgets – and never had a larger ‘gap’ between assessed need and coverage (ALNAP, 2015; Development Initiatives, 2015). Humanitarian financing is discussed below in Section 2.3. The point here is to simply highlight the rapid changes under way.

#### Categorising humanitarian emergencies

ALNAP has suggested a scheme for classifying contemporary crises. The categories include rapid-onset ‘natural disasters’, conflict, protracted crises, recurrent crises, urban disasters and ‘mega’ disasters (ALNAP, 2015). However, the bulk of the evidence on contemporary crises, as well as case studies conducted for the PFF study, confirm that only a handful of contemporary humanitarian emergencies can be neatly categorised: the Syria crisis, for example, includes elements of conflict, urban disasters and protracted crisis – and indeed is probably the best current example of a ‘mega’ disaster (Howe, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, many of these could be labelled ‘wicked problems’ in that they are difficult to define precisely, multi-causal, unstable, have no clear solution and attempts to address them have unforeseen consequences (Ramalingam, 2013). Several points should be noted about the ALNAP categories. First, this list excludes technological or multi-causal disasters such as Fukushima. While triggered by ‘natural hazards’, *rapid-onset natural disasters* often put populations at risk due to human-made factors. Second, *conflict* is the classic ‘human-made’ crisis – displacing people from their livelihoods, destroying civil authority and infrastructure and leading to horrific humanitarian consequences. But there are many other human-made factors that put people at risk, both in conflict and in crises triggered by natural hazards. Some political crises do not necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> Howe (2016) is the Syria case study undertaken specifically for the Planning From the Future project.

**Table 1. People in need, funding requests and gaps**

Category	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
People in assessed need (m)	26	28	43	53	65	62	73	76	82.5	125
Total UN CAP appeal (\$bn)	5.5	8.1	10.0	12.9	9.5	10.5	13.2	19.5	19.9	20.1
Total CAP funded (\$bn)	4.0	5.5	7.1	8.0	5.8	6.2	8.5	12.0	9.7	N.A.
Budgetary gap (\$bn)	1.5	2.6	2.9	4.9	3.7	4.3	4.7	7.5	10.2	N.A.
% of CAP funded	72.7%	67.9%	71.0%	62.0%	61.1%	59.0%	64.4%	61.5%	49.0%	N.A.

Source: Development Initiatives, 2015; CHS Alliance, 2015; OCHA, 2016; ALNAP, 2015

result in violent conflict, but may result in significant humanitarian emergencies all the same (for example the famine in North Korea in the mid-1990s). Currently, about 80% of the humanitarian caseload is driven by conflict (Development Initiatives, 2015). Third, *protracted crises* are long-lasting situations (by definition longer than eight years, and caused by multiple factors, (FAO/WFP, 2010)). *Recurrent crises* are different from protracted crises in that they have specific causes, and one crisis may follow another, but they are not necessarily continuous. With a rapidly urbanising global population and rising urban poverty and vulnerability, *urban disasters* have become a category on their own. *Mega disasters* have the potential to spiral out of the control of any authority. The Syria crisis is the best current empirical example, although the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014–15 was considered a potential mega disaster.

### Changes in the ‘landscape’ of crisis

Changes in the nature of humanitarian crisis include the frequency and severity of crisis, changes in the duration of crisis and changes in the nature of conflict.

**Changes in the frequency and severity of crises.** Data from CRED-EMDAT depicts a steady increase in the incidence of disasters triggered by natural hazards for nearly a century leading up to about the year 2004, but with a small drop-off in numbers per year since then. Likewise, the number of people affected increased steadily, but then declined in recent years. The number of people killed in natural disasters has dropped steadily

over the past century, and with a few exceptions such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, has been very low in recent years. The 2015 State of the Humanitarian System report (ALNAP, 2015) also noted a sharp decline in disasters triggered by natural hazards that required international assistance – but noted that, in many cases, this is because affected countries are increasingly capable of handling the impact of natural disasters on their own.

Information about the frequency or incidence of violent conflict is contradictory. Harrison and Wolfe (2012) argue that wars and conflict are increasing in frequency. Pinker (2011) and the *Human Security Report* (Human Security Research Group, 2013), on the other hand, contend that violent conflict has become less frequent. What is clear, however, is that the *humanitarian caseload resulting from violent conflict* is increasing. UNHCR (2015) notes that 13.9 million people were displaced by violence and persecution in 2014 alone, with the total reaching an unprecedented 60 million and, increasingly, numbers on displacement do not capture the full impact of conflict – people may be trapped by conflict rather than displaced by it. Between 2002 and 2013, 86% of all funds requested for CAP appeals were for people affected by conflict (OCHA, 2015b). And all ten of the largest current humanitarian appeals have come from conflict-related emergencies. In 2016, people in need of humanitarian aid are estimated at a staggering 125 million, a point made repeatedly at the World Humanitarian Summit. The implications of these trends are discussed below.

**Changes in the duration of crisis.** Humanitarian emergencies were classically conceived of as brief, acute episodes of suffering, brought about by a specific cause, with a clear beginning and end, and followed by some kind of period of recovery or rehabilitation (FAO/WFP, 2010). Recent evidence, however, shows that an increasing number of humanitarian crises are protracted (and/or 'recurrent'), and that, once in the mode of a protracted crisis, it is very difficult to 'recover' (FAO/WFP, 2010). Accordingly, some 70–80% of humanitarian funding now goes into crises that have lasted eight years or longer (Development Initiatives, 2015).

**Changes in the nature of conflict.** Since the end of the Cold War, the majority of active conflicts in the world have been internal rather than inter-state, and protracted or recurrent in nature (Lange and Quinn, 2003). Duffield (2001) and Keen (2008) describe the nature of 'new wars' – conflicts that had been presumed to be proxy wars between rival superpowers, but which continued in the aftermath of the Cold War, and were fuelled by local grievances that were largely masked when the parties were superpower clients. These conflicts often, but not always, reflected a struggle to control resources and markets in an era of increasing globalisation. These conflicts highlight the nature of state fragility and the inability of states to control activities within their boundaries, and the rise of armed non-state actors (Duffield, 2001). At face value, they may be tied to religious, tribal or ethnic identities (Micheletti, 2010), but PFF case studies show that political, economic and ideological factors underpin many such crises as well. Whatever the cause, in most cases civilians bear the brunt of conflict. In some, i.g. Syria, the direct targeting of civilians and the denial of humanitarian action have become principal war objectives.

Since 2001, more ideologically motivated forms of conflict have again emerged, many of them revolving around counter-insurgency or the 'global war on terror'. This has complicated humanitarian response in several ways. First, it has increased restrictions on access: both restrictions imposed by armed non-state actors themselves, and by insecurity. Second, donors put restrictions on aid that limit humanitarian response, and various actors instrumentally manipulate humanitarian assistance

for their own political ends (Donini, 2012). And third, there may be a general lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law by parties in conflict, whether state or non-state actors. All of these lead to a phenomenon labelled the 'collapse of humanitarian space', although there is disagreement over whether humanitarian 'space' really has disappeared, or whether the nature of humanitarian action in such spaces has changed (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). In sum, humanitarian action continues to occupy such space as is determined by politics, or, more precisely, the failures of politics.

### **Drivers of conflict and crisis**

**Climate change.** The first-level impacts of climate change on the frequency and severity of natural disasters such as drought and tropical storms have been evident for some time (Walker et al., 2010). But climate change involves complex interactions at a number of different levels, with unpredictable outcomes (Pachauri, Mayer and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2015). The secondary effects, such as the greater range of disease vectors as temperatures warm, displacement caused by prospective changes in sea levels, increased conflict over natural resources, water in particular, and the capacity of political systems to adapt to rapid change and contain the potential damage are all long-term concerns related to climate change.

**Demographic shifts.** Three major forms of demographic shifts have changed the nature of vulnerability. First, while children remain perhaps the greatest single at-risk group in emergencies, much of the globe's population is aging and the needs of a vulnerable aging population are different (HelpAge International, 2015). Second, in some parts of the world, the HIV-AIDS crisis has substantially reduced the number of working-age adults, making both children and the elderly more vulnerable in crises of all types, and has weakened the institutions that typically help to protect people in crisis (de Waal and Whiteside, 2003). But the major shift is urbanisation. With the dramatic pace of urbanisation projected to continue, cities are increasingly areas of extreme vulnerability. 'Stress bundles' where climate-related disasters, conflict-induced migration, poverty, poor governance and limited local capacity all converge (Zetter and Deikun, 2010). Urban environments, and their cortege of risks and

vulnerabilities, have long existed outside the expertise of the humanitarian community, as standards and practices arose mainly from camp situations in rural areas. Forced migration of mainly urban Syrians and other nationals fleeing conflict are an additional dimension, which has led to the near collapse of Europe's asylum system and its ability to provide assistance and protection to vulnerable groups within its borders.

**Globalisation.** Globalisation has brought growth and development and the rapid expansion of opportunity to many population groups, but it has had clear winners and losers. The links between borrowed capital for economic development, structural adjustment policies meant to ensure debt repayment and the interconnectedness of global markets have resulted in increased vulnerability for many. O'Demsey and Munslow (2006: 501) cite a 'downward spiral ... of debt, disease, malnutrition, missed education, economic entrapment, poverty, powerlessness, marginalization, migration and instability'. The food price crises of 2008 demonstrated that few places on earth are insulated from the impact of a global market shock, with widespread food insecurity reported in many places as the result of the near tripling of the price of basic food grains on global markets (Headey and Fan, 2008). A similar phenomenon was noted in 2011 that may have, among other things, contributed to the Arab Spring (Barrett, 2013).

**Geopolitics.** Geopolitical concerns have always shaped humanitarian crises. State fragility is increasingly the context for – if not the cause of – humanitarian emergencies. Belligerents in conflict, particularly in the context of challenges to national sovereignty, continue to attempt to co-opt or manipulate humanitarian action to their strategic advantage (Donini, 2012). This is discussed further below.

## 2.2 The changing nature of humanitarian action

Humanitarian action is rapidly evolving. Some of these changes are occurring within the formal humanitarian system, many are effectively outside the 'system' as it has been understood. This section analyses both sets of changes.

### Trends in the formal system

As discussed in Chapter 1, some of the pivotal trends observed within the 'system' bear mentioning again here. These include rapid growth and institutionalisation; supply-driven responses largely dictated by donors; on-going difficulties with principles, protection and sovereignty; and repeated attempts at reform, which have at best been only partially successful. Despite the challenges, there have been improvements in several notable areas as well. This section reviews all of these, beginning with recent improvements, then turning to some persistent challenges.

### Key areas of improved humanitarian performance.

While the contours of the political economy of the system have remained relatively static, a number of changes in humanitarian practice have altered the field in the past decade. Some have improved its overall effectiveness. These are outlined here. Many of these were built upon at the recent WHS.

- **Market-based and private-sector responses.**

Perhaps the most significant change in the practice of humanitarian response in the past decade has been the shift away from a focus on in-kind assistance towards greater reliance on markets and market-based programming. Earlier emphasis on in-kind delivery – particularly food aid – was driven in part by large surpluses of agricultural production in donor countries, making humanitarian and other forms of assistance a means of dealing with a domestic problem (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). Beginning with the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the emphasis has increasingly been on cash transfers or commodity and value vouchers to replace in-kind aid, particularly in places where markets still function well in spite of the disaster (Harvey and Bailey, 2015). This mode of intervention has since been used to great effect in crises that are largely inaccessible to humanitarian agencies, such as Somalia (Hedlund et al., 2013; Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015) and Syria (Howe, 2016). And yet, while this mode of programming has increased substantially since 2005 and is advocated by nearly everyone in current policy debates (Harvey and Bailey, 2015), it still accounts for only a small percentage

of overall humanitarian funding (High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, 2015; Harvey and Bailey, 2015; Development Initiatives, 2015). Cash increases the freedom of choice of affected groups and reduces costs for aid agencies. Its potential is huge, as demonstrated by the high level of interest evident at the WHS – and so are the implications for agencies that have traditionally provided food and other in-kind items.

- **Private sector engagement.** In contexts of natural hazards, and particularly in dealing with the impact of climate change, there is increasing experience in using insurance and other risk-financing instruments to anticipate risk and put in place different measures for dealing with predictable shocks (African Risk Capacity, n.d.). Claims are frequently asserted that insurance and risk financing can reduce and even eliminate the requirement for post-disaster humanitarian assistance (Linnerooth-Bayer and Mechle, 2009; UNISDR, 2015). This includes both micro-insurance interventions at the household and local level, and national level efforts at risk-pooling. When combined with approaches like cash transfers or vouchers, these programmes have been shown to reduce the time it takes to trigger a response and get assistance into the hands of disaster-affected groups (Rahimi, 2014). These programmes tend to be more developed in high- and middle-income countries, but they hold potential for application in low-income, chronically vulnerable countries also. Public/private partnerships in risk reduction and insurance have great potential, but will still require traditional modes of humanitarian response where these approaches fail (Kent and Zyck, 2014). The evidence is fairly clear, for instance, that overall levels of insurance against predictable hazards are lowest in countries where exposure to risk is highest, leading many analysts to advocate for greater levels of investment in these partnerships. Little of this kind of risk-financing applies in unpredictable circumstances such as protracted conflicts, except perhaps in the context of protecting specific business investments, i.e. not at-risk human populations (Crossin and Banfield, 2006).
- **The revolution in treating malnutrition in emergencies.** Until the mid-2000s, the treatment of severe acute malnutrition in emergencies was largely restricted to clinic-based, in-patient treatment centres. This approach could not handle the caseload, and children frequently fell back into acute malnutrition after release. New approaches that rely on out-patient, community-based management of severe acute malnutrition have dramatically improved coverage and made identification of cases easier. Ready-to-use therapeutic food has made home-based treatment a more viable option. The combination of these (both the product and the process) has led to dramatic improvements in treating acute malnutrition in emergencies (Sadler and Maxwell, 2011). This change in practice in emergencies has in turn led to similar changes in social safety net programmes in non-emergency contexts. Given the protracted nature of contemporary crises, there is additional attention to the treatment of moderate malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency diseases, and an emphasis on prevention of undernutrition. In this context, the enhancement of the nutrient content of food aid has also gained attention (Food Aid Quality Review, 2011). The search for the most effective and cost-efficient supplementary and therapeutic foods continues.
- **Increasing emphasis on protection.** Non-material needs, in particular protection, are gaining increasing prominence in humanitarian rhetoric, but only partly in practice. The failure of the international community in Sri Lanka was a tragic reminder of how protection plays second fiddle to assistance, not to mention Realpolitik (United Nations 2012; Niland et al. 2015). Awareness is increasing but progress is patchy; institutional and staff resistance to addressing protection issues, even at the highest level, is still widespread. Despite strong exhortatory statements such as the Human Rights Up Front agenda of the UN Secretary-General or the Inter-agency Standing committee (IASC) statement on the Centrality of Protection, progress is slow and protection concerns continue to be ignored or undermined by mainstream humanitarian stakeholders (Niland et al. 2015; Healy and Tiller 2014; Svoboda and Gillard 2015). Our own

case studies and the PFF Briefing Paper on protection (Niland 2015) document many such instances in Syria, and elsewhere. In sum, there is more awareness of the critical importance of protection, particularly in conflict settings, but, challenges remain (see below).

- **Technological changes.** Humanitarian response has seen a dramatic increase in reliance on information and communication technologies. This is hailed as a 'fundamental shift in power from capitals and headquarters to the people aid agencies aim to assist' (UN OCHA, 2013:2). This includes the use of Twitter and other social media, internet platforms and mobile phones to crowd-source information and allow for more interactive engagement with crisis-affected populations. For those populations with access to these technologies, this has been a true game changer. It has enabled greater self-help and has started to rebalance power between humanitarian actors and affected communities. For humanitarians, it has created much stronger links with private sector actors, strengthening private sector involvement. It has led to the creation of a new generation of humanitarian volunteers (both in terms of crowd sourcing and crisis mapping, but also the use of social media to help with reunification or other issues). Other technologies, including GIS, crisis mapping and mobile cash, have improved the quality of response, or permitted affected populations to become 'first responders' (Vinck, 2013; Meier, 2015). 'Big data' approaches have led to monitoring and early warning innovations such as Global Pulse (High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2013).

However, access to technology is still unequal, and experience indicates that, in many cases, those most likely to experience a crisis are the least likely to have access to some of these technologies (Vinck, 2013). Widespread access to cell phones and electronic money transfer systems permitted a major response to the Somalia famine, the Syria crisis and other recent humanitarian emergencies. But cell phone networks do not exist everywhere (South Sudan, Central African Republic) and can be shut down by governments. Money transfer companies have been

targeted in the 'global war on terror', underlining that these technologies are neither risk-free nor guaranteed, even where they work well. Importantly, also, the use of new technologies tends to reduce the physical proximity between conventional aid workers, 'respondents of first resort' and the people they intend to support. Remote technologies also have the potential to outsource much of the risk of humanitarian response to the latter (Donini and Maxwell, 2014; Duffield, 2012; ALNAP, 2015).

- **Responding to the challenges of urban programming.** The world's population has been rapidly urbanising. Virtually all the population growth globally to 2050 is projected to occur in urban areas of developing countries (FAO, 2012). This has led to a sharp increase in urban vulnerability and urban crises, but the capacities needed to respond to urban humanitarian emergencies are very different from the traditional humanitarian toolkit predicated on the assumption of (mostly) rural crises (Zetter and Deikun, 2010). This lack of urban expertise along with environmental conditions has prompted a shift in the humanitarian agenda towards Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), particularly in urban areas (ACAPS, 2015; IFRC, 2010). Increasing attention is being paid to urban assessment practices, the challenges of targeting vulnerable populations and access to difficult urban areas (Sanderson et al., 2014). The issue of IDPs in urban areas and how best to target them is also being more actively pursued. Experience from the Syria crisis has shown that people displaced from urban areas are less likely to move into camp settings, meaning that organising assistance and protection for urban IDPs and refugees is a rather different task than current models. While low-income urban dwellers are likely to face a raft of hazards for which rural disaster risk reduction programmes are not prepared (Zetter and Deikun, 2010; Sanderson et al., 2014), urban populations are much more likely to possess smartphones and be linked into the internet or social media, and thus much better able to access services and make their needs known.
- **Evidence and the use of evidence.** A major criticism of humanitarian action from a decade ago noted

that, principles notwithstanding, humanitarian response was not impartial, and indeed did not have the evidence base needed to be impartial (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003). Since then, major efforts have been made to improve the evidence base on which humanitarian programmes and policies are based. This includes major inter-agency efforts to improve assessment, including the Assessment Capacity Project (ACAPS) project, Integrated Phase Classification analysis and other diagnostic tools (Darcy et al., 2013). Greater reliance on evidence has enabled a move away from counting inputs and outputs towards much more sophisticated impact assessment based on outcomes and impacts (Dijkzeul, Hilhorst and Walker, 2013), and has simultaneously enabled much greater participation of affected groups in both assessment and impact evaluation (Catley et al., 2014).

Better evidence has allowed for gender- and age-disaggregated analysis of crisis and the impact of crisis (Mazurana et al., 2011). Evidence-based approaches are now regularly utilised in evaluating the impact of different interventions in humanitarian contexts, even though there are difficulties in replicating clinically-based randomised controlled trials in humanitarian contexts (Krystalli and Emerson, 2015). New analytical methods have enabled evidence-based approaches to determine which modalities best fit the specific context of a given crisis (Maxwell, Parker and Stobaugh, 2013). Although in many cases valid information and evidence remain elusive, the humanitarian field has made important progress in this area in the past decade. Many parties are now calling for independent needs assessments as a guarantor of the credibility and validity of the analysis (DuBois et al., 2015).

- **The 'resilience' agenda.** Several major reviews of humanitarian action have recommended that the question of building resilience – not simply responding to crises – needs to be built into humanitarian policy (Ashdown, 2011). This was one of five priority themes for the World Humanitarian Summit (United Nations Secretary-General, 2016). Much emphasis at WHS was placed on increasing the

effectiveness of programmes in protracted crises, including by adopting longer term or sustainable approaches. Particularly since the Somalia famine of 2011 and the Sahel crisis of 2012, both donors and agencies have developed policies and programmes aimed at bolstering the capacity of at-risk and affected communities to better manage risks posed by various hazards, and to mitigate, cope with and recover from shocks. Building on the evidence that investments in prevention and preparedness can result in major savings in humanitarian response budgets (Cabot-Venton et al., 2012), 'resilience programming' is a concerted attempt to integrate disaster risk reduction, early warning and contingency planning, crisis mitigation, and acute response and recovery, with social service delivery and livelihood improvements – all in an over-arching programming framework (DFID, 2011; USAID, 2012).

Of equal concern is the question of what kind of hazards or shocks at-risk communities face, and how external support can or should help to manage risks. Few doubt the importance of building resilience in the face of longer-term climate change, or building systems that reduce the risks of natural hazards, be they climatic or tectonic. The notion of building resilience in the face of violent conflict is more contested, and despite the rhetoric, many policy statements and resilience programmes tend to focus on 'natural' hazards rather than on conflict situations, while few specifically embrace the notion of building community resilience in conflict-prone situations (Scott, 2014). It clearly does not mean making people more 'resilient' to indiscriminate military attacks or violations of IHL. But notions of protecting livelihoods or enabling recovery must not be left out of responses to protracted conflict situations either.

There is increasing consensus around the need to close the 'humanitarian–development divide', and most analysts believe that resilience analysis and programming is the way forward. Emphasising as it does the links between anticipation and preparedness, risk reduction and risk management, rapid and effective humanitarian response and risk-informed development interventions (United Nations Secretary-

General, 2016; HPG, 2016). In contexts characterised by recurrent natural hazards, this is a relatively uncontroversial conclusion. In contexts characterised by protracted conflict, and especially by the presence of armed non-state actors, the application of resilience approaches is still being worked out. This integration requires attention to its implications for principles and protection, as well as a different kind of leadership than has often been in evidence. Some 'Dunantist' humanitarian actors – for example ICRC – have expressed concern, including at the WHS, with regard to approaches purportedly aimed at merging humanitarian and development action.

- **Response to 'natural disasters'.** Crises caused by natural events such as hurricanes or typhoons, droughts, earthquakes and floods are often described as 'natural disasters'. The *State of the Humanitarian System* report notes that 'only in the function of rapid response to major sudden-onset disasters can the system claim clear success' (ALNAP, 2015: 15), even if this 'success' sometimes comes at the price of the marginalisation of local authorities and NGOs. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, approved in March 2015, is a landmark agreement that aims to reduce both the mortality from and the economic impact of this kind of disaster over the next 15 years. Together with the Sustainable Development Goals, an improved framework has been put in place for addressing non-conflict-related crises in the future. This is no small achievement, but is only one kind of disaster. Only very limited improvements have been made in addressing natural hazards in the context of conflict or other political crises – in particular, slow-onset drought in the context of conflict and in the presence of armed non-state actors (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015). It should also be noted that the response to pandemics is usually treated separately from 'natural disasters', given the different social dynamics around pandemics. The *State of the System* report did not find improvements in pandemic response, noting particularly the strain that the Ebola outbreak of 2014/15 put on the humanitarian system.
- Finally, it is important to mention the numerous pan-system initiatives, such as the development

of minimum standards for humanitarian response (SPHERE), the introduction of standards for accountability to affected populations (Common Humanitarian Standard) and various initiatives related to learning and improved quality and accountability, monitoring and evaluation (ALNAP, ELRHA, PHAP, the Humanitarian Academy, etc.). While attention to accountability is increasing, the related issue of independent needs assessments and monitoring is also receiving more airtime in humanitarian circles. Practical solutions are still being sought, however.

While there have been improvements, the humanitarian sectors still faces many persistent challenges. These are outlined below.

**Growth and institutionalisation.** The rapid expansion of an organised international 'humanitarian system' has been a revolution in international relations over the last three decades. It represents the conscious effort of mainly Northern states and civil societies to relieve the suffering of distant strangers but also to contain crises that might threaten peace and security. Humanitarian action has thus emerged as a potent form of contemporary governance: a set of institutions, norms, policies, ideologies and representations that are geared towards providing assistance and protection in times of disaster and crisis. Organised humanitarianism also functions as a moral community: public opinion in the West, and increasingly elsewhere, has become used to the global spectacle of suffering and expects the global display of succour when crisis and disaster strike.

Humanitarianism has a long and diverse history, but the qualitative and quantitative transformations since the end of the Cold War are unparalleled. Organised international humanitarianism has mutated from a relatively marginal and specialised activity to one that is at the centre of contemporary international cooperation and governance. From \$2.1 billion in 1990, the combined humanitarian spend of states, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement has increased more than ten-fold to at least \$24 billion in 2015 (Development Initiatives, 2015) and above \$30 billion in 2016. This does not include the contributions of local charities,

religious groups and tithes, community organisations and affected people themselves, who are the first on the scene when disaster strikes. The visible and structured humanitarian enterprise now employs a quarter of a million people, the vast majority of whom are nationals of affected countries. With the growth of funds has come a simultaneous process of institutionalisation, proceduralisation and professionalisation of the diverse institutions that comprise what in some ways has become the world's humanitarian welfare system. In addition, there is also a growing superstructure of coordination, quality and accountability entities (OCHA, NGO coordination bodies, ALNAP, Sphere, Common Humanitarian Standard) and a cottage industry of monitoring, evaluation and humanitarian research outfits (including those at the origin of the present report). The size of this superstructure and its relationship with actual humanitarian response is itself problematic.

Many reports provide a description of the system and its functioning (Taylor et al., 2012; ALNAP, 2015; Donini et al., 2008). Like its development cousin, it has grown by accretion rather than according to some grand plan. It has many moving parts and many different types of stakeholders. New institutions have been created, amalgamated and added to old ones (Adinolfi et al., 2005; Ashdown, 2011; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2012). With the perceived emergence of new problems and situations, Western NGOs have grown and diversified beyond recognition. And so have norms, standards, procedures, layers, clusters, customs, hierarchies, coalitions of agencies, coordination mechanisms, interagency bodies, new mechanisms attempting to substitute for older ones, and the like. As one informant for this study noted, 'it has become a millefeuille' (a puff pastry).

Many would dispute there is a system.<sup>6</sup> Former Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) John Holmes quipped: 'It is not a system in any recognisable state' but 'a haphazard collection of organisations' (Cornish, 2011). Nevertheless, the system, such as it is, does function in the sense that it delivers hugely important services. Some of its parts work more effectively

than others. It saves and sometimes helps to protect innumerable lives. It can mount extraordinarily complex operations – as in Darfur or the response to the 2004 tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake or the millions of refugees who have fled Syria. Although hobbled by bureaucracy, instrumentalisation and unending turf wars, it can mobilise itself into effort. With growth has come professionalisation, the development of standards and accountabilities that make the humanitarian sector more predictable, more technically able and sometimes more effective than before. However, in the process it has lost some of the can-do voluntary spirit and flexibility that characterised its former ethos. It has become more risk averse. No-go areas have increased because of security and insurance concerns or because anti-terror legislation proscribes contact with certain groups. Face-to-face interaction has often been replaced by face-to-screen, and many of these screens are situated in bunkerised compounds where humanitarians work and live (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Donini and Maxwell, 2014; Donini and Scalettaris, 2016).<sup>7</sup>

***A supply-driven, top-down complex system.*** The system is 'of the North' and not 'of the world' (Donini, Minear and Walker, 2004). Because it commands huge resources and can decide where they are used, organised humanitarianism constitutes an important form of global governance – not in the sense that there is a single force or source of power that directs its work: rather than principles or overarching strategies, what keeps the system (somewhat) together is its network power (Grewal, 2008). It is the Northern-based agencies that have set the standards and norms by which the system operates. This network power defines the rules of the humanitarian club, which new players effectively need to accept if they want to become members. As such, this network power provides the glue that keeps the system somewhat together and allows its disparate parts to communicate with one another. But it also creates the dominant structures of what has been called the 'Empire of Humanity' (Barnett, 2011). Despite much rhetoric, the current 'supply-led paradigm' – top down,

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1 for the definition of 'system' used for this report.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that the first and last of these references mentioned here are case studies conducted specifically for the Planning from the Future project.

externally driven, with a focus on rapid action and short-term funding cycles – does not provide incentives for engaging with affected people (Brown and Donini, 2014). It produces isomorphism and creates barriers to entry for new or different actors (Hopgood, 2008). Like many systems, organised humanitarianism suffers from the classic transition of institutions from means to an end to becoming an end in themselves (Slim, 2015).

Recent research and reports have documented the growth and complexification of the institutionalised ‘oligopoly’ centred around the six UN agencies, the ICRC and six to seven federations of international NGOs that account for 80% of the humanitarian spend (Els and Carstensen, 2015). This oligopoly or ‘club’ works closely with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) donors that account for roughly two-thirds of the funding (Development Initiatives, 2015). With the exception of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and a few smaller NGOs, none of the key humanitarian agencies can afford to break away from their ‘cozy relationship’ with a handful of Northern donors (Donini et al., 2008: 30). At the same time, the complexity of the system and the transaction costs involved in making it work through multiple layers of coordination by consensus have led to the creation of an inordinately large superstructure which appears to be increasingly remote from those it purports to help (Donini and Maxwell, 2014).

***A system beholden to the powers that be.*** Since the end of the Cold War, the agendas underpinning humanitarian response have been increasingly linked to the containment of crises and the promotion of liberal peace and, more generally, Western foreign policy aims (Barnett and Weiss, 2011; Donini and Walker, 2012; Duffield, 2001). By design or by default, while it aspires to function as a kind of global safety net, the humanitarian enterprise, which grew in parallel to the capitalist system, also serves to reduce the risks of crises escalating and threatening the citadels of the North. Humanitarians are often the only (foreign) civilian actors on the ground in countries in crisis. They perform essential functions to prevent protracted crises from spiralling out of control or to prepare the terrain for the return of international industry and finance (Donini, 2010; Currion, 2015).

In recent years humanitarian action has become more overtly politicised through its subordination to *realpolitik* (Barnett and Weiss, 2011; Donini and Walker, 2012; Duffield, 2010). Decisions on where and how much to fund are hardly based solely on need. Various studies document the political factors that influence donor decision-making (Olsen et al., 2003; Walker and Pepper, 2007; Donini et al., 2012). Donor states provide funding to support their interests, and condition their support to agency partners based on these interests. ‘States will use their interests to determine whose needs matter – and they have the power to get their way’ (Barnett and Weiss, 2011: 91). Donor states are of course well aware of the risks of politicizing humanitarian action; the EU’s Humanitarian Consensus, for example, has helped to limit such risks (as in the case of Libya, which some states wanted to qualify as a ‘humanitarian intervention’). Nevertheless, states and non-state armed actors allow or deny humanitarian access based on political considerations. Access to Aleppo and other besieged areas in Syria is a case in point, where humanitarian convoys are held hostage to complex political negotiations (Parker and Slemrod, 2016).

The criminalisation of humanitarian activities under counter-terrorism legislation (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015) and comprehensive or integrated approaches that incorporate humanitarian aid into political interventions (Donini, 2016) have further blurred the lines between aid and partisan politics (Donini and Walker, 2012; Duffield, 2010). Such *instrumentalisation* in support of politico-military goals of containment and ‘stabilisation’ is now a distinctive feature of many of the contexts in which humanitarian agencies operate (Donini and Walker, 2012). Moreover, even if agencies and donors have to some extent recognized the need for a clearer separation between principled humanitarian action and other forms of international engagement, it is the perception of such subordination that undermines humanitarian activities and puts aid workers in danger.

Engaging in humanitarian action to pursue security agendas or as a substitute for political solutions necessarily means that *impartiality* – not to mention *independence or neutrality* – is undermined. An example of this was the Ebola response, which was framed in

security terms in order to facilitate the deployment of Western military forces: a perhaps necessary but worrying precedent (de Waal, 2014). Geopolitics and globalisation remain the key determinants of the space for humanitarian action. Most observers assume that the processes of globalisation will continue unabated towards a smaller, ever-more interconnected world (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Grewal, 2008). However, fragmentation or even atomisation may also occur.

Capitalist ideals underpin the Western development aid machinery with a focus on market solutions, choice, responsibility and accountability. Humanitarian aid largely shares the same underpinnings despite the rhetoric around principles (Duffield, 2012). For many observers, humanitarianism has become a business, with NGOs modelled after firms, and poor people as consumers (Hopgood, 2008). Krause (2009) views NGO work in terms of market dynamics, likening relief to a 'form of production'. Agencies or 'producers' sell their products to donors. Cooley and Ron (2002) conclude that, to be successful – to increase their bottom line – NGOs need to act like a business and/or like a state. However, Weiss and Hoffman (2007), among others, note that, unlike private business transactions, there is no straightforward feedback loop between 'buyer' and 'seller' because the consumer (crisis-affected populations) is not the same as the 'buyer' (donors) and therefore does not have the power or leverage a traditional consumer would enjoy. Numerous means have been tried to redress this gap, notably the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) and the Common Humanitarian Standard (CHS) but, for now at least, accountability is mainly framed in terms of donors rather than affected populations.

The 'global war on terror'<sup>8</sup> has heightened the securitisation and militarisation of humanitarian action. Many strategies and activities have been developed based on the assumption that poverty leads to extremism and can be remedied through the 'winning of hearts and minds' by providing civilians with development and humanitarian aid (Wilder, 2010). This logic has been challenged in a number of contexts, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Haiti, Kenya and the Ebola response (Bradbury

and Kleinman, 2010; de Waal, 2014; Fishstein and Wilder, 2012; Greenburg, 2013; Wilder, 2010; Young, 2010). First, the securitisation of aid represents a fundamental erosion or violation of humanitarian principles (Bradbury and Kleinman, 2010; Chandler, 2001; Fishstein and Wilder, 2012; Foley, 2008; Pugh, 1998; Young, 2010). Second, little evidence exists that aid applied with such a strategy has been successful in increasing security and stabilisation. In Afghanistan, Fishstein and Wilder (2012) show that aid increased corruption and competition over scarce resources and thus provided incentives to *promote* violence. It also reinforced existing inequalities. Moreover, the term 'humanitarian' has been used as a cover for hearts and minds, or worse, counter-terror operations (Donini, 2009: 6). Bradbury and Kleinman (2010) report that humanitarian assistance has not been successful in winning hearts and minds or increasing security in the Horn of Africa.

One of the clearest manifestations of the securitisation and militarisation of humanitarian assistance is the legislation prohibiting the provision, or even the accidental leakage, of material assistance to proscribed groups (Maxwell, Kim and Majid 2015; Maxwell and Majid, 2016). Counter-terrorism policies affect the impartiality of humanitarian action, increase organisations' compliance burdens and decrease their ability to access financial resources, both in terms of funding and banking services (Metcalf-Hough, Keatinge and Pantuliano, 2015). Rather than focusing on the greatest need, much energy is devoted to preventing resources from being captured or utilised by 'terrorist' groups, imposing vetting requirements and administrative hurdles which disrupt relationships with local actors, drain the resources and capacities of organisations and decrease access and aid efficiency (Claridge and Carter, 2011; Metcalfe-Hough, Keatinge and Pantuliano, 2015; Pantuliano et al., 2011). In these contexts, humanitarian assistance is thus allocated not according to need, but according to risk management criteria (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015). Islamic charities are particularly affected by reductions in funding based on counter-terrorism legislation (Pantuliano et al., 2011).

Counter-terror legislation allows for the prosecution of agencies and staff who intentionally or *unintentionally*

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<sup>8</sup> Sometimes now referred to as 'countering violent extremism'.

support proscribed groups. A fundamental tension exists between IHL and counter-terrorism laws (Foley, 2008; Hoffman, 2007; Pantuliano et al., 2011). IHL allows for humanitarian access if activities are carried out in a neutral or impartial manner. But counter-terror legislation criminalises the provision of any assistance to proscribed individuals and groups. A Supreme Court case in the US in 2010 included training on IHL as ‘material assistance’ (NRC 2013). As Glaser aptly notes, ‘aid is not supposed to take sides in conflict, but in the context of the GWOT it may have to cross sometimes invisible front lines and engage with entities considered to be terrorist’ (2007: 19). PFF case studies in Somalia and Syria document the hurdles faced by humanitarian agencies and the debates about whether or not, and how, to engage with groups such as Al Shabaab and Islamic State. Interestingly, in Afghanistan the counter-terror legislation card has been used much more rarely to discourage contact with the Taliban (Benelli, Donini and Niland, 2012).

***A system that struggles with principles ...*** Classical humanitarian principles continue to be a mainstay in the discourse of all stakeholders of organised humanitarianism. Their importance is regularly reaffirmed by donors, aid agencies and, of course, the Red Cross movement, but advances in respect for principles have been more rhetorical than real. The end of the Cold War saw the emergence of a ‘new humanitarianism’ that reaffirmed the importance of impartiality but saw neutrality as an impediment to addressing the root causes of crises (Fox, 2001; Macrae, 1998; Leader, 1998). New humanitarianism coincided with a geopolitical interventionist phase – rationalised as ‘ethical foreign policy’ by the Blair government and the emergence of rights as an important element in the humanitarian discourse. Deontologists – who are guided by their duty to save lives in the here and now – and consequentialists – who focus on the longer-term consequences of their actions – argued their cases, sometimes vociferously (Duffield, 2001; Labbé, 2013; Slim, 2015; De Torrente, 2004; O’Brien, 2004).

Deontological organisations like ICRC and, more recently, MSF, tend to focus on the intrinsic value of principles, in particular neutrality, which is seen as both a means to an end (unlike impartiality and humanity which are at

the core of the humanitarian message) and as a better guarantee of access in particularly fraught environments (Harroff-Tavel, 1989; Harroff-Tavel, 2003). ‘Wilsonian,’ ‘solidarist’ and faith-based agencies, as well as the various codes of conduct and humanitarian standards, recognise the importance of humanitarian principles, but have a much more nuanced approach to neutrality (Minear, 1999; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2012).

Much of the debate on principles is however aspirational, if not ideological. Evidence on whether neutrality is a prerequisite for effective humanitarian outcomes in conflict situations is hard to find. Field studies stress the importance of principles from an operational perspective and/or the longer-term consequences of ignoring or violating them (Terry, 2013; Benelli, Donini and Niland, 2012; Hansen, 2007). PFF case studies – in particular Syria and Somalia – document the trade-offs between access and neutrality and the consequences of alignment or accommodation with belligerents. Yet most of the evidence is derived from ‘qualitative, general analysis and think-pieces rather than empirical, field-based research over an extended timeframe with concrete findings and guidance’ (Schreter and Harmer, 2013). A recent study found that the humanitarian system ‘remains largely anecdote, rather than evidence-driven’ (Mazurana et al., 2011: 1). The poor evidence base is compounded by the disconnect between the claims of key actors in support of neutrality and practice on the ground. For example, in Afghanistan, in the context of an integrated UN mission and where all major donors were also belligerents, the norms to which donors had subscribed were quickly put aside as humanitarian actors were incorporated into the West’s nation-building agenda (Egeland, Harmer and Stoddard, 2011; Benelli, Donini and Niland, 2012).

One recent study concludes that, overall, there is no strong case in the evidence base that neutrality would in itself improve access or other positive outcomes for civilians (Combaz, 2015). The literature suggests that major determinants of outcomes for civilians are specific to the context and do not centrally involve neutrality as a variable. This does not mean that principles should be jettisoned or, as claimed by some predominately Western NGOs, used ‘for reference only’ (Minear, 2007).

Even solidarist and multi-mandate agencies recognise that, in some situations, neutrality provides the best opportunity for access, and that alignment with political agendas can be extremely detrimental in the longer term as evidence from Afghanistan and other crises shows (Terry, 2013; Donini, 2012).

Two points deserve to be stressed. First, while no serious calls so far have been made to open Pandora's box by revising the classical humanitarian principles, calls have been made to add to them. The debates in humanitarian accountability circles have sometimes suggested that accountability to beneficiaries, responsibility and solidarity should be added to ensure that humanitarian action is not only principled but also effective. Second, the diversification of the humanitarian enterprise, and particularly the greater prominence of non-Western actors, have challenged Western dominance. This has resulted in perceptions that Western principles are fine for Western agencies, but not necessarily for agencies that derive their legitimacy from, for example, Islam. Similarly, actors from the Chinese philanthropic tradition, while not openly rejecting them, do not recognise themselves in classical humanitarian principles, but rather in concepts such as responsibility and legitimacy drawn from the Confucian tradition (Krebs, 2014a).

In sum, debates show an increasing diversification of positions. No one challenges the core principles of humanity and impartiality, but it is clear that the mere fact of being unable to intervene in certain crises, either because of lack of funds or denied access, undermines the very essence of impartiality. Views on the pertinence of independence and neutrality differ and are perhaps more divergent than in the Cold War era. Neutrality remains contested. It is seen by Dunantist agencies as a means to an end – to gain access for example, or to guarantee the safety of aid workers. But it is rejected, more or less vigorously, by proponents of rights-based or developmental approaches that aim to tackle the root causes of crises. Independence is often undermined through the instrumentalisation and subordination of humanitarian action to political agendas, including for example in UN integrated missions. Our case studies show the many difficulties in navigating principles and the risks of romancing them. Classical humanitarian principles

maintain intrinsic value, but they are under threat. Whether they retain this value in the future is an open question to which we return in Chapter 3.

**... struggles with protection ...** Protection faces similar challenges. Despite formal responsibilities lodged with mandated agencies (ICRC, UNHCR and UNICEF) and much agency and system-wide rhetoric, protection has until recently been mainly an afterthought for mainstream humanitarian agencies, whose attention has traditionally been focused on material assistance (Niland et al., 2015; Niland, 2015). Many studies, including the PFF Briefing Paper on protection (Niland, 2015), have documented the reluctance of stakeholders to engage with protection issues and the difficulties of doing so. Protection is often seen as political or confrontational. Trade-offs between access and protection are often mentioned as an excuse not to raise contentious issues with belligerents; agencies often equate protection with human rights; some aid workers feel that protection 'is not their responsibility' (Niland et al., 2015; Healy and Tiller, 2014). Others have argued that protection is at best a fig-leaf for inaction, if not a delusion that humanitarians can actually protect anyone (DuBois, 2010).

Protection concerns are rarely dealt with in a strategic, system-wide manner by humanitarians, notwithstanding increased commitment to do so – at least at the level of rhetoric – and investment in building expertise and capacity as well as strengthened normative frameworks (Niland et al., 2015). Evidence from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan and PFF case studies in Somalia, South Sudan and Syria shows that the persistent default position of most practitioners and policy-makers is the traditional provision of material goods. Real time and other evaluations rarely deal with protection issues in more than a cursory manner (Niland et al., 2015). Moreover, protection issues are rarely prioritised at the decision-making level in the field and at HQ, and strategic vision and contextual intelligence on protection issues is often very weak in IASC coordination mechanisms such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and protection clusters (Niland et al., 2015; Niland 2015).

The systemic failures of the UN in Sri Lanka documented in the UN Internal Review panel report (United Nations,



2012) triggered much soul searching in the UN Secretariat, leading to the adoption of a statement on the Centrality of Protection by the IASC and the Human Rights Up Front agenda by the UN Secretary-General, which commits all staff to promoting human rights as their 'lifeblood'. This recent increased awareness of the significance of a protection lens is an important advance. However, such declarations are paralleled by the growth of a fragmented and atomised 'system' that has not kept pace with multiple changes in the operating environment. In addition, there is significant confusion as to what 'protection' means in practice (Niland et al., 2015).

The ineffectiveness of the current architecture and division of labour on protection issues points to the need for a dramatic re-thinking of the systems and methodologies needed to work effectively and in partnership with first-line responders and those directly affected by calamitous events (Niland et al., 2015). Currently, there is limited political will among stakeholders to acknowledge the need for radical reform. Inside and outside the formal system, protection issues continue to prove particularly challenging. However, those who are directly affected are more and more vocal in demanding action to address patterns of abuse that undermine their safety and dignity. The expectation is increasing that the UN and NGOs will 'come to the rescue'. Numerous studies show that the UN and the humanitarian system more generally are essentially reactive on protection issues, lack strategic understanding of how issues might be addressed and, even in the higher echelons, leadership on protection issues is often sorely lacking (United Nations, 2012; Niland et al., 2015).

Too many humanitarians, including in leadership positions, still consider that raising and addressing protection issues is not their problem (Sparrow 2016; Gutman 2016). As a result, protection activities are routinely ghettoised, inadequate and of limited effectiveness. Often, there is a focus on the uprooted – IDPs and refugees – and the needs of internally stuck people (ISPs) tend to be discounted. Even concern for the protection of refugees is becoming increasingly problematic: doors in rich countries are rapidly closing and the refugee regime itself is sorely tested – as the current refugee crisis in Europe

is demonstrating. Meeting protection needs remains a critical unresolved issue in the humanitarian system. Practical ways need to be found to demystify protection and to ensure that humanitarian leaders and agencies prioritise protection both at the strategic and operational levels (Niland et al., 2015).

**... and with state sovereignty.** Traditionally, the concept of sovereignty has been grounded in non-interference in the internal affairs of nations. This was set forth in the UN Charter, and was largely respected until the end of the Cold War despite major superpower-supported proxy wars. After the Cold War, international attitudes towards external interventions started to shift. As observed by the former UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar in 1991 'We are clearly witnessing what is probably an irreversible shift in public attitudes towards the belief that the defence of the oppressed in the name of morality should prevail over frontiers and legal documents' (Cohen, 2008). Successive Secretaries-General have echoed similar views that the time of absolute and unconditional sovereignty had passed (see for example Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Over the past two decades, constructions of sovereignty have evolved with globalisation and the progressive disappearance of alternatives to the dominant capitalist model. The assumption that weak states threatened global security has meant that international attention has turned toward issues of governance, rights and protection and humanitarian intervention (Kahn and Cunningham, 2013; Weiss, 2007). Sovereignty has thus been seen as conditional: tied to a state's ability to protect and assist those within its borders (Kahn and Cunningham, 2013). With the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (ICISS, 2001; Gulati and Khosa, 2012), intervention in the face of serious human rights violations without the consent of the state was elevated above sovereignty (Zanon, 2012: 105). However, regardless of evolving understandings of sovereignty, R2P as a mode of intervention is now much less likely to be invoked – after the intervention in Libya and the failure of the international community in Syria.

There are three main trends related to sovereignty that impact humanitarian action. The first is globalisation.

Power dynamics are changing, both vertically, away from state-ruled processes and to supranational institutions, ranging from the EU to the IMF and multinational corporations, as well as opaque financial cartels, on the one hand; and to ungoverned contested spaces that escape the control of the state and that become the preserve of armed and non-armed non-state actors, insurgents, criminal networks and the like, on the other. Globalisation subjects the world to forces that challenge the Westphalian state-centric view of international relations and points to the significance of non-state entities in shaping a post-Westphalian order. Power is also shifting horizontally, from the West to the East. This has significant implications for humanitarian action as the West's assumed monopoly on moral authority is challenged by different traditions of the role of the state and of the state's responsibility vis-à-vis groups affected by crisis or conflict. Recent studies have already shown how different 'humanitarianism' looks from China or South Asia (Krebs, 2014a; Simonow, 2015) (see below).

The second relates to intervention, whether couched in 'humanitarian' or counter-terrorism terms. The incorporation or subordination of humanitarian action to other agendas is nothing new (Donini, 2012), but many would agree that it has reached unprecedented levels in the years since 9/11. The erosion of humanitarian space both by political and security agendas and by the reactions of affected countries to intervention or the threat of intervention has been well documented, including by our own case studies (Howe, 2016; Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015) and our earlier work in Afghanistan (Benelli, Donini and Niland, 2012). A key concern of humanitarian organisations is the prospect of being associated with external interventions that affected states or non-state actors find objectionable from a political or strategic perspective. This is the case especially for activities that are perceived as linked, for example, to accountability for war crimes, human rights violations or crimes against humanity, or involve external military action for whatever purpose including action authorised by the Security Council.

The third trend is the aspiration of nations to respond to their own crises. An increasing number of countries, following the lead of India and China, are managing

their own emergencies (Harvey, 2013: 158). Others have imposed greater control over the work and movements of foreign aid agencies (Sudan, Rwanda, Myanmar, Ethiopia and South Sudan for example). This has led to tensions between host countries and humanitarians over who should 'call the shots' when disaster strikes. States are asked to allow humanitarians to operate, while at the same time humanitarians operate by their own norms and principles and are often seen as 'state avoiding' (Harvey, 2013; Kahn and Cunningham, 2013). As Kahn and Cunningham explain, 'principles were formulated to reassure states that humanitarian organisations would not interfere with their internal affairs; but increasingly humanitarian organisations wield them as a means of protecting themselves against the interference of the state' (2013: S146). As investment in disaster risk reduction increases at the national and regional level, more governments than ever before are in a position to respond to crises and assert their sovereignty in relation to humanitarian action (Harvey, 2010). This effectively means that, as national actors – governments, NGOs and others – assume a bigger role in responding to disasters, there will be less need for external support. It also means that the bulk of humanitarian action in the near future will continue to be in armed conflict settings.

A variant of this trend, encountered in the Sahel, is the tension between humanitarian and development actors around the definition of the nature of a crisis and who should take the lead in the response (OCHA, 2015b). Sovereignty-based and nationalist discourses tend, unsurprisingly, to favour the latter over the former, sometimes with serious consequences, particularly when it comes to respect for humanitarian principles (Donini and Scalettaris, 2016). This tension was highlighted at the WHS with affected states not unexpectedly affirming their prerogatives to lead and control but it was also manifest between UN humanitarian and development agencies.

***A system resistant to reform (and that is functional to the needs of its key stakeholders).*** Despite being largely embedded in the global processes mentioned above, the basics of organised humanitarianism have remained remarkably stable over the last 20 years (while more significant change has happened in the margins or outside the Northern-driven humanitarian system,

as we shall see in the next section). Power, resources and activities – the political economy – are still centred around the relationship between OECD donors and the triad of UN agencies, the Red Cross movement and a handful of federations of large NGOs.

The end of the Cold War, and the explosion of humanitarian needs that accompanied it, triggered a process of institutional reform that led to General Assembly Resolution 46/182 and the establishment of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) and the IASC, which brought together the key players in the humanitarian movement including the Red Cross movement and the INGOs. Within the UN system, these reforms were resisted in particular by UNHCR, which was promoting the 'lead agency model' that it had implemented in the Former Yugoslavia. Externally, the reforms were viewed with suspicion by developing countries, which sensed a possible challenge to their sovereignty and/or a transfer of financial resources from development to humanitarian programmes (Kent, 2004). The subsequent transition from Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) to OCHA in 1998 confirmed the central coordination function of the IASC system, while at the same time taking away any aspiration OCHA might have had to move beyond coordination by consensus to more robust approaches. It also put paid to any idea of more radical reform, such as the establishment of a single humanitarian agency incorporating the operational arms of UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF – which had been aired by Maurice Strong, James Ingram and a few others (see for example Ingram, 1993).

Over the past ten years, further institutional streamlining in the humanitarian architecture has been introduced, but there has been no radical reform. The Humanitarian Response Review (Adinolfi et al., 2005) commissioned by the ERC in 2005 identified significant gaps and weaknesses in the coordination of humanitarian action, namely the lack of a clear understanding of what coordination entailed, who should do what and with what accountabilities. This led to the creation of 'clusters' that would define clearer responsibilities in the system as well as automaticity in response. Importantly, it resolved the issue of lack of clear responsibility for IDPs by proposing to extend UNHCR's role as lead agency in the

protection of refugees to include conflict IDPs. However, it did not look at the relationship between humanitarian activities falling within the purview of the IASC and those, such as refugees, that fell outside its remit. In other words, it did not take a whole of humanitarian caseload approach (Niland et al., 2015).

The Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) and the subsequent humanitarian reform agenda that launched the cluster system, an expanded Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and an increased role for the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), followed by the 2011 Transformative Agenda processes have, to an extent, addressed some structural issues. Responsibilities for IDPs have been clarified. Responsibilities for camp management, water and sanitation, protection, etc., have been streamlined. Much normative and regulatory development as well as the production of guidance and manuals has occurred. Mechanisms for interagency accountability have started to be introduced through Operational Peer Reviews rather than Real-Time Evaluations. However, the reforms have failed to address core issues of leadership, strategic planning and joint decision-making, as well as conflicts of interest between UN agencies as donors, implementers and norm setters (Healy and Tiller, 2014; Niland et al., 2015). Case studies commissioned by the PFF project in Syria, Somalia, the Sahel and South Sudan (Howe, 2016; Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Donini and Scalettari, 2016; Maxwell and Donnelly, 2015), as well as earlier field visits to Myanmar (Niland et al., 2015) and Afghanistan (Benelli, Donini and Niland 2012), document many instances where these issues are still rife and where mandate-specific agencies still treat other stakeholders paternalistically (Healy and Tiller, 2014; Niland et al., 2015).

In analysing the architecture of the current system, a number of studies have concluded that reform efforts have not delivered. If anything, the reforms of the past decade have ossified the system rather than making it more responsive and flexible (Howe, 2016; Donini and Scalettari, 2016; Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015). The many analyses that spell out the dysfunctions of the system (Taylor et al., 2012; ALNAP, 2015; Darcy and Kiani, 2013; Development Initiatives, 2015; HPG, 2016) tend to conclude, to varying degrees, that the system is in need of reform, that it is either 'broke' or 'broken' (or both).

Many such studies recognise that rapid and informed decision-making is lacking, and that the system is overly proceduralised and complex. Most, however, conclude – as do many informants interviewed for this study – that while substantive reform is necessary, it is not realistic to expect that meaningful change can occur in the near future given institutional and other vested interests. The increasingly urgent need for such reform is stressed in Chapter 3, which looks at the importance of preparing for the longer-term future now and in the recommendations that appear at the end of that chapter.

### Trends outside the formal system

Equally important, major change has taken place outside the traditional humanitarian system.

**The rise of non-Western actors.** Until recently, the West dominated the shape of international humanitarian response, but a multipolar system is emerging. Chapter 1 reviews the history of non-Western humanitarian actors because of persistent assumptions that many of these have only ‘recently emerged’. While this is often untrue, many have greatly increased in visibility and prominence in the past decade. Hence, both Chapters 1 and 2 address the role of non-Western actors (or perhaps better labelled non-OECD/DAC, since as noted below, some are from the Western hemisphere). Regional entities such as Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the OIC and the AU are starting to influence the global development and humanitarian systems (Davey, 2012; Micheletti, 2010). Western actors have met these entities with a ‘mixture of interest, suspicion, concern, openness and opportunism: interest in their origins and attitudes; suspicion of their motives; concern at a lack of professionalism and coordination’ (Davey, 2012: 2). While Western organisations continue to dominate the humanitarian landscape the fact remains that non-Western actors are providing a significant amount of aid, and their contributions are only reluctantly acknowledged by the dominant Western system.

Part of this interest reflects the fact that ‘although the idea of saving lives and relieving suffering is hardly a Western or Christian creation, modern humanitarianism’s origins are located in Western history and Christian thought’ (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 7; Fassin, 2012).

Embedded in this moral and historical narrative is the postulate that, with some variations, the values of charity and compassion that underpin humanitarianism are universal. In other words, Western humanitarians assume that, because these values are universal, their organised expression in terms of assistance and protection activities and related institutions are also universal (Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Fiori, 2013).

Given recent global transformations and the rise of states such as Brazil, China and India in the world economy, along with the global economic position of, for example, oil-producing Middle Eastern states, states in the global South will likely play an increasingly important role by both being better able to help themselves when disaster strikes, and by projecting their ‘soft power’ through development and humanitarian initiatives. Their ‘zero point’ – the point from which they look at the world – is different, as is their historical experience of the processes of colonialism, capitalist development and the expansion of Western rationality (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013), Kot-Majewska (2015) and Fiori (2013) all stress the different starting points and agendas of non-Western actors. At the more operational level, our case studies in Somalia and Syria document the growing influence of such actors and some of the problems, or ambivalences, in their relationships with mainstream agencies.

Some of the literature stresses the similarities or the compatibilities between non-Western approaches and the Western humanitarian canon. For example, over the past decade the ICRC has spent considerable time and effort engaging with Islamic scholars in order to highlight the compatibilities between Islam and IHL (Abdirashid et al., 2015). Turkey’s increasing role as a relief player with its own ‘soft power’ agendas, both implemented by the state and by Turkish NGOs, has also been studied (Bayer and Keyman, 2012; Binder and Erten, 2013; Binder, 2014; Tank, 2015).

- **China.** The special case of China deserves to be underscored. China has a 2,000-year tradition in philanthropy, largely based on Confucian precepts of legitimacy and responsibility. The term *rendao* (humanitarian) first appeared in Chinese literature two millennia ago, and while Europe was still in the Middle Ages, China already had sophisticated

state systems for relief in times of famine or disasters (Krebs, 2014a; Krebs, 2014b). Because of its historical suspicion of the West, the Maoist dismissal of 'charity' as 'bourgeois' and the emphasis on non-interference in the internal matters of states, considerable obstacles still exist to China's involvement in humanitarian matters abroad. Much emphasis is placed on disaster response within the country via the Chinese Red Cross and the People's Liberation Army. Most observers expect China to become increasingly active, on its own terms, in humanitarian issues abroad. China contributed to the Typhoon Haiyan response (after being initially shamed for not doing so), and sent state-sponsored assistance through government-supported NGOs to the Nepal earthquake response in 2015. Numerous more-or-less independent 'NGOs' or philanthropic groups are emerging – and are even encouraged by the state, particularly in the health sector, where state structures are increasingly unable to cope.

- ***The Cuban model.*** The PFF-commissioned briefing paper on Cuba (Dahrendorf, 2015) shows that a small country, acting outside the dominant system, using its own state resources and intelligently leveraging those of friendly states, can have an important impact in the delivery of emergency medical assistance. Cuba's participation in a range of humanitarian emergencies, primarily through its exportable medical expertise, dates back to the 1960s. More recent significant engagements include in Pakistan, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa and in Nepal. The Cuban approach with strategically targeted activities that are firmly rooted in a long history of socialist ideology and political culture is an interesting counterpoint to mainstream organised humanitarian action. Interventions are localised and directed through a centralised government, and are integral to a form of 'health diplomacy' which also involves large-scale training of foreign medical personnel in Cuba and their deployment in the remotest areas in countries in the region and beyond (Dahrendorf, 2015).
- ***Turkey, the Gulf States and the rise of Islamic humanitarianism.*** The Turkish government agency

TIKA, the Turkish Red Crescent and Turkish NGOs were prominent humanitarian actors during the Somalia famine of 2011 and its aftermath. That crisis also stimulated a response from Gulf States as well including Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Iran. Turkish agencies – and to a degree other Middle Eastern agencies – were notable in that they were based in Somalia, not in Nairobi, where the UN and most of the western humanitarian effort was located (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015). Turkey has been a major humanitarian actor in the Syria crisis since it began, with programmes implemented both by the state and by NGOs (Bayer and Keyman, 2012; Binder and Erten, 2013; Binder, 2014; Tank, 2015). By 2013, Turkey had become the fourth largest humanitarian donor in the world (although its share subsequently declined). Saudi Arabia was already a major humanitarian donor, though not as active in terms of putting agencies on the ground. However, it is starting to provide aid to other countries (e.g. Haiti), and reportedly plans to increase its humanitarian budget. At the same time, it combines hard (bombing) and soft (bankrolling aid) power in Yemen. Farther afield, Malaysia – with Mercy Malaysia – has also become an established humanitarian player, as has Indonesia, with the large-scale involvement of Muhammadiyah, the second-largest Indonesian NGO, in disaster relief (Bush, 2015). The OIC became the second-largest coordination platform after the UN in Somalia, and continues to play a leading role among member states in coordinating Islamic agencies, both governmental and non-governmental. Despite repeated requests, it has not been admitted into the IASC – a cause of some friction with the established 'system'. Islamic identity and solidarity is an underlying theme that both characterises much of this sector and informs sources of funds as well as areas of activity. As noted earlier, Islamic solidarity and principles of charity motivated donations of money and responses by many individuals and governments in Turkey and the Gulf States (Al Yahya and Fustier, 2011).

***The rise of private donors.*** The number of non-state funders of humanitarian assistance is growing.

One-quarter of funding for humanitarian assistance comes from private donors, the majority of whom are individuals (Stirk, 2014). Such donors are more likely to provide financial backing for natural disasters than conflict-related crises. Some large federations of NGOs rely nearly exclusively (MSF) or primarily (World Vision International) on individual contributions. Private support – which consists of about 40% of funding for NGOs globally – tends to be stable, while institutional funds – which represent the majority of UN support at 95% – can be volatile and are often earmarked (Stirk, 2014). Public/private partnerships are on the whole increasing (IRIN, 2013). Four of the top five private humanitarian donors from 2009 to 2013 are from the Middle East (Stirk, 2014). In many emergency settings the private sector is increasingly involved either directly in the provision of assistance – as in the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines – or more indirectly through insurance schemes against drought or crop failure, particularly in Africa (see above).

***Subsidiarity, devolution and localisation.*** Power relations in the organised humanitarian system are increasingly being contested by the growing number of national NGOs and Community-based Organisations (CBOs) – and increasingly by networks of agencies from the Global South – that are often the first responders in disasters, but feel that they are at best considered as useful implementing partners for international agencies, rather than as humanitarian actors in their own right. They challenge the inherent paternalism of sub-contracting arrangements that frequently do not allow for any genuine capacity building of national organisations, and the barriers to entry that the ‘official’ system imposes. According to one estimate, less than 2% of international funds go directly to national NGOs. The rest is channelled through one or more intermediaries (Gingerich and Cohen, 2015). PFF case studies have documented many instances where the interests of international agencies trump those of emerging national NGOs (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Howe, 2016; Donini and Scalettaris, 2016). More organised voices of NGOs from the global South have been heard in the run-up to the WHS and at the WHS itself, culminating with the launch of the NEAR southern NGO coordination network. Some groupings of NGOs have articulated an objective of ‘20% of direct

funding to national NGOs by 2020’. The mantra of ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’ has received wide acceptance at the level of rhetoric. The ‘Grand Bargain’ struck at the WHS proposes a target 25% of funding to local agencies in the global south.

It is far from clear if the incentive structures of the system, which still benefit the global rather than the local, are amenable to change beyond the instrumental use of local partners in areas where it is too difficult or dangerous for international agencies to operate (Donini and Maxwell, 2014). Some large international NGOs have initiated a process of ‘nationalising’ their own country programmes. Others are talking about shifting progressively from a direct operational role to one of norm setting and advocacy (Gingerich and Cohen, 2015). Some have argued that it is time (for the Northern agencies) to ‘let go’ (HPG, 2016). This issue received a lot of attention at the WHS beyond the 25% of funding target (see below). The difficulty facing any reform in this area is that most Western donor agencies do not have the staff capacity to manage hundreds of modest-sized grants, and so prefer to provide large grants to UN agencies or international NGOs, and outsource to them partnerships with local organizations. While this addresses the capacity gap, it leaves local organizations in the role of sub-contractors to international agencies. The suggested alternative is pooled funds that might be administered by a local NGO, or a local consortium.

***Social networks, community agency and voluntary spirit.*** In many cases technology and distance have conspired to take the ‘human’ out of ‘humanitarian’. This is manifested in many ways. In the Sahel, for example, even established humanitarian agencies are losing their ‘fieldcraft’, in the sense that they may be technically proficient in their own field but less able to relate to the issues as seen from the perspectives of the communities they purport to serve: they have become more remote, both physically and emotionally. One experienced aid worker quipped, ‘We are losing our ability to be inside the crisis. We spend too much time in coordination, writing plans and reports and we are losing our ability to actually save lives’ (Donini and Scalettaris, 2016).

Another telling example is the failure of the organised humanitarian system, with the exception of MSF and a few other NGOs, to set up a coherent response to the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the Balkans in the latter half of 2015. Much of the response was left, at least initially, to voluntary initiatives of ordinary citizens and ‘pop-up’ groups, while established agencies were absent from the beaches and border fences – or overly constrained in their capacity to respond. In Lesvos, where some 500,000 asylum-seekers arrived on dinghies from Turkey in the second half of 2015, and up to several thousand a day in November, the brunt of the humanitarian response was borne by local people, the Greek Coast Guard and an assortment of ad hoc groups, rather than by UNHCR or established NGOs (Stevis, 2015). The reluctance or inability of mainstream agencies to quickly mobilise resources and presence is symptomatic of how remote the humanitarian system has become from the problems of ordinary people, especially when these problems do not fit in the scripts that agencies are accustomed to. We shall return to this issue in the concluding section of this chapter.

In the absence of adequate external support, communities have long relied on their own means to cope with crisis as best they can. Indeed, some analyses show that as much as two-thirds of the total support that crisis-affected populations access worldwide does not come from organised humanitarian agencies, but from people’s own communities, local business communities, diaspora groups and other social networks (Hammond, 2013). This phenomenon is now coming to be known as ‘responders of first resort’ because people must often get by with this kind of assistance for some time before international or state-led efforts can reach them (Maxwell, Kim and Majid 2015; Maxwell and Majid, 2016). This is linked to the trend towards ‘localisation’ discussed above, but in many ways goes beyond it. Any attempt to reorganise humanitarian action needs to take account of this agency, but must also recognise that it is frequently insufficient on its own, and can easily be undermined by externally driven action.

## 2.3. The humanitarian malaise

The preceding section described key trends and changes in the humanitarian landscape. Here we capture the creeping sense of malaise<sup>9</sup> in the humanitarian community and dig deeper into the critical issues that need to be urgently addressed.

### The symptoms of the malaise

The humanitarian system has seen substantial growth, institutionalisation and professionalisation, but despite (or in part *because* of) this, the system is facing systemic problems. PFF case studies, and recent reports analysing field-level operations, show that, while time-tested tools, funds and capacities are readily available, a widespread malaise is perceptible among agencies and their leaders (Guterres, 2015a; Miliband and Gurumurthy, 2015; Egeland, 2016; Barnett and Walker, 2015). Recent crises from Afghanistan to Somalia, Haiti and Sri Lanka as well as current emergencies – in Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Ebola, Ukraine, Yemen, the Mediterranean and Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda, among other less visible crises – question the very foundations and capacities of humanitarian action and of the galaxy of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals. The intractable nature of many crises and the instrumental use of humanitarian action to deflect attention from the political failures of the so-called international community are leading to a growing realisation that the humanitarian system as presently constituted is not fit for purpose. It further highlights a growing dissonance about what the purpose should be. Indeed, the very notion of a humanitarian ‘system’ is in dispute. In other words, the system is in a kind of stasis: it is incapable of reforming itself and the external context is such that no appetite exists for externally induced change. Perspectives vary on whether it is ‘broken’ or just ‘broke’ (Guterres, 2015a; Aly, 2015; Currión, 2015), but even the UN Secretary-General’s report for the WHS recognises that it faces a critical moment, in some ways similar to the discussions during the Second World War on the

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<sup>9</sup> Malaise refers to a sense of extreme discomfort and anxiety. Some observers refer to these same symptoms as an ‘existential crisis’. The use of the term malaise here is deliberate – the humanitarian system could continue in its current form but would eventually face a crisis of existential proportions.

future international system (2016, para. 6). Organised humanitarian action continues to save and protect countless lives, but there is a yawning gap between what it is able to do and the increasing magnitude of need (which the humanitarian financing report estimates as a gap of \$25 billion).

Saying that the humanitarian system is not ‘fit for purpose’ has become commonplace within aid agencies, even at the highest level. Thoughtful analyses have also emerged from academia and think tanks addressing various aspects of this malaise (Duffield, 2012; Healy and Tiller, 2014; Barnett and Walker, 2015 and among many others, including a proliferation of internal agency position papers and inputs into the WHS). The most important aspects of this malaise are discussed in this section.

Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata was wont to say that there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems. In situations like Syria, where there is a geopolitical deadlock in the UN Security Council, humanitarians can only occupy whatever space is authorised by politics. When confronted with barrel bombs or boat people drowning in the Mediterranean, humanitarians feel powerless. All they can do is a rudimentary sort of triage between lives that are sacrificed and those that can be saved. In Somalia, despite good information and repeated warnings, a famine resulted from the refusal of an armed non-state actor to grant access and donors prioritising counter- terrorism over humanitarian concerns. Humanitarianism cannot break out of the space that politics assigns to it. This is the core of the malaise (Niland et al., 2015; Fassin, 2012; Maxwell and Majid, 2016). One is left to wonder if the so-called ‘international community’ is actually committed to an effective humanitarian regime, or whether the status quo is functional to the interests of the powers that be.

The symptoms of malaise fall into several categories. Some are related to the external environment, the limits and failures of the liberal peace and so-called ‘new humanitarianism’ agenda discussed in the previous section (Duffield, 2001; Duffield, 2012; Rieff, 2002). Other symptoms, as we have seen, relate to the multiplication of actors in the humanitarian theatre – relief agencies and

donors from different traditions, but also non-state armed actors such as Al Qaeda or Daesh. And finally, symptoms that relate to the pathologies in the internal functioning of the humanitarian enterprise, though some of these are related to the politics that surrounds the enterprise.

### Symptoms of the malaise at field level

The internal symptoms have been well documented in a number of crisis settings, including in particular Afghanistan, Darfur, Haiti, the response to Typhoon Haiyan and in our own case studies in South Sudan, Somalia, Syria and the Sahel.<sup>10</sup> While many of the elements of the ‘humanitarian malaise’ explored here are manifest at the level of the overall system, there are also widespread perceptions of malaise at the field level, noted in PFF case studies that ‘the system is rotten’. Much of the written material reviewed for the case study in Somalia was optimistic that, while mistakes were made during the response to the famine, lessons were learned, new systems were put in place and resilience approaches were now driving the agenda. Interviews with individuals on the ground had a much more pessimistic tone. Likewise in South Sudan, Syria and the Sahel, while the dynamics were different, an aura of pessimism had definitely set in by mid-2015. This section attempts to illustrate this ‘view from the ground’ by spelling out the observable symptoms of the malaise. These issues are explored in more depth in the individual PFF case studies (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Donini and Scalettaris, 2016; Maxwell and Donnelly, 2015; Howe, 2016).

- In an era of increased remote management, agency staff – especially international staff – do not know enough about what is happening on the ground. This feeds a fear that things might be going wrong; it also feeds the perceived need for ever-greater amounts of information, much of which goes unused and un-analysed.
- Staff sense that the humanitarian system corrupts benefactors and beneficiaries. It appears beholden to political agendas that only vaguely relate to

<sup>10</sup> On Afghanistan see Donini et al., 2012 chapter 3; Benelli et al., 2012; FIC reports on hearts and minds. On Darfur: Young, 2012; Haiti: Schuller, 2012.

protecting life or livelihoods and prioritises other objectives in the guise of caring about people.

- There is a sense that the possibility of real reform under current circumstances is entirely hostage to political processes and that humanitarians alone cannot reform the system further.
- The 'humanitarian community' is fragmented; the competitive structure of funding makes it hard to share learning; everyone calls for greater accountability, but despite many efforts to advance accountability there is a growing sense that real accountability accrues mostly only to donors, not the affected populations for whom aid is intended.
- Staff turnover is high and new people have to relearn the same lessons, often the hard way.
- Diversion of humanitarian assistance, especially in conflict, has long been a problem. The more 'remote' the management, the worse the problem has become. It is very difficult to monitor local partners – the rise in third-party monitoring helps with accountability in the short term, but does little to build genuine trust in the long term and in fact often undermines it.
- Examples abound of the 'elite capture' of the benefits of programming and of collusion between local elites and local agency staff as well as international staff, hence the perception of the system being 'rotten'.
- There is little joint sharing of risk, and little incentive to report problems. There are real incentives to stop diversion, but huge disincentives to reporting it when it happens. Telling the truth about anything becomes very difficult. Everyone has had to tolerate some degree of diversion, but no one can say so. This makes an honest discussion very difficult, and contributes, again, to the assessment that something is very wrong with the system.
- The humanitarian community has tried to deal with these problems, and at the level of individual agencies and individual groupings of agencies progress has been made. Risk management practices by agencies have improved significantly. On the other hand, there are reports of agencies approaching third-party monitoring groups offering to pay them money in exchange for a clean rating that the agencies can then use with donors or UN agencies.
- Attempts to improve risk management have also

inevitably had the effect of reducing the amount of assistance: when the emphasis is on stopping 'leakage', almost by definition 'under-coverage' increases.

- Professionalisation of staff has brought benefits, but proceduralisation and the heavy reliance on short-term contracts combine in loss of fieldcraft and increased remoteness. Bureaucratisation results in lengthy procedures that favour conformity rather than flexibility or innovation and often stifles field capacity.
- There is a general view that the humanitarian community lacks a collective voice. UN Humanitarian Coordinators and coordination mechanisms are not playing this role. There is little appetite for collective action even among relatively like-minded NGOs, with each forced into different competitive arrangements on funding. Coordination mechanisms outside the IASC framework are burgeoning. The NEAR network, launched at WHS is but one example.
- Difficulties remain in identifying good partners: if one agency has a bad experience with a partner, it does not necessarily inform other agencies. All this underlines the lack of trust in the system.

Much of this sense of pessimism results from the fact that new practices or changes have not made old problems go away. Multi-year funding is in place, for instance, but many respondents do not believe that the humanitarian community has taken full advantage of this. Mistrust undermines relations among humanitarian agencies, governments and donors, but also relations with affected communities. Within the humanitarian community itself, between international and local partners, or between agencies working within an affected country and those working cross-border or in neighbouring countries. All of these combine to produce high burn-out rates and high turnover of (particularly international) staff, both of which in turn tend to undermine agency learning, and thus perpetuate the problem. As a result, the system becomes more risk-averse and less innovation-minded – which is made worse by the security regimes established by the UN and INGOs, and by the increasing hold of security (non-humanitarian) personnel over humanitarian decisions. In many of the contexts studied, there is widespread

scepticism vis-à-vis the leadership and architecture of the system – in particular coordination structures seen as overly complex, costly and duplicative – and their relation to the needs of crisis-affected people.

These internal symptoms represent some of the recurring failings that put into question the *raison d'être* of the humanitarian enterprise. Some have to do with the political instrumentalisation of humanitarian action (Donini, 2012; Duffield, 2001; Rieff, 2002), but also with a kind of stubborn 'condemned to repeat' syndrome (Terry, 2002; Cooley and Ron, 2002; Weiss and Hoffman, 2007; Barakat, Deely and Zyck, 2010), as well as a deep sense of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' (Maxwell and Majid, 2016), all of which include issues such as the inability to learn from or deal with the past; the frequent ignorance of the history of crises (or across crises) and low institutional memory.

Counter-terror legislation, insurance concerns and the development of new technologies (drones, cash transfers via mobile phones, etc.) also conspire to increase the distance between aid agencies and their populations of concern. Duffield (2012) has termed this shift the bunkerisation and fortification of aid work, or the creation of a protected 'aid archipelago' that puts distance between aid workers and the communities where they work. Duffield (2012) questions whether rising insecurity for aid workers is real, or whether it is a function of growing risk aversion and the decline of Western influence globally. Perhaps it would be more precise to talk of the erosion of Western humanitarian space.

PFF case studies, in particular on Syria and Somalia (Howe, 2016; Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015), document the growing distance between international actors and at-risk groups as well as the burgeoning of initiatives that do not conform to the Western humanitarian canon, or purposely reject it. These initiatives range from diaspora groups, the use of remittances, local self-help groups that are too small to compete for international resources, Islamic NGOs that eschew established coordination and funding mechanisms (or are not invited to them), and the like. In sum, while a variety of symptoms of this malaise are observable, it is not clear whether the causes are singular, universal and

predictable, or if the causes are multiple, contingent, idiosyncratic and context-specific.

### **No-go areas**

Humanitarian access – a linchpin for the rights of affected groups to humanitarian action – has mutated in lockstep with the changing nature of crises. As most humanitarian need is a direct result of conflict, access is thus tied to the political and military agendas of armed state and non-state actors, and broader perceptions and experiences of security (Bernard, 2013; Taylor et al., 2012). Access is both a reflection of who can get what where, and who gets hurt in the process.

The current nature of conflict puts civilians in the line of fire to an unprecedented extent. The denial of access to humanitarian action is a violation of IHL and one that state parties to the Geneva conventions disrespect in pursuit of their war aims. The plight of the hundreds of thousands of ISPs besieged in Syria is a case in point. It echoes similar wilful disregard for the law in Sri Lanka, South Sudan and Myanmar and the inability or unwillingness of the international community to take action to stop the killing. Despite the rhetoric of Human Rights Up Front and the IASC statement on the Centrality of Protection, there is a widespread perception that the UN humanitarian wing has been ineffective in confronting the reality of barrel bombs and the use of starvation as a weapon of war (Howe, 2016; Gutman, 2016; Sparrow, 2016), and that humanitarian assistance has de facto supported belligerents (Martínez and Eng 2016).

Contemporary war tactics put aid workers at particular risk. In 2013, 474 aid workers were attacked, and 155 were killed (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2014). Victims of attacks are predominantly local staff of NGOs and Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies. This violence occurred almost exclusively in countries with weak governance or actively engaged in conflict, such as Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2014). Figure for 2014 have decreased slightly, but this is likely a direct result of organisational withdrawal because of insecurity. In that year 329 aid workers were attacked in 21 countries, of whom 121 were killed, 88 wounded and 120 kidnapped. Aid agencies have become more risk-averse and are changing their mode of operating (Egeland,

Harmer and Stoddard, 2011; Duffield, 2012). Several studies have explored the motives for and typology of attacks against aid workers (Fast, 2014; Labonte and Edgerton, 2013; Steets, Reichhold and Sagmeister, 2012).

The shrinking (Western) humanitarian space is largely a function of the GWOT and its widespread implications, which include the increased politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian action on the one hand and, on the other, the introduction of anti-terror legislation by many Western countries, which proscribes interaction with listed non-state armed actors such as Hamas, Al Shabab or the Taliban (Pantuliano, Mackintosh and Elhawary, 2011; Mackintosh, 2011; Fraterman, 2013; Maxwell and Majid, 2016). These counter-terrorism laws and related measures have increased operating costs, slowed down operational response, curtailed funding and undermined humanitarian partnerships. They have also prevented access and altered the quality of assistance. Some argue that they violate IHL (Fraterman, 2013). Importantly, they have altered the relationship between agencies and the at-risk groups that they work with (Duffield, 2012; Donini and Maxwell, 2014). But it should also be noted that some crises characterised by extremely restricted access, such as South Sudan or the Central African Republic, do not involve specifically labelled 'terrorist' groups. In either case, increasing proportions of the humanitarian caseload have now become unreachable. This challenges the principle of impartiality. Moreover, insurance concerns further limit the reach of humanitarians. New technologies are only a very partial solution to this problem, which is likely to increasingly affect assistance and, even more, protection activities.

### **Humanitarian financing**

While humanitarian budgets have grown dramatically, Table 1 makes it clear that needs have grown even faster, resulting in a seemingly ever-increasing 'gap' between humanitarian needs and the resources required to address them. Indeed, the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing suggests that the current level of funding may only be about *half* of what is actually required (HLPHF, 2016). This has led to a debate about whether the humanitarian system as it exists is 'broken' or merely 'broke' (Aly, 2015). While there are consistent shortfalls,

and these shortfalls must be addressed in a systematic (not *ad hoc*) manner, the problems related to humanitarian finance go well beyond a simple shortfall in resources. The problems of finance are symptoms of the deeper problems confronting humanitarian action more broadly.

First, not all crises, or all affected populations, are treated equally. Darcy and Hofmann (2003) pointed out well over a decade ago that the level of response to crisis could in no way be considered 'impartial'. Some crises and some populations are deemed to be of much greater strategic importance to donors than others, and hence those crises and those populations receive a lot more attention and resources. High-profile crises achieve a much higher proportion of needs met than 'hidden' crises, and the response to a given crisis may vary significantly from one year to the next, depending on donor priorities. In South Sudan, for instance, 90% of humanitarian needs were funded in 2014, the year that the current conflict/displacement crisis really began (Development Initiatives, 2015), but only 46% of the needs of the same affected populations were funded in 2015, when donors had grown exasperated with the refusal of the main parties to the conflict to resolve their differences peacefully (OCHA, 2015a). Darcy and Hofmann (2003) pointed out that the humanitarian system did not even have a mechanism by which to compare the severity of crises. However, that has now changed with the introduction of innovations such as Integrated Phase Classification analysis. But acquiring the analytical capacity has not dramatically changed the politics of funding.

Second, as noted in section 2.1, most of the funding arrangements are predicated on the assumption of short-term, acute 'emergencies'. Yet it has been clear for at least the past decade that protracted crises have become the norm (FAO/WFP, 2010; Maxwell, Russo and Alinovi, 2012). Funding mechanisms have begun to reflect this changing reality. Some humanitarian donors now have multi-year funding options, but many do not.

Third, there is an assumption of a clean divide between what constitutes 'humanitarian' and 'development' action – and therefore funding – in protracted crises or fragile and post-conflict contexts. Indeed, 'bridging

the humanitarian/development divide' is one of the most common refrains heard in humanitarian reform discussions in the run-up to the WHS and at the WHS itself (United Nations Secretary-General, 2016). Yet funding 'windows' – and the kind of assumptions, time frames, analysis and reporting requirements that go with them – remain much the same as they have always been. In protracted crises in particular, *both* humanitarian and development actors have long recognised the importance of protecting livelihoods and enabling people not just to survive crises, but also to protect themselves in advance and to recover afterwards – objectives that now come together under the rubric of 'resilience'. Despite the rhetoric, relatively few funding mechanisms have emerged to seamlessly finance 'resilience' interventions. Most resilience funding remains a patchwork of old mechanisms. However, there are several modest reforms to the previous system: many donors now make multi-year humanitarian grants, mix and match humanitarian and development objectives and funding in resilience programmes, and build 'crisis modifiers' into development programmes. In non-conflict emergencies, many donors and national governments have invested heavily in scalable social safety nets that can assist chronically vulnerable groups in 'normal' years, and expand to pick up an emergency caseload in 'bad' years. Donors are increasingly providing indirect funding to local actors, for example through country-based pooled funds. However, most donor countries are not able to provide direct funding to many small local actors due to capacity and accountability issues. Most donor countries do not have the presence in countries to identify and vet local actors, enter into agreements with them or monitor them. The Grand Bargain, which commits donors to longer-term, less earmarked and more 'local' funding, puts additional pressure on donors to overcome such hurdles.

Fourth, despite a lot of lip service, there is still a poorly articulated link between what communities themselves endeavour to do to be more resilient in the face of protracted or recurrent crisis, and what the international community does to support them. There is still very limited direct international funding of local organisations (Gingerich and Cohen, 2015) and limited understanding of – let alone good ways of working with – communities' own efforts (Maxwell, Kim and Majid 2015). While there

is discussion about the role of local actors and diasporas, for example, there is relatively little in the way of concrete examples of enabling or working to support their responses – and indeed in many cases political priorities undermine these strategies (for example, pressure to close down money transfer links into Somalia – a lifeline on which many Somalis depend in good times and crises – because of the possibility that terrorist groups were being financed through such mechanisms).

In the run-up to the WHS, a variety of proposals emerged for reforming the financing of humanitarian action (Future Humanitarian Financing, 2015; HLPFH, 2016; United Nations Secretary-General, 2016; HPG, 2016). These include greater attention from donors to address underlying causes of conflict and crises – or 'shrinking the need'; expanding and diversifying the resource base, including attempting to engage with diasporas and new forms of finance such as Islamic Social Finance; and a 'grand bargain' between traditional donors and humanitarian agencies that would effectively promise more flexible, less earmarked and larger amounts of funding for humanitarian action in return for greater accountability, transparency and cost effectiveness on the part of agencies, together with a commitment to joint needs assessment (HLPFH, 2016). The Grand Bargain came in for widespread support at the WHS, but how it plays out in reality remains to be seen.

The Secretary-General's report for the World Humanitarian Summit calls for equal attention to peace-building and conflict resolution (noting that the UN humanitarian budget now dwarfs its peacekeeping and special political missions budget combined) (United Nations Secretary-General, 2016). It also calls for greater investment in local organisations and local capacities, better risk management and new funding arrangements for situations of protracted crisis. Both of these underline the general trends towards a greater emphasis on resilience as an integral part of humanitarian action, and greater emphasis on local organisations in response to protracted crises. Yet the implications of proposed reforms – for localisation, for impartiality, for protection or indeed even for the likelihood of securing adequate amounts of money – are only beginning to be explored.

Until recently humanitarian funding was the near exclusive preserve of a relatively closed club of OECD donors. Non-Western donors have either struggled to be accepted in this club (OIC) or have stayed away altogether (Gulf, Saudis). Calls have been made to find a way of addressing this imbalance through assessed contributions<sup>11</sup> or through an ‘automatic funding’ mechanism such as a levy on airplane tickets (HLPFH, 2016). While both such measures would go a long way in spreading the responsibility for funding humanitarian assistance across the globe, neither has much likelihood of being adopted in the near future. Efforts in this direction are likely to continue. Even the introduction of a modicum of assessed contributions to OCHA appeals, through a restructured CERF for example, to which all member states would be asked to contribute, would provide a strong signal that humanitarian action is a social good and thus a collective responsibility of all members of the UN. Truly international funding combined with independent needs assessments and independent monitoring and evaluation would amount to a welcome revolution in the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise.

### **Failure of leadership**

Leadership – at all levels of responsibility – is critical for humanitarian effectiveness. However, failures are all too common. These range from the systemic to the ordinary. Many fall under the dictum, attributed to Edmund Burke, that ‘the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing’. Such was the case in the final months of the Sri Lankan war, when the international community and the UN humanitarian leadership in the country as well as at HQ, and the IASC, essentially stood by, powerless or unable to counter massive targeted attacks on civilians or challenge the warring parties and their backers (United Nations, 2012). Similar systemic failures have occurred in Rwanda (Eriksson et al., 1996)

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<sup>11</sup> On the use of assessed contributions for humanitarian action, see Stoddard, A., ‘A practical Response to MSF’s ‘Where is Everyone’’, *The Guardian*, 23 July 2014; and Antonio Guterres’ statement at the Third Committee of the UNGA, 5 November 2014: ‘I believe that in the future, humanitarian response should be able to rely partially on assessed contributions ... This would be a way to minimise the dramatically increasing gap between needs and available resources in humanitarian response.’

and more recently in Syria, where the system seems paralysed in challenging the inhumanity of the war and where, for example, it took four years before the UN humanitarian leadership felt comfortable in including the term ‘protection’ in the UN Strategic Response Plan (Niland et al., 2015: 44; Howe, 2016). The obstacles to principled and effective humanitarian action in Syria, and many other conflict situations, may well be formidable, but the PFF case studies and earlier visits to Afghanistan and Myanmar have found many instances where staff were reluctant, or felt unsupported, or that it was not their duty to act on difficult or controversial issues such as protection. To a large extent this depends on organisational culture and senior management support, in addition to personal commitment.

Despite the rhetoric of Human Rights Up Front and the IASC statement on the Centrality of Protection, there are limited incentives for the HC or HCT to take bold decisions, and this trickles down the staff hierarchy. The organisational culture prefers conformity to challenging authority. Short-term contracts and high turnover of staff compound the problem. As one recent study notes, when you step out of the mould and ‘irritate a government or a major agency, and if you do not have a lot of experience, then you are putting your whole career on the line’ (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011: 49). Similar concerns, combined with the lack of consensus within the IASC and the challenge of parallel coordination frameworks, are inhibiting bolder, proactive leadership in the Syrian crisis (Howe, 2016). In a system based on consensus and with many layers of coordination, reaching agreements on critical issues, such as how to deal with abusive belligerents, is a very labour-intensive process that requires much vertical (to HQ) and horizontal (across agencies) consultation. Turf and mandate issues, as our case studies in Syria and the Sahel and many other contexts show, often compound the problem.

In crisis settings, including disasters, HCs are frequently double-hatted, with functions as RCs that result in multiple responsibilities including humanitarian, human rights, governance and development, as well as staff security. Prior experience greatly determines the extent to which an HC understands IHL and humanitarian principles and has the capacity to be visionary and



strategic in contested governance settings. Evidence from our Sahel case study among others (Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka), points to a great deal of hesitation among HCs in prioritising humanitarian action over longer-term development agendas and the relationship with the government. HCs with traditional development backgrounds are more likely to subordinate humanitarian priorities to longer-term development goals and relations with government authorities. Debates on ‘ending need’, prompted by the UN Secretary-General’s WHS report, and on merging humanitarian and development coordination mechanisms, also aired at the WHS, potentially address some of the coordination issues and gaps, particularly in post crisis early recovery, but on the other hand could potentially have a deleterious effect on principled humanitarian action.

In UN peacekeeping settings where there is an integrated mission, HCs can have triple functions. In the DRC, Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia and South Sudan amongst others, the HC/RC is also the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General. Humanitarian issues can become secondary to political/military or state-building agendas. UN integration efforts represent, in theory at least, increased coherence from a political and programmatic perspective and potential for more strategic positioning of humanitarian issues. To date, even though the risks of integration have been recognised, and specific policy tools developed, tensions between peace, development and humanitarian priorities still exist, as our work in Mali or South Sudan shows, as well as earlier work in Afghanistan (Benelli, Donini and Niland, 2012). The fundamental contradiction of placing under a political mandate activities that draw their legitimacy from IHL and humanitarian principles has not been resolved. There have been calls for separating the HC function from the RC (and SRSG) in order to insulate humanitarian action from politicisation, and a stand-alone HC was appointed in the Central African Republic. But the trend, as noted above, seems to be toward more integration than separation or insulation of humanitarian from political/development functions. At a minimum, where there are calls for greater collaboration between humanitarian and development actors – particularly in situations of protracted crisis – an RC/HC requires deep experience of both in order to be able to function effectively.

The recent move to appoint Regional Humanitarian Coordinators – as in the Sahel and Syria – complicates leadership even further. In the Sahel, the RHC has no authority over the HC/RCs at the country level, whose focus is primarily developmental. In the view of some observers, this results in a dilution rather than a strengthening of leadership (Donini and Scalettari, 2016). The same occurs between HCs and the OCHA country offices which are now separate entities with different reporting lines (OCHA, 2011). The Head of the OCHA office no longer reports directly to the HC. This dilutes leadership, adds an additional layer and increases the potential for tension, especially when the HC/RC has a developmental rather than humanitarian background (Donini and Scalettari, 2016). The formal separation of the IASC coordination mechanism from the responsibility for coordination of refugee assistance and protection, which remains with UNHCR, also affects leadership and precludes a whole-of-crisis and whole-of-caseload approach.

While the issue of leadership has often been identified as a major constraint to principled and effective humanitarian action (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011), recent reforms (HRR and TA) have not resulted in a step change. In fact the system has become so complex that meaningful leadership remains an elusive goal. The HRR and TA seem to have made the system more homogeneous and resistant to change (Niland et al., 2015). Mandate issues have become more pronounced (Howe, 2016; Donini and Scalettari, 2016). In pre-DHA/OCHA days, when humanitarian coordination was done through ad hoc arrangements such as the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA), Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) or the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa (OEOA), there was, often, more flexibility and clearer leadership over different coordination mechanisms concerned with affected groups, inside the crisis zone and those who had crossed international borders, and between humanitarian and development agendas (Minear, 2002; Ingram, 1993).

### **Architecture**

Despite, or perhaps because of, the various attempts to reform the humanitarian system over the past 20 years,

the evidence from the PFF research confirms that it is debatable whether there actually is a 'humanitarian system' and/or whether it functions as one. Describing the architecture of humanitarianism is difficult. Depending on where you are in this amorphous galaxy, it can look very different.

Organised humanitarianism is composed of a relatively small number of core actors who call the shots, and various more or less concentric circles of increasingly peripheral actors. At the core, we find some 15 stakeholders who play an overwhelming role in determining how the system runs (Els and Carstensen, 2015). If it does not run smoothly it is because, rhetoric aside, these actors have sometimes divergent interests in the humanitarian marketplace and political economy. What unites the big 15 – the major Western donors, the operational UN humanitarian agencies and OCHA, the ICRC/Red Cross Movement and the large federations of INGOs – beyond a broad commitment to saving and protecting the lives of people in extremis, is a common language, culture and network power. They form an oligopoly that exercises a gravitational pull on all the other more distant constellations of the system. Their unwritten message is: 'you can join us on our terms; the rules of our club are not up for discussion'. Of course, this triggers negative reactions from negative reactions from non-Western donors and age agencies ho butt into the barriers to entry into the system or simply, like stakeholders in the Gulf, decide to ignore it. Despite much talk of downward accountability, the users of the system have even less of a say in how it is run (Brown and Donini, 2014).

One of the peculiar characteristics of this situation is that, although organised humanitarianism is a critical modern form of global governance, there is no governance of the system and even less collective accountability. Unlike, for example, UN peace operations or human rights, there is no intergovernmental organ at the helm that can decide what, where and how much is needed to address humanitarian need. ECOSOC only provides some minimal orientation in this respect, and outcomes are largely engineered by humanitarian agencies themselves, but there is no 'Humanitarian Council' akin to the Peacekeeping Commission or the Human Rights Council – and this despite the fact that, as

the UN SG rightly points out, peacekeeping expenditures are only a small fraction of humanitarian spend (United Nations Secretary-General, 2016).

So, if there is no intergovernmental governance, who runs the humanitarian machine? The short answer is that no one does. OECD donors control some parts, UN agencies and NGOs as well, and the ICRC has its own managerial structure. Non-Western donors and agencies are in a separate sphere. Unlike WFP or UNHCR, OCHA has no intergovernmental oversight to speak of. The IASC works on the basis of consensus only, and so far it does not include emerging or different forms of humanitarian action such as the OIC. NGOs are self-governing if not self-referential by definition. In sum, there is little intergovernmental supervision for a system that moves close to \$30 bn per year. In fact, the further you go from the core, the lesser the governance. Humanitarian action is a public good but one that is not subjected to any form of democratic oversight. Many would argue that it represents a form of sovereignty that is accountable to no one (Fassin, 2012; Barnett, 2013). The machine is supposed to intelligently control itself – by consensus no less – but it has become so complex and unwieldy, and riven by such internal turf wars and vested interests that it is a wonder that it is still able to deliver at all. In our field studies, we have identified a number of crucial areas that explain why the architecture is unfit for purpose:

- **Complexification.** The formal, IASC-centred humanitarian system has become so complex that it functions like an end in itself rather than a means to an end (Slim, 2015: 15; Barnett, 2013). Layers have proliferated beyond comprehension, creating huge coordination transaction costs that slow down the system. Moreover, only the big players can afford to engage fully in clusters and other coordination bodies, e.g. for security, accountability and monitoring and evaluation. Small players, particularly local NGOs, cannot afford the time and face barriers such as language and the vicious circle of not being part of the humanitarian establishment and therefore not able to get in (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Donini and Scalettaris, 2016; Schuller, 2016). A study of the transaction costs of coordination and

of all the other activities not directly related to saving and protecting lives has never been done and is long overdue. The costs of this humanitarian ‘superstructure’ are likely to be considerable, and compounded by the costs of consensus-building, which assumes that all stakeholders need to be at the table (rather than just those who can contribute to the solution of a particular problem).

- **Gaps and overlaps in coordination.** The IASC and its myriad global and local mechanisms, functions as the main consensus-based coordination system for humanitarian action, but it is not the only one. Coordination of refugee responses is the realm of UNHCR and guarded fiercely against the imposition of clusters (Guterres, 2015b). Mandate/status-based approaches sometimes clash with needs-based approaches and work against whole-of-crisis or whole-of-caseload strategies and approaches. Similar gaps occur between humanitarian and development policies and perspectives. Western donors set up NGO coordination bodies, and so do the NGOs themselves. Non-Western donors do the same.
- **Hegemony.** The system remains very much a top-down, dominant structure in which the oligopoly defines priorities, modalities and narratives of success. The rhetoric of inclusion and localisation – which was strongly reaffirmed at the WHS – is still seen as suspect by many non-Western actors and local NGOs, in particular because they have so little access to the money and the decision-making.

Three additional, related concerns arise, that are not necessarily directly a function of architecture:

- **The local and the global.** While there are clear justifications for increasing the role of, and funding provided directly to, local organisations, there is as yet no clear consensus on the appropriate balance between reliance on local actors and organisations and the on-going requirement for international engagement. The buzz-phrase is ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’. But this says little about the criteria for either. Clearly, in cases of extreme limitations on access, but even in less fraught circumstances, it makes sense for local

agencies to lead. But there is no clear categorisation of a ‘local’ agency. In Syria, for example, ‘local’ or ‘national’ organisations are mostly partisan supporters of one faction to the conflict, not the least of which is the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, which is clearly controlled by the Assad regime (Howe, 2016). Under these circumstances, even if local organisations have the best access, there is still a clear need for some level of international engagement to ensure a degree of impartiality and adherence to IHL in the response. However, in some cases the staff of even international agencies may be dominated or wholly controlled by one party, ethnic group or clan (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015). In other cases, local agencies or national governments may be the best positioned to ensure an impartial response. This is clearly a matter for greater contextual analysis rather than global ‘standards’, even if, as was very clear at the WHS, there is general agreement that the role of local organisations should be prioritised. And care should be exercised that ‘localisation’ is not just a handy label for out-sourcing the inherent risks of operating in conflict situations from international agencies to local actors. Nor should it afford a way of avoiding the need to tackle difficult issues of respect for IHL and protection. The launch of the NEAR southern NGO coordination network at the WHS was universally welcomed, but it is yet unclear if the focus on the local will be sufficient to make a dent in the power relations in the humanitarian arena.

- **Declining fieldcraft.** One of the striking findings of the PFF case studies, particularly in the Sahel, is a sense of decreasing fieldcraft among mainstream humanitarian agencies. Some agencies have become ‘too big to save lives’ – or, to put it differently, they are no longer present where lives need to be saved or protected (Healy and Tiller, 2014). These tasks are conducted through ever-longer chains of intermediaries. Agencies find it difficult to remain operational in fraught contexts and international staff are losing basic humanitarian skills – how to behave with abusive strongmen, how to navigate a checkpoint, how to remain firm but polite, how to express solidarity and eschew arrogance. This loss of fieldcraft has partly to do with the fact that the



system is becoming more adverse to staff security, legal and reputational risks. ‘Even in Timbuktu’ quipped one observer in the Sahel, ‘when the town was controlled by the insurgents, humanitarian space was there to be taken. Those in charge valued our services, but we just did not try’.

- **A reactive, not anticipatory, humanitarianism.** Despite advances in early warning, and despite long experience with hazards that are predictable, humanitarian action is still largely reactive. Humanitarian action only scales up after the full extent of the crisis has become clear (Maxwell, Kim and Majid, 2015; Maxwell and Donnelly, 2015). Progress has been made in some cases where predictable hazards and predictable caseloads have been more successfully managed by scalable social protection programmes – Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) being the most frequently cited case (although the PSNP will be tested in the response to the El Nino drought of 2015–16). A more anticipatory approach to humanitarian action requires both greater levels of joint analysis and coordination, and a stronger consensus about early action. The evidence in the case of natural hazards on both improved humanitarian outcomes and reduced cost is convincing (Cabot-Venton et al., 2012), but in complex emergencies competing imperatives confound the search for consensus and coordination (Maxwell and Majid, 2016).

## 2.4 Reform?

The run-up to the WHS triggered a number of proposals for reform (Barnett and Walker, 2015; Miliband and Gurumurthy, 2015; Malloch-Brown, 2015; Gingerich and Cohen, 2015; HPG, 2016; ALNAP, 2015); more are bound to follow in its wake. Despite the use of lofty terms such as ‘regime change’, very few of the proposals reviewed so far go beyond tinkering with organisational charts and incremental reform. The exceptions are HPG (2016), Oxfam’s plea for turning the system on its head (Gingerich et al., 2015) and the SOHS report (ALNAP, 2015), which at least make some concrete recommendations on, for example, devolution and localisation. The WHS itself, however, did not really entertain any strong reform ideas.

**The WHS: a glass half full or half empty?** It is still too early for a balanced assessment of the reportedly more than 3,000 commitments made by governments, aid agencies and other stakeholders. Most of the commitments were individual rather than collective, and exhortatory rather than measurable. More detailed assessments and follow-up actions will emerge in the coming months. The PFF partners participated in the Summit by co-organizing a side-event on the current challenges and the future of humanitarian action. Our overall impression was that the Summit was long on rhetoric but short on detail. Or, as one donor representative put it, ‘there were many little good things, but no big outcomes’. Specifically, we note the following items – ‘half-fulls’ – which carry at least some potential.

Perhaps the most important signal was the widespread recognition, by all stakeholders, that conflict and protracted crises were their greatest concern and that respect of IHL is a central responsibility of states. Much rhetoric, and applause, re-affirmed the importance of humanitarian principles and protection. But in terms of being a defining political moment for the sector, WHS was disappointing. While governments, particularly Western governments, restated their commitment to the important foundations of humanitarian action, states fell short of committing to explicit actions to prevent and end war, address human suffering, including by curbing arm sales to belligerent countries, putting in place a watchdog and sanctions mechanism for upholding IHL and improving the conduct of war, such as by proscribing the targeting of medical centres.

The centerpiece of the WHS was the Grand Bargain. The sector’s powerhouses – its 15 largest donors and 15 largest recipients of their funds – agreed to increasing the use of cash and market mechanisms, directing more funding to national and local organisations and funding more flexibly and for longer with simplified reporting in exchange for more transparency on how that money is applied. Post-WHS, a number of technical bodies have been set up for the implementation of the Grand Bargain (GB) but it is too early to tell whether and how the GB will change the way humanitarians – and their donors – do business. The same applies to localization, which was another high-visibility agenda item, underscored by the

launch of the NEAR network of southern NGOs just before the summit. The target of up to 25% of direct funding to national and local NGOs was endorsed both in the more formal sessions and in the side-events. However, much ambiguity remains on how this target might be achieved and, importantly, on how much donors and NGOs are actually committed to letting go of some of their power: some donors, for example, are pointing out that they do not have the capacity to directly manage large numbers of local projects. In addition, the issue of the implications of localization for the respect for humanitarian principles in fraught or conflict environments was largely avoided. Various other large scale new initiatives were also launched such as a new platform for education in emergencies with a target of close to \$4 billion in the next five years or a new Regional Organisations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN).

While the main events were largely scripted and did not allow for much debate, the real energy was in the 115 or so side events, which brought a sense of promise and purpose to the meeting. Many innovations and initiatives were showcased, such as the Charter 4 Change, a new coalition on meeting the needs of people with disabilities, initiatives by philanthropists and private sector businesses, a new humanitarian data hub in The Hague. New financial instruments, such as the humanitarian impact bonds launched by the ICRC and the OIC Islamic endowment fund, deserve mention. The wealth of initiatives is an indication of the diversification of the humanitarian system – or ecosystem – and suggests viable and sometimes non-Western alternatives to the sector’s rigid models.

In the ‘more than half empty’ category, there was major disappointment at the level of participation of states. None of the P5 countries sent heads of state or government. Moreover, the participation of G77 states, including heavyweights like China and India, was somewhat muted – merely observing rather than participating. NGOs attended en masse – except for MSF, which publicly boycotted the Summit – and largely dominated the side events. Because it was a multi-stakeholder event in which no negotiated intergovernmental outcome or political declaration was anticipated, there was no incentive to unify the community of states around critical issues. The

multi-stakeholder nature of the meeting – neither intergovernmental nor a civil society forum – did not go down well with many Southern states. The lack of governmental support from the global South became evident at the June ECOSOC meeting, which was unable to agree on wording recognizing the importance of the Summit.<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned, rhetoric aside, there was no progress on IHL, humanitarian principles and protection. The lack of engagement of Southern member states on IHL is seen by some as a harbinger of a greater North–South divide on issues of principle. Moreover, despite the extent to which protection had been flagged as an important issue in the pre-Summit consultations and especially in consultations with affected people, the Summit was much more about assistance than about protection. No new ideas on how to advance the protection agenda emerged either in the Secretary-General’s report or at the Summit itself. Refugee and migration issues were absent from the Summit, allegedly because they were being ‘reserved’ for the September Summit in New York. Many saw this as a lost opportunity to highlight the links between, for example, the inhumanity of the war in Syria and deteriorating asylum conditions in Europe. Discussions of relationships between humanitarian action and peacekeeping or peace-building, particularly in the difficult contexts of UN integrated missions, were notably absent.

The humanitarian–development relationship gained a lot of airtime. The issue was framed in the context of ‘ending need’ and with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the overarching framework, including for humanitarian action. While there was support for the notion that development agencies should be more active and be seen earlier in protracted crises, the implications of the proposed merger of relief and development were not discussed in any detail, whether in terms of architecture at HQ or the risks of politicising humanitarian action in the field. ICRC and other Dunantist organisations had expressed their concerns before the Summit on how this shift would affect principled humanitarian action, particularly in conflict, and have confirmed their concerns

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<sup>12</sup> ECOSOC resolution E/RES/2106/9 of 30 June 2016, para.41, simply ‘notes the holding’ of the WHS.

in its aftermath. The same applied to issues around interaction with non-state armed actors – which were however a topic much referred to in a number of side events. Much of the discussion revolved around greater development action to prevent, mitigate and assist in recovery from ‘natural’ disasters. This is an important area, but there was much less discussion about the humanitarian–development relationship in conflict. There were some positive attempts to get the UN humanitarian and development systems to work better together, e.g. through a signed commitment to ‘New Ways of Working’, but the architecture and incentives for such collaboration are not in place.

Despite the undercurrents in the pre-Summit consultations that change and reform were to be high on the agenda, very little or specific transpired at the Summit itself. The Secretary-General’s report had steered clear of any issue implying change in the architecture, governance and power and institutional relations in the UN system. There were hints that coordination structures needed to be reviewed in order to accommodate the incorporation of humanitarian affairs within the SDGs but, by and large, the current architecture and governance of the system were accepted as a given – certainly in the formal sessions. Neither coordination nor leadership issues were broached, or the implications of increased use of cash as a possible entry point for streamlining the (UN) system. Many left Istanbul with the feeling that this was a lost opportunity.

Finally, except in the side events, there was no discussion to speak of about the future and how agencies would need to change to adapt to emerging and potentially escalating threats and risks. The net result was a Summit that either dealt with today’s challenges or was backward looking. Even the attention given to innovation was embedded for the most part in the present, rarely venturing beyond what is available now. Yet, in a world in which technologies, societal constructs and economic systems will undergo exponential change, much greater attention needs to be given to the future – to the ‘what might be’. Nevertheless, the WHS’s attention to the potential impact of insurance and re-insurance for mitigating risk and responding to crisis impacts demonstrated how this single instrument has the

potential for changing some of the most fundamental assumptions about prevention, preparedness and response. Expanding the full potential of this sort of innovation along with the focus on cash may well transform not only the way we assist those in need, but also the way we perceive the vulnerable.

The uneven outcomes of the Summit were emblematic of the never-ending tension in the humanitarian endeavor – at once neutral, independent and impartial in its ethos, but highly vulnerable to political influence in its apparatus. Perhaps it was unrealistic to expect that this fundamental tension could be discussed and addressed given the nature of the Summit. In any case, neither the ERC nor the Secretariat had the capacity or authority to lead the stakeholder consultations and engage governments to drum up the necessary political support.

Stepping back and taking a broader view, what do we learn from the WHS and the other major recent international intergovernmental conferences including the Red Cross conference of December 2015 and the New York UN refugee summit in September 2016? None of these major events reached any significant breakthrough, whether in terms of advancing principles or addressing institutional and governance issues. States at the Red Cross Conference were deadlocked on the issue of setting up an IHL compliance mechanism; reform never really made it to the agenda of the WHS and the same lack of intergovernmental consensus-building plagued the refugee/migrants Summit.

For the most part, leaders used these conferences as opportunities to emphasise what they were already doing rather than to agree to anything new, or even the urgency of agreeing. On refugees and migrants, a possible new compact was postponed for possible adoption in another two years. As one observer put it, rather than a holistic focus on displacement, there was a strong suggestion by some countries that ‘if we want to help the refugees, we have to keep out the migrants’.<sup>13</sup> The issues of the Red Cross Conference the WHS and the New York Summit are intimately linked. They are at the

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<sup>13</sup> Josephine Lebed of Oxfam, quoted in ‘Plenty of Hype, No New Ideas at UN Migration Summit’, IRIN, 22 September 2016.

core of international engagement in conflict. The fact that they are being addressed separately and that there is no political will to work towards an intergovernmental agreement is a telling reflection not only of the state of the humanitarian system but, more importantly perhaps, of the parlous state of multilateralism.

**Prospects for reform.** At some point in the future, a major overhaul of the humanitarian architecture and coordination machinery is bound to be put on the agenda again. National and external relief actors need a system that is able to address urgent humanitarian need in a timely and effective manner, rather than impeded by institutional turf and mandate battles. Some streamlining is surely required, especially in the UN. Of course, for now bold reform is considered radical or impractical. At the WHS itself there was precious little discussion of the architecture of the system and the functions that it performs, but many observers are of the view that further tinkering or, worse, procrastination, will only make overdue change more difficult.

The key question is ‘where will change come from?’ Many of the key and powerful stakeholders are comfortable with the current architecture, as expressed for example in donor statements to ECOSOC 2015 or the ERC interview to IRIN (Aly 2015). Some will recognize privately that it is functional to their needs, as it allows them to maintain control of the money and where it goes. It is thus unlikely that change will come from within.<sup>14</sup>

#### Four critical questions

**One system or several?** Although the idea of saving lives and relieving suffering is hardly a Western creation, organised humanitarianism’s historical origins are located in the West (Barnett and Weiss 2008, 7). While many observers recognise the existence of a multitude of shades of humanitarianism (Kennedy, 2005: xv), the reality of the institutions and of the power relations is still very much Northern and Western. Humanitarian action not borne of the Northern-dominated and highly institutionalised international regime has remained largely neglected beyond rhetorical affirmations of the

universality of the system. As mentioned above, the consistent message of the dominant system is ‘you can join us, on our own terms’ (Fiori, 2013; Donini and Walker, 2012; Donini, 2016).

As long as the West dominated the world, its way of doing humanitarian work was naturally dominant as well. But now power is leaking away from the West. Many states in the global South are occupying a larger space on the international scene by both being better able to help themselves when disaster strikes and by promoting their own soft power through development and humanitarian initiatives. While recognition of the existence of ‘other’ or ‘recently noticed’ humanitarisms is increasing, universality is still very much the ‘universality’ of the West. This claim may well start to ring hollow.

So, what lies ahead for the humanitarian enterprise as we know it? Will Western humanitarianism be increasingly challenged and even overtaken by other models of succour for populations at risk – for example by more statist or ‘Eastphalian’ models (Ginsburg, 2010)? Will the humanitarian future be more pluri-versal, with many different humanitarian systems blooming and somehow co-existing (Donini, 2016)? This now seems to be a fundamental question.

**Is change necessary?** The evidence put forward in this report suggests that it is. There is a deep malaise across the humanitarian enterprise fuelled by the realisation that humanitarian action is prone to instrumentalisation, is used as a fig leaf for political inaction, and cannot be fixed by incremental tweaks. Syria and Yemen, coming on the heels of South Sudan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and other crises, show the limits of the humanitarian endeavour. Respect for humanitarian principles has fallen to new lows and Syria may be a game changer for the future of humanitarianism. It can either lead to a shake-up and revival of the humanitarian discourse or usher in further decline and marginalisation. Needs have never been so high, but the gap between needs and capacities has never been wider. Much will depend on how this critical crossroads is approached by key stakeholders, and their political will to effect reform.

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<sup>14</sup> As the American feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde once noted, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.’

The big picture malaise is complemented by a litany of problems related to the internal functioning of organised humanitarianism, many of which have been analysed above. They result from failures of leadership and architecture; they have to do with how humanitarian work is organised and financed, whether it is principled or not, whether rights and protection are forcefully pursued or neglected, whether needs are assessed in a rational manner or piecemeal, whether downward and upward accountabilities are in place and many other substantive and technical issues. The common feature of these problems is that, while they retain a kind of ‘condemned to repeat’ flavour, they are not intractable.

**Is change possible?** Yes, even if past attempts at reform, some of which resulted in much-needed improvements in terms of the reach and accountabilities of humanitarian action, have fallen short of expectations. The obstacles, including the fact that the status quo is functional to the interests of the powers that be, are daunting. The UN Secretary-General’s report to the WHS is a potent wake-up call that the current system is failing the assistance and protection needs of 65 million people on the move, and countless more who are denied assistance and protection because they are unable to move, or cannot be reached, or who are living in extremis. But political will has yet to be mobilised, although public opinion worldwide has increasingly come to expect a rapid expression of global succour when confronted with intolerable levels of human suffering. Affected vulnerable groups have never been so well informed of their rights and of the failings of the international system – or so enabled to take their case directly to the public via social media or citizen reporting – and are already demanding accountabilities in ways that would have been unimaginable only ten years ago.

Citizens and humanitarian agencies as well as affected populations form a moral community with complementary interests. It would be surprising if pressure from below did not materialise in the near future to demand change. The levels of frustration are high and have been recognised even at the highest level (United Nations Secretary-General, 2016: 3). Now is the time to build on this frustration and delineate the contours of an effective humanitarian system.

**What would change look like?** Vulnerable groups and humanitarian actors need a system that is able to address urgent need in a timely and effective manner, rather than on the basis of political expediency, institutional turf or mandate battles. Needs should be assessed in an independent and transparent manner rather than through a system that privileges agency vested interests and market share. Monitoring, evaluation and accountabilities should be similarly independent and removed from agency interests. UN coordination mechanisms could be considerably simplified with a single leadership and structure covering all affected groups in a particular crisis – whether refugees, IDPs or ISPs. Such changes would require no revision of existing mandates and could, therefore, be implemented in the short term. But again, the challenge would be to develop a single leadership that embraces the full panoply of humanitarian actors, which may well mean that the old ‘club’ does not necessarily decide who that single leadership comprises. And the leadership ‘model’ would have to recognise that the quality of leadership is not the same as the quality of structure or architecture.

Other measures would require more work. Effective change would mean coming to grips with the shackles humanitarian action puts on itself: the humanitarian imperative vs. security imperative paradox; the professionalization vs. voluntarism paradox; the constraints to learning; the ‘early warning/late response’ paradox and the imperative of becoming more anticipatory generally. The lack of involvement of the entire UN membership in the policies and management of humanitarian action would need to be addressed; humanitarian operations are still, in the main, the preserve of a handful of donor states – unlike UN peace operations, where all states have a say. A system of assessed contributions for humanitarian action would address this democratic deficit. It might be instituted gradually by building up an assessed contributions window in the CERF. This, combined with the establishment of a governance structure that reflects all UN member states would go a long way to transform the current system from one that is ‘of the North’ to one that is genuinely ‘of the world’.

Change would mean learning to deal with the politics of protracted crisis – in which multiple actors have to engage; protecting the humanitarian imperative but recognising that humanitarian action is not the only form of intervention; and addressing the troublesome overlap with other agendas – humanitarian/development and, more critically, humanitarian/security.

An even bolder move would be to solve at least the UN part of the leadership and coordination conundrum by creating a single UN operational humanitarian agency (Ingram, 1993). Of course, for now such ideas may appear to be pipe dreams, but further tinkering with organisational charts or, worse, procrastination will only make overdue change more difficult. We shall return to these issues in the following chapter.



# 3. Planning from the future: Conclusions and recommendations

The global community will be confronted with an ever-expanding range of future threats, their dimensions and dynamics growing in many instances exponentially. Those within the traditional humanitarian sector will have to face the prospect that the ways that their organisations are currently configured and their capacities may be inadequate to deal with such risks. Such inadequacies will inevitably have a significant impact upon the lives and livelihoods of untold numbers around the world – East, West, North and South.

Humanitarians need to recognise that causal factors in future crises will be far more multidimensional and interlinked, and that such crises will become ever-more global – their impacts spilling across regions and continents. The dimensions and dynamics of future humanitarian crises mean that more and more people will be affected. In this most fundamental sense, the global community will have to prepare to address a different concept of risk, a broader definition of a humanitarian actor and organisational transformations that in various ways run contrary to today's humanitarian ethos.

## 3.1 The future: preparing for threats to come

The threats of the future will create vulnerabilities, but in ways far more complex than we see today. In no sense do these deny the importance of those categories with which we are already too familiar – the protracted crises, the plight of refugees, the war-affected. The new categories posited here, however, are intended to demonstrate the links between those transformative factors that have been discussed earlier, emerging societal vulnerabilities and related crisis drivers.

Each of the new categories has common characteristics, and indeed may inter-relate in various ways. Their boundaries may blur and overlap. They, too, in one way or another may frequently result in violence, wars and mass displacement of peoples, or conversely each category in its own way may be triggered by the same. Although these might be termed 'human crises' or crises for humanity, they will have humanitarian consequences and require a humanitarian response.

**Existential threats**, or threats to large swathes of humanity and in certain instances to the planet itself. Many such threats are technology-driven, but not all. Their common denominator is the sheer magnitude of their impact. And, while the effects of such threats would indeed be potentially cataclysmic, that should not suggest that there will not be ways to prepare for them and mitigate their effects. Pandemics are one of the best known of these threats.

**Cascading threats and risks.** While an existential risk assumes that a single factor will trigger catastrophic crises on a planetary scale, which in turn will result in massive loss of life and means of subsistence, cascading risks can cause catastrophes that may eventually be global but not existential in the short term. Their eventual impacts are the end result of a sequence of events resulting in physical, social or economic disruptions far beyond the initial impact of any single crisis driver. Cascading crises, for example, could be triggered by a drought that led to a famine, which in turn led to conflict and industrial collapse, all of which in turn might result in state collapse and anarchy. Breakdowns in communication systems, failures of back-up systems, flaws in decision-making or even simply the lack of capacity to respond to a crisis can further intensify that chain of events. Mass and long-term displacement and the development of 'slums' and 'no man's lands', both involving intractable poverty and vulnerability, are potential consequences.

**Simultaneous crises.** As opposed to the types of crises noted above, simultaneous crises describe a situation in which the international community – in this case societies as reflected in stable countries – may be faced with crises simultaneously in which total needs far exceed the international community's capacities to respond. As one looks at the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it would seem that the number and types of crises faced by the international community are already overwhelming the humanitarian sector. Multiple crises occurring at the same time in countries deemed to be 'developed' as well as those regarded as developing might well stretch the capacity of those with humanitarian roles well beyond their capacities and capabilities to respond.

The humanitarian sector is generally focused on the immediate, after a crisis has taken place and to which it feels compelled to respond. Yet, even for those who understand the need to plan beyond the immediate, there is a disconcerting lack of coherent, consistent and global approaches for identifying and anticipating future risks. This presents a barrier to more considered, strategic planning. This failure to be more proactive through futures planning also reflects an overly narrow focus throughout much of the sector on internal organisational interests and priorities and standard operating procedures.

An organisation that is sufficiently anticipatory and adaptive still remains a rarity in the humanitarian sector. All too often Western hegemonic assumptions as well as institutional survival define the nature of threats, standard humanitarian responses and indeed the humanitarian policies and principles which ostensibly determine the response. While tools used for this project – *Futures Roundtables*, *Testing the Future* initiatives and the *Organisational Self-Assessment Tool* – demonstrated a very clear interest in futures thinking, participants from a wide range of humanitarian organisations felt that there was little institutional incentive to do so, and an assumption that there was neither a system nor sources to which one could turn for direction.

Similar organisational perspectives also defined the nature of collaboration for many of those in the humanitarian sector. Dealing with future disasters and emergencies will increasingly require expertise that reflects multi-sectoral perspectives. Private sector companies, the military, social networks and the sciences all offer an understanding of future threats and possible solutions, but here again the self-referential nature of many within the humanitarian sector is reflected in very narrow networks that hamper a wider perspective about future risks, and potential solutions to reduce such risks. Collaboration, once one goes beyond the conventional humanitarian sector, is inhibited by a fundamental lack of understanding about the motives and core interests of potential collaborators, and there are few forums in which this is consistently explored.

Collaboration, too, needs to be based upon a clear sense of the objectives for which possible partnerships might

be needed. In a series of studies of UN country teams, it was apparent that potential partnerships with local natural and social scientists would clearly have provided a deeper understanding about the viability of UN country programmes and projects. However, such obvious collaborative networks had never been previously used, although their utility in the aftermath of these studies was acknowledged.

The anticipatory and adaptive organisation – one that acknowledges new forms of collaboration and new types of collaborative partners, and that recognises the importance of new approaches to identifying innovation – will be essential in dealing with the challenges of the future. The key is the extent to which organisations in the sector understand the importance of preparing now for what may well be, and the extent to which there is support from a much wider and diverse international community to help to prepare for an ever-more complex and uncertain future.

And, yet despite a general awareness throughout the world that transformative changes are impacting on virtually all aspects of human existence, the humanitarian sector finds itself once again in reactive – not proactive – mode. It expends little energy on looking for plausible links between such changes and their possible humanitarian consequences, and does even less to inculcate such concerns into their organisational strategies or their training programmes.

While such gaps will become increasingly evident, it is also very clear that the humanitarian sector is given few incentives to think more strategically about the challenges of the future. There is no consistent support for efforts to enhance anticipatory and adaptive capacities in order to consider potential longer-term threats and their consequences. While attempts to predict the future are all too often a hazardous and unrewarding exercise, efforts to make organizations 'think outside the box' can have significant benefits, which, in the humanitarian context, can be life-saving. Hence, greater attention must be given to initiatives designed to strengthen organizational agility, and these must be adopted by governments, international and regional organizations as well as other emerging

humanitarian actors in the private sector and social networks.

### 3.2 Conclusions and recommendations

The Planning From the Future project partners share the sense of ‘outrage’ expressed by the UN Secretary-General in his report to the World Humanitarian Summit about the suffering of civilians and the failure of the international community to do enough about it; about the fact that humanitarian action substitutes for politics – all too often; that sovereign interests trump individual rights – even in cases of mass atrocities; that aid agencies have too much voice – and affected people not enough; and the blatant inequities that privilege some lives – some crises – above others in terms of money and attention. The findings of the PFF project also point to a sense of frustration that, despite vast improvements in analytics and forecasting, humanitarian action is still reactive and that, despite the dedication of individual aid workers and some attempts at reform, the humanitarian system as a whole still under-performs and lacks the trust of the people it aims to help.

This deficit is linked in part to the emergence of a new multipolar order and the diminishing influence of the West and values deemed to be Western. It is also driven by a funding gap: despite the largest amount of available funding in history, the percentage of assessed needs covered in the global humanitarian appeal in 2015 was the lowest in recent memory (49%). This is particularly the case in long-running conflicts, protracted crises and situations of mass displacement, where basic needs may persist for decades. Current frustrations with the sector are the result of a recognition that humanitarians alone have neither the depth nor the breadth of knowledge or ability to address humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities in all their complexity, now and in the foreseeable future. The result is a systemic discontent that has called into question the foundations of humanitarian action – its ethos, its emblems and the constellation of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals.

At the same time, there is both momentum and appetite for changing the way the humanitarian

enterprise works. There is new potential in viewing humanitarian response as a global responsibility, in which a diverse set of stakeholders have a role to play: states of course, but also an array of non-state and civil society actors, public opinion and, importantly and increasingly, crisis-affected people themselves. Recent reform initiatives, such as the two High-Level Panels on humanitarian financing and cash assistance, and the Secretary-General’s report to the World Humanitarian Summit, and many other studies and reports (referenced in the bibliography of the report), concur that change is both urgent and necessary.

The PFF partner institutions recognise that major change is difficult, and perhaps even unlikely in the current context. If the past is any guide, radical change in international institutions only happens in the context of a major shock, such as the two world wars and the consequent reshuffling of international institutional tectonics. Since then, change in the international system and in the humanitarian sub-system has only happened by accretion and, with few notable exceptions, the humanitarian architecture looks remarkably similar to the way it did in the 1950s, only much bigger.

Fundamental reform is difficult: there are too many vested interests within the system and too much resistance to thinking beyond the institutional box. The ‘powers that be’ are unlikely to voluntarily let go of their power. The trigger for change will likely come from without, starting from a balanced analysis of what needs to change and related remedies. A constituency for change will need to emerge in civil society and among those affected by crises themselves.

The Planning From the Future project offers below a broad outline of such change. This includes a vision for future humanitarian action: what it might aspire to in order to increase its effectiveness. It also includes a proposal for short-, medium- and future-oriented actions that must be taken together and simultaneously to achieve this vision. Whether ‘broke’ or ‘broken’, the humanitarian system of the future needs to do more than simply muddle through.

# FUTURE HUMANITARIAN ACTION. A 6-POINT VISION:

## 01 REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL HUMANITARIAN STAKEHOLDERS

- It is 'of the world' – neither 'of the North' nor partial to any agenda. It is directed to all crisis-affected people in need of humanitarian action.
- It is local, but external experience is valued and available to support locally-led action, or to act where local parties cannot.
- Its alliances are based on strategic partnerships between international, national and local organisations, from a wide range of sectors.
- Its activities, where possible, are based on the principle of subsidiarity, which puts control and decision-making as close as possible to actions on the ground.

## 02 PRINCIPLED

- It is guided by the humanitarian principles embodied in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), international refugee law and the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct.
- It is always impartial. It is able to act in an independent and neutral manner when required, particularly in conflict situations.
- It is honest and transparent in the way it invokes those principles and respects them.
- It works flexibly to protect life, rights and livelihoods, both in contexts where IHL requires a narrow focus on protecting life and dignity and in those where longer-term strategies can be developed.



### 03 PROTECTIVE

- It is focused on the dynamics and circumstances that threaten the safety and dignity of people affected by armed conflict, displacement and other crisis situations
- It is informed by the aspirations and agency of those at imminent risk – whether displaced, besieged or unwilling to flee.
- It develops crisis-specific strategies that prioritise issues of greatest concern to affected groups, while investing in relationships and initiatives that safeguard the space needed to uphold humanitarian values.
- It focuses on protection outcomes over agency interests and rhetoric.
- It invests in evidence-based advocacy and mechanisms to maximise compliance with IHL, refugee law and human rights norms.
- It puts the protection of at-risk groups – in situ, displaced, refugees – at the centre of all humanitarian action, within and beyond the immediate crisis setting.

### 04 ACCOUNTABLE

- It is accountable to affected people and prioritises their interests and needs over mandates and agency interests. It puts dignity and choice over paternalism and control.
- It is accountable to its funders to take, and manage, calculated risks while making effective use of limited funds.
- It is accountable to its peers, working in complement with organisations that supplement its skills and resources toward collective outcomes.

### 05 NON-PARTISAN

- It is mindful of politics but is non-partisan in all its activities, including public pronouncements.
- It is able to work with a broad constellation of actors, including warring parties, national and regional disaster management authorities, civil society and the private sector, while retaining its independent character.
- It is able to support resilience programming, social protection and livelihoods initiatives when applicable to the context.

### 06 PROFESSIONAL

- It values professionalism, but embodies the voluntary spirit that lies at the root of the humanitarian imperative.
- Its programmes and decision-making are informed by evidence – independently verified where possible.
- Its actions are driven by a deep understanding of the context in which they are taking place.
- It is governed by independent, transparent and accountable institutions, with leaders that embody the humanitarian ethos and strive for excellence in management practice.
- It is able to mobilise sufficient funds to anticipate, prepare for and respond to crises irrespective of their causes or human impacts.
- It is honest and transparent about its mistakes – and applies the lessons inferred by them.
- It develops strategies that are designed to anticipate emergencies and disasters in the longer term.

# A roadmap for change

Based on the vision outlined above, this study proposes three levels of action: ‘Practical Measures for Immediate Implementation’, that is, high-impact improvements for which there is already near-universal support; ‘System Overhaul’, which calls for an independent review of the system itself across its many functions; and ‘Planning from the Future’, to help the humanitarian sector plan for an ever-more complex and uncertain future.

## Level 1: Practical measures for immediate implementation

Some humanitarian reforms have near-unanimous support, but remain only partially implemented – or not implemented at all. The following points represent actions that can be taken immediately to address the gaps highlighted by this research and within the context of the current system.

1. States should recommit to, and humanitarian agencies should act to improve **compliance with International Humanitarian Law** and international refugee law (IRL). This includes strengthening national and international efforts to monitor, investigate and prosecute violations of IHL; improving trust between states and humanitarian organisations on the terms of engagement with non-state groups; and facilitating the engagement of non-state actors with IHL.
2. **Governments with counter-terrorism legislation in place should implement a process to rapidly grant humanitarian exceptions** to minimise the consequences of such legislation for humanitarian action, and to monitor the impact of such exceptions. This should be accompanied by ongoing discussion on IHL obligations and the impact of counter-terror measures between humanitarian actors and the security organs of states and non-state actors.
3. Donors and international humanitarian organisations should **enable local organisations to take the lead** and respond quickly to crises, when appropriate, including through direct funding, significant investment in capacity development, and strategic partnerships.
4. International humanitarian agencies should act to **protect and nurture their fieldcraft**, that is, their ability to engage directly with affected communities where possible and appropriate. International humanitarian agencies, whether UN or NGO, should avoid simply playing an intermediary role between donors and local agencies.
5. Donors and humanitarian and development organisations should ensure a greater range of capacities and resources in protracted crises by **engaging in collective crisis management**. This means working together to analyse, plan and implement short- and longer-term responses while employing the full range of humanitarian and development capacities and funds to strengthen the resilience of at-risk communities to the hazards they face. This also means resolving institutional divides within aid organisations and donor agencies to ensure joined-up working, and requiring that humanitarian action embrace some development goals and methods, apart from those contexts where a principled approach to humanitarian action is essential.
6. Humanitarian agencies should **ensure that protection of civilians is at the core of humanitarian work** by implementing the UN Human Rights Up Front and IASC Centrality of Protection agendas.
7. A number of **good programme practices** should be implemented by donors and agencies:
  - a. When supported by context and response analysis, humanitarian organisations and donors should prioritise cash transfers or other market-based interventions that enable choice, support local markets and reduce handling and distribution costs.
  - b. Humanitarian organisations should invest in capacity to respond to urban crises, and to reach and protect refugees and IDPs in non-camp settings.
  - c. Donors and agencies should build flexibility into development programmes in chronically at-risk areas, for example through budgetary flexibility that enables objectives to be shifted rapidly to

humanitarian protection and assistance in the face of developing emergencies.

- d. Humanitarian organisations and donors should improve their evidence base and analytical capacity for crisis response, through improving standards of evidence and developing independent early warning, needs assessment and monitoring mechanisms.
8. Donors should **address chronic problems in humanitarian financing** by providing flexible, long-term aid. Humanitarian organisations should commit to greater transparency and accountability in the use of funds (implementing the main tenets of the 'Grand Bargain' between donors and aid agencies).
9. Agencies, donors and host governments should build incentives for **candid reporting and for learning from mistakes**. Current incentives favour hiding mistakes or failures in order to guarantee continued funding.
10. Humanitarian organisations and donors, with the support of others with specialised expertise, should strengthen their capacity to **analyse and consider future crisis threats** and invest in opportunities to mitigate them.

## Level 2: System overhaul

Quick wins are important but will not fundamentally change the way the system functions now, or in the future. The PFF partners thus recommend a sector-wide overhaul. Our findings point to the need for a systemic approach comprising a number of interlinked measures, including:

1. **IHL compliance.** A mechanism should be put in place to document and hold to account states and parties to conflict for breaches of IHL and refugee law. This could be done through the appointment by the UN Secretary-General of a special envoy for IHL/IRL or the establishment of an independent monitoring group, possibly outside the UN.
2. **Governance.** This report has highlighted the fact that organised humanitarianism lacks a transparent

system of governance. It remains very much 'of the North' and functional to the interests of the big players even if there is growing resistance to such domination as reflected by the emergence of parallel systems. A governance model that ensures that all traditions and sensibilities of humanitarianism are engaged in humanitarian work, and that the humanitarian endeavour is perceived to be 'of the world', should be instituted. This could be achieved through:

- a. The establishment of a **UN Humanitarian Council** that would ensure representation of all member states and humanitarian stakeholders. The Council could be composed of three segments: (i) an **intergovernmental segment** that would take over the functions of ECOSOC as they relate to humanitarian issues; (ii) an **interagency segment** which would be an expanded IASC opened up to emerging stakeholders such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and networks of Southern NGOs; and, (iii) a **Third Estate segment** in which representatives of affected populations would participate in person or through social media, particularly on issues of accountability to affected populations. The three segments would meet together as a UN Humanitarian Council and separately (much as the International Labour Organisation tripartite bodies do). Where appropriate, regional humanitarian councils, including regional IASCs, should be established to ensure participation of regional bodies in disaster preparedness and crisis response. The Council would have a wide remit on humanitarian policy issues, and could issue specific reviews or undertake fact finding missions; it could, for example, commission a biennial review of the state of the humanitarian system.
- b. In order to reinforce the ethos that humanitarian response is the shared responsibility of all states, PFF recommends the progressive introduction of **assessed contributions** for humanitarian action, starting with an 'assessed window' in the CERF, recognising that such an instrument would need to be adjusted to allow for the funding of NGOs. Moreover, non-OECD donors should be included in a joint donor coordination body.

3. **Protection.** The UN Secretary General and the IASC must ensure that humanitarian staff, particularly those in senior positions, are held accountable for protection failures occurring under their watch, and that protection of civilians is at the core of humanitarian work including by speaking out against abuses, without compromising humanitarians' ability to reach those in need of assistance.
  4. **Architecture.** In order to maximise effective leadership in humanitarian response, PFF is convinced that there is an urgent need to take a hard look at the architecture of the system, and recommends that the following changes be seriously explored.
    - a. Remove the ERC function from the UN Secretariat to ensure the ERC represents all humanitarian stakeholders – including INGOs, national NGOs and affected populations; and to insulate it from political pressure from the UN and the Security Council.
    - b. In order to ensure a coherent and effective UN system humanitarian response, the ERC should lead a much simplified UN humanitarian structure, if not a single agency, with managerial responsibility over operational activities of UN humanitarian agencies. In this connection, the growing focus on cash provides an opportunity to rethink the functions of large UN organisations.
    - c. Streamline field coordination responsibilities and structures by adopting a 'whole of crisis' or 'whole of caseload' approach to ensure that all humanitarian caseloads, including refugees, are addressed within one coordination structure.
  5. **Accountability.** The humanitarian sector needs to be more accountable to the people it seeks to assist, while maintaining transparency to its donors and stakeholders. This could be achieved through the introduction of independent needs assessments and an independent monitoring and evaluation body that would decouple assessment from fundraising and institutional vested interests, and encourage more authentic assessment of and learning from response successes and failures.
  6. **Capacity and fieldcraft.** The international humanitarian sector must maintain its field readiness and technical expertise, while at the same time building the capacity of governments and local organisations to act as first responders in their own right. It is essential to leverage the full extent of the available capacities in the humanitarian sector, while enhancing respect for humanitarian principles and IHL, when necessary.
  7. **Collaborative action in protracted crises.** Humanitarian action in protracted crises must be recalibrated to enable not only the protection of human life, but also to strengthen livelihoods and capacity-building, while ensuring respect for humanitarian principles when required in conflict or other extreme crises. This involves working more closely with development actors, focusing on risk management and risk reduction, and enabling communities to build resilience to predictable threats.
  8. **Future threats.** Humanitarian agencies must increase their capacity to focus attention and resources today on anticipating future crises and preparing for their impacts, including 'black swan' events.
- How can such a reform agenda be achieved? PFF is fully aware of the political and institutional obstacles to change, but is nonetheless convinced that piecemeal approaches will not work, and that the possibility of a **comprehensive overhaul must be put on the table**. The PFF study's overarching recommendation, therefore, is addressed to the incoming UN Secretary-General, who of course is well-versed in matters humanitarian and who is best placed to put forward a number of reform ideas in the humanitarian arena and in other spheres of international action. PFF therefore recommends that the Secretary-General review the details of the proposed overhaul and consider how it could be best implemented. It would be up to him to weigh whether this should be done through an intergovernmental initiative of member states that he would encourage, or through an outside mechanism such as an Independent Commission on the future of humanitarian action. Either way, the PFF team stands ready to support this effort and assist the office of the Secretary-General with more detailed proposals.

### Level 3: Planning from the Future

While the above recommendations highlighted the need for both immediate and longer-term shifts in the way the humanitarian sector operates, the PFF partnership proposes a third level of change that underscores the need to consider those future risks, dimensions and dynamics of crisis that are yet unknown. Organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities need to better understand and prepare for those plausible transformative factors currently outside the humanitarian purview but likely to shape society and change future disasters and conflicts. PFF, therefore, suggests four interlinked measures to prepare for the future:

1. As part of the work of the Humanitarian Council and its regional affiliates described above, the UN Secretary-General should publish a biennial **Register of Future Risks**. This register would identify plausible risks and mitigation measures that in turn would be used to advocate for addressing new types of crisis threats and to monitor progress in longer-term prevention and preparedness. The Register would bring together the views of organisations operating in the humanitarian sector with those of major governmental, regional and private research institutions and of specialist bodies, such as the World Economic Forum and the International Council for Science.
2. Linked to the development of the biennial Register of Future Risks, the UN Secretary-General should establish **multi-stakeholder technology forums** to disseminate the Register's findings and promote greater understanding of the role and transformative potential of technology in socio-economic development and crisis mitigation and response.
3. Donor governments and the private sector, (e.g. foundations or bodies focusing on emerging risks and hazards) should provide financial and in-kind incentives and methodologies to **enable the humanitarian sector to be more anticipatory and adaptive** in order to prepare for ever-more complex and uncertain disasters and emergencies, including by developing better analysis on future threats and a more robust evidence base for anticipatory action.
4. The humanitarian sector should **strengthen links with academic research and policy institutions** focused on risk analysis and mitigation and the application of innovative practices and new forms of collaboration towards becoming more anticipatory and adaptive.



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