Collaboration: speculating about the future

A think piece for the HFP Stakeholders Forum

Randolph Kent, Humanitarian Futures Programme, November 2008

Introduction

This think-piece is about the inter-relationship between the changing dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian threats and new forms of collaboration. It seeks to identify critical changes in the environment in which humanitarian organisations will have to operate over the coming decade and various innovative practices that will alter many aspects of traditional collaborative practices and structures.

The intention of this paper is to focus on three key questions:

1. In light of possible humanitarian futures, what will be the sorts of collaboration gaps that might need to be filled to meet that future?
2. What will be the consequences of shifting from “off-line” to “on-line” communications for traditional collaborative structures?
3. What are the critical challenges that the humanitarian sector will have to face in light of new forms of “on-line” collaboration?

Some of the answers to these questions begin with at least a modicum of understanding about the nature of collaboration. Section I: Collaboration: an elusive and multifaceted concept briefly attempts to fulfill that objective. The extent to which collaboration might take different forms is an issue that needs to be explored in the context of the types of humanitarian crises that the future may hold, and as such is suggested in Section II: Future humanitarian crises and their consequences. Section III: Collaboration in the context of humanitarian futures reflects on the consequences of that future upon collaboration needs and opportunities, while Section IV: Multiple paths towards collaboration in a complex future suggests some ways that the “on-line world” may impact upon humanitarian collaboration in the future. Section V: Focusing on collaborative futures returns to where this think piece began – with three questions still requiring answers.

Collaboration: an elusive and multifaceted concept

Collaboration invokes a plethora of definitions. This think-piece will rely on a very basic understanding of the term, namely, collaboration is

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1 The basis for this paper is a joint initiative by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and the Humanitarian Futures Programme, which has resulted in a study on collaboration, *Collaboration: Twenty years past, twenty years futures*, as well as a report on future collaboration to the ICVA Executive Board.

2 In an analysis provided for the ICVA HFP study by Jass Gill and Sean Lowrie, at least 28 definitions of collaboration were identified that had relevance to the humanitarian sector. The definition used in this text is a loose amalgam of many of these.
cooperative behaviour between two or more entities focused upon achieving a particular objective, set of objectives or ensuring a mutually beneficial relationship. Collaboration is normally time-bound, for long or short-term periods.

The past two decades have witnessed an upsurge in formal and informal collaborative mechanisms at global, regional and national levels. Their functions have ranged from policy development and advocacy to joint operational activities and information sharing. While in no sense have such mechanisms been perfect, there has emerged a clear recognition throughout the humanitarian sector that individual organisational objectives and achievements are increasingly dependent upon the capacities of others. This sense of inter-dependence is also reflected in attitudinal changes by individuals as well as organisations within the sector. Though collaboration is still regarded by many as a potential threat to institutional interests under various circumstances, it is increasingly “a default option” and less and less an exception to the rule when it comes to policy development, advocacy, operational activities and information sharing.

**Future humanitarian crises and their consequences**

An underlying assumption of this note is that changes in the very nature of humanitarian threats over the next decade will create new needs for and new types of collaboration. That said, below are seven possible changes that could directly affect the ways that humanitarian crises are generated and in some instances addressed:

1. **Changing nature of humanitarian crisis drivers.** Factors that will expose human vulnerability in the future will be both familiar and unfamiliar to humanitarian workers of today. Those that will be familiar will include conventional crisis drivers, e.g. floods, earthquakes, violence, but their dimensions and impacts will be greater, and their frequency in most cases more. In this context of even greater consequence will be non-traditional crisis drivers, and these will include such factors as computer-hacking into economic sub-systems, erosion of nuclear waste sites, technological failures; inter-active pandemics; and the collapse of conventional state structures.

2. **Changing dynamics and dimensions of humanitarian crises.** The dynamics and dimensions of humanitarian crises will most likely change in at least four respects. They will be more synchronous, sequential, simultaneous and global. In other words, synchronous failures will involve large-scale collapse of infrastructures and economic systems – similar too but much more extensive than the so-called Mumbai floods in 2005. Rapidly falling dominoes is analogous to what is meant by sequential crises. One crisis driver triggers a series of others, with the main characteristics being the rapidity of new crises and exponential scale. An increasingly evident challenge emerges out of simultaneous crises, where, for example, major humanitarian crises occur at the same time in California [an earthquake] and in the Horn of Africa [sequential crises triggered by large-scale drought].

3. **Changing nature of the affected.** Affected populations will change over the next two decades in at least four ways: [i] vulnerability will be increasingly globalised, and less and less bifurcated into “hapless south” and “vibrant north”; [ii] major demographic movements, e.g. the urban phenomenon, will act as causes as well as consequences of crisis drivers and threats; [iii] large-scale affected populations will suffer from long-term, agonising afflictions arising out of such disaster agents as chemical and nuclear exposure; and [iv], there will be the “inaccessible” that are trapped in “no-man’s
lands,” where conventional states no longer function or provide even minimum safety-nets;

4. **Changing types of humanitarian actors.** If one defines a humanitarian actor as an organisation or ad hoc grouping that assumes humanitarian roles and responsibilities, then clearly the types of numbers of humanitarian actors will change in terms of types and numbers. The definition and identification of a humanitarian actor will expand, including a growing number of private sector bodies – both local and international, military establishments, governments not normally associated with international assistance [e.g. China, India, Brazil], the Diaspora, non-state actors [e.g. Hezbollah], trans-national ethnic networks and urban gangs;

5. **Changing instruments in the humanitarian toolkit.** Prevention and preparedness as well as response will increasingly depend upon economic instruments rather than conventional food, shelter, water and clothing inputs. The humanitarian toolkit of the future will include remittances from the Diaspora, and will increasingly be dependent upon insurance-based schemes, covering food security as well as health. Greater attention will be paid to psycho-social needs, and telemedicine will expand the range of services and immediacy of complex service delivery. The capacity to anticipate and monitor crises through communications technology and satellite imagery will increase significantly. Online social networking will lead to completely new ways to manage crises, and a combination of bio-nanotechnologies will revolutionise the ways that chemical, nuclear and biological disasters are handled;

6. **Changing types of humanitarian workers.** There will be a significant decline in so-called “international” relief workers, as ethnic and cultural sensitivities and a lack of security make greater reliance upon local relief workers essential. This shift will be compounded by two intersecting trends in the relief world. The first is that those who are “internationals” may well be required to deal with humanitarian crises nearer to home. Secondly the humanitarian instincts and funds of today’s major donors may decline as operational environments become too hazardous and traditional donor advantages, e.g. food surpluses, currency stability, no longer can be relied upon;

7. **New standards of accountability.** The interest of the conventional governmental donor community in providing humanitarian assistance as one understands it today will decline when compared to the level of interest and expenditure over the past twenty years. There are many reasons for this, including the economic pressures that donors will face in a decade’s time, the alternative commercial opportunities that assets such as food surpluses will provide, the aforementioned difficulties with operating environments and an emerging use of litigation to compensate for inappropriate or inadequate relief response.

**Collaboration in the context of humanitarian futures**

Future humanitarian threats as well as opportunities will affect the types of knowledge, organisational capacities and commitments that will be required by organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities. Given the exponential change in the dynamics, dimensions and impacts of future crises, each of these suggests dimensions of collaboration which cross sectoral boundaries, linkages and networks that go well beyond the humanitarian sector. Of overarching importance is that institutional survival will depend more and more on
collaboration and less and less upon the ring-fenced multidimensional expertise of any single organisation.

1. **Collaboration, information and communications.** Operational as well as strategic requirements will require different types of information and communications systems than is the case today. Substantively, information will have to reflect greater sensitivity to scientific and technological knowledge required for anticipating new types of threats and new ways to mitigate them. It too, will have to include linkages with representatives of new forms of social constructs, e.g. non-conventional urban authorities, non-state actors, trans-national ethnic groupings.

2. **Collaboration and strategic planning.** Collaborative strategic planning involves ways that a group of organisations, individuals, networks or a combination of each agree on common visions and set of objectives, and together determine how such visions and objectives will be achieved. To date, such planning has proven to be difficult at the best of times in the humanitarian sector. Narrowly defined outputs, sectorally specific approaches and perceived threats to organisational interests explain in part this lack of strategic planning. However, the changing dimensions and dynamics of future threats may change this reticence. That “tipping point” will come when individual organisations are faced with the stark realisation that future crises will exceed their individual competencies to deal with them, and that longer-term planning will be a major factor in helping to define and develop approaches to respond;

3. **Collaboration and operational capacity.** As one looks to the changing dimensions and dynamics of future humanitarian crises, it is evident that the humanitarian sector as presently configured does not have the capacity to address the scale of crises that are implicit in synchronous [e.g. system’s collapse], simultaneous or even sequential crisis events. The concept of capacity is not merely one of delivery, but has as much to do with the application of resources and innovation to ensure effective prevention as well as preparedness. As discussed above, strategic collaboration will become an ever-increasing necessity, and similarly, so, too, will the issue of capacities be a determinant in operational collaboration;

4. **Collaboration and innovation.** The expense of innovation can often inhibit organisations from undertaking new products or methodologies. It is evident that an increasing benefit of collaboration will be to share the burden of innovation adaptation and implementation. The use of telemedicine and mobile phone networks for medical response is a case in point. Maintaining the network and the human resources to operate such systems go beyond the capacity of the vast majority of humanitarian organisations, but their potential value makes burden-sharing extremely valuable.
5. **Collaboration and ad hocracy**. Collaboration frequently is viewed in terms of permanent organisational structures and systems. To the extent that such organisational constructs are perceived as necessities, there is an inevitable tendency to ring-fence those admitted to collaborative networks, which in turn will to environments in which salient information is screened out or the views of otherwise central actors are excluded. If, however, three key characteristics of the future are new types of humanitarian actors, new types of humanitarian workers and new types of affected, it will behove collaborating partners to ensure that means are in place that can be sufficiently flexible to deal with frequently changing problems and issue areas, changing types of actors and methodologies;

6. **Collaboration and advocacy**. The humanitarian future will not be like the humanitarian past, with potential consequences already triggering advocacy initiatives. Advocacy will become an increasingly important means to alert the wider community to potential longer-term risks and opportunities, but the complexity that will have to be addressed will inevitably require a more inter-active collaboration. It is evident that advocacy of the type suggested here will need to have an agreed set of assumptions about potential hazards and ways to address them. Advocacy will probably not be solely dependent upon the views of the humanitarian sector, but will also have to have perspectives that reflect a much wider community. Advocacy, too, will have to relate to much wider and different types of audiences, if the message about the future is to have maximum impact.

7. **Collaboration and accountability**. The diversity of humanitarian threats and opportunities and the unprecedented communication potential between the affected and those involved in humanitarian roles and responsibilities, will in other words make accountability an issue of greater immediacy, complexity and accessibility. New forms of collaboration will be required to meet these demands, as well as all the other demands that arise from the changing dimensions, dynamics and impacts of future humanitarian crises. Therefore, not only will it be increasingly difficult for the humanitarian sector as it now operates to account for the wide range of activities in which it will become involved, but also transformation in communications will make operational strengths and weaknesses more open to scrutiny.

**Multiple paths toward collaboration in a complex future**

The dimensions, dynamics and potential impacts of future crises call not only for more robust collaboration, but for collaboration that transcends the conventions of today. Fundamental to both is the need for those in the humanitarian sector to see collaboration as a means to go beyond today’s time-bound assumptions about the boundaries of humanitarianism. Also, the humanitarian sector needs to recognise that organisational self-interest will

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3 As described by Mintzberg, “Ad hocracy is an organic structure that relies for coordination on mutual adjustment among its highly trained and specialised experts, which it encourages by extensive use of the liaison devices – integrating managers, standing committees and above all task forces and matrix structures... All the distinctions of conventional structures disappear in the ad hocracy...Ad hocracies are found in environments that are both complex and dynamic, because those are the ones that require sophisticated innovation, the type of innovation that calls for the cooperative efforts of many different kinds of experts.” See Mintzberg, H., “The Structuring of Organisations,” Asch, D. and Bowman, C., *Readings in Strategic Management*, London: Macmillan Education, 1989.
depend upon sustained organisational partnerships with a host of new types of humanitarian actors. Below, there are some examples to consider.

**Information and communications**

Open sourcing and information networks. “Information communities are networks of individuals and/or organisations that rendez-vous around an information commons, a collection of information that is open to all on an equal basis.” They will, according to one leading expert, be increasingly empowering to fragmented groups, whose members may for the first time gain access to a great deal of rich and fresh information of mutual interest. Already “the behaviours and infrastructure for success are being increasingly learned and codified.” It is evident, if one takes for example e-Bay, that there are entirely new approaches to data aggregation, challenging in so many ways traditional business models. The diverse and interactive source of data aggregation also is improving on the quality of data. Further, the non-hierarchical underpinnings of a growing number of information communities is promoting a freedom that is lowering the costs and enhancing the benefits of producing information and collaboration.

While non-hierarchical information communities enhance the effectiveness, quality, and collaboration of data collection, they nevertheless still require systems of peer reviews “and leaders who can guide and manage interactions and help integrate the disparate contributions from users. They also need to design rules for cooperation, cope with free riders and figure out ways of motivating and coordinating collective action over long periods of time.”

**Strategic planning**

Futures Prioritised collaboration. Rarely in the humanitarian community are collaboration and collaborating partnerships based upon strategic priorities. The essential linkage between strategy development and collaboration will, however, become increasingly important. The need to anticipate humanitarian crisis threats and opportunities will call for longer-range analyses, goals and objective setting that should in turn determine who will be the required collaborating partners. Strategy development – or the prioritisation of goals and objectives – should in other words determine the partnerships and collaborating structures that are needed to achieve the strategy. In this sense “secretariats” of collaborating partnerships should in the future be responsible for garnering interest in potential long-term threats and solutions analysis, and for promoting the most appropriate collaborating structures and relevant collaborating participants for achieving that objective.

**Operational collaboration**

Pre-crisis response roles and responsibilities matrix. The main purpose of an integrated early warning system is to translate warning into action. It is increasingly likely, however, that the

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4 Eric von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation*, MIT Press, Boston, 2006, p.84
5 Ibid #4, Eric von Hippel
7 Ibid #6 Tapscott and Williams, p.70-71
8 The ALNAP and CDERA cases described in Section II may be seen as exceptions to this general assumption.
types of crises that one will have to address in the future will require far more intensive, integrated response plans than is the case normally today. In other words, pre-planning activities – a type of response roles and responsibilities matrix will prove to be essential. Although this sort of initiative has in a nascent form been launched by the United Nations, the true complexities of effective operational planning will necessitate the incorporation of a wide range of actors, linked around a broad but common strategy, to various operational instruments, including a “virtual warehouse,” remote sensing and monitoring systems that identify emerging vulnerabilities as well as update plans and ultimately monitor crisis impacts and virtual operations centres. The technology for truly integrated and multi-sectoral and prioritized response plans is emerging on various fronts. NASA and the European Space Agency, for example, are increasing their remote sensing capacities, and Web 2.0 and 3.0 capacities – particularly the latter – will allow for unprecedented levels of integrated and prioritized information flows and dialogue.

Innovation

There should be dedicated forums for global humanitarian research and analysis. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) offers an interesting model for collaboration. Its relevance lies chiefly in the IPCC’s ability to transcend the interests of any individual set of organisations and to offer a wider spectrum of alternative views than would probably have been the case if any particular sector dominated the analysis. In that sense the IPCC process serves as a useful example of ways that knowledge-based strategies and operations can be enriched by diversity.

Similar approaches are needed to generate interest not only in future humanitarian threats, but in guiding the research and identifying the innovations that could mitigate those threats. To date, innovation has proven difficult in the humanitarian sector because of the sector’s self-referential nature, its predominant interest in response, its lack of appropriate ways to identify and implement innovation and the limited nature of its collaborative processes.

At the same time that sector has to face the prospect of new types of actors offering new approaches that may – if effective collaboration does not enhance engagement – marginalize conventional humanitarian actors. Cross sectoral collaborative networks for innovation will be essential for those assuming humanitarian roles and responsibilities. And as one California-based technology laboratory has recently noted, new technology cannot be done during

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9 The United Nations has taken initial steps towards developing this sort of matrix with the recent introduction of the “predictable leadership” or “cluster” initiative. This initiative groups expert agencies within nine operational areas in order to provide a more coherent inter-agency response to crises. Still, the cluster approach does not draw on the full spectrum of potential responders and does not engage in specific pre-event planning.

10 Web 2.0 and 3.0 is a term to describe the evolutionary process of the web. Web 2.0 refers to the interconnectivity and interactivity of web-delivered content e.g. blogging. Web 3.0 is the next step in internet social and technological connectivity, which is still in its speculative stage.

11 This is not to deny the domination of certain governments, e.g. the US government, in the policy negotiations, but rather to emphasise that at the technical level the collaborative process engendered ideas and innovative approaches that were the result of an open fora, notable for the wide range of different types of specialists.

12 A very basic but important step in this direction has been taken by what ISDR and others have called the creation of a Risk Academy and an Internet Platform, both in their individual ways intended to share knowledge and know-how “from the world of academic science to business and society.” These initiatives have been launched under the general rubric of the Global Risk Forum, Davos, Switzerland.
an emergency but must be put into practice prior to an emergency. It has to be understood by its users and relies upon building trust means “to develop organic filtering methods.”\textsuperscript{13} The challenge for the humanitarian sector, therefore, is how best to structure a forum for research and innovation that will be cross-sectoral and provides the innovative space.

**Collaboration and ad hocracy**

“Inter-organisational projects, in which multiple organizations work jointly on a shared activity for a limited period of time, are increasingly used to coordinate complex products/services in uncertain and competitive environments....,” notes Jones and Lichtenstein. “Moreover in the public sector inter-organisational projects are often carried out in crisis situations where there is a lack of central authority or even a formal hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{14} Although the contingencies of a crisis make it impossible to define ahead of time who will participate in its response, the key players tend to be already connected in a web of loosely overlapping networks.\textsuperscript{15}

For those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities, “temporary inter-organisational projects” [TIOPs], or organisational ad hocracy, the concept of “structural embeddedness” offers an obvious though not perfect solution for temporary and in some senses unforeseen crises. Structural embeddedness is based upon a shared understanding of interests and competencies through prior roles and interactions. It is by no means a new technique, and continues to be promoted in a variety of well established ways. Through such initiatives, for example, the US Department of Homeland Security embeds potential response actors through such initiatives as the National Incident Management System, which is a model “for certain natural disasters...to help guide the project effort.”\textsuperscript{16}

The collaborative process for the future will have to foster structural embeddedness for far more complicated networks of diverse actors. How this will be done is one of the considerable collaborative challenges of the future.

**Advocacy**

The issue of advocacy goes to the heart of new forms of collaboration. Collaboration in the future will reflect greater mobilisation of common interests and concerns across an extensive array of actors through accessible and inter-activ e networks. At the same time collaborators – due in no small part to the very accessibility that such networks offer – will have to confront the prospect of far greater difficulties when it comes to reconciling contending interests. The advantage of greater open-sourced advocacy networks is that they offer the prospect of generating a more extensive and robust “call to arms;” the disadvantage lies in the prospect that the consensus-building required to foster advocacy positions may result in

\textsuperscript{13} InSTEDD, for example, a California-based technological laboratory funded by Google, seeks to use prototype social networking technology that many people are already familiar with for humanitarian mitigation and response. The company hopes not only to rely on FOAF networking to identify communities but also with GPS mapping and language translation machinery so that any expert regardless of language can be identified and located before and during an emergency.

\textsuperscript{14} Candace Jones and Benyamin Lichtenstein, Temporary Inter-organisational Projects: How temporal and social embeddedness enhance coordination and manage uncertainty, Delhi, December 7, 2007, p.232

\textsuperscript{15} D. Moynihan, Leveraging Collaborative Networks in Infrequent Emergency Situations, Collaboration Series, Washington, IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2005

\textsuperscript{16} Op cit. #13, Jones and Lichtenstein, p.246
lowest common denominator positions, which in and of themselves can be threatened at any time by cross network disagreements.

Whatever the advantages and disadvantages, it is increasingly evident that advocacy, networks and new forms of collaboration are finding common cause. “Crowdsourcing” is a relevant case in point. Crowdsourcing – similar in some senses to what earlier was described as the InnoCentive approach – is defined as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent, e.g. an employee, and outsourcing to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.” However, generally speaking, despite the term, crowdsources, these “crowds” are unlikely to be the unruly and uninformed bunch which the word invokes. More likely they will be virtual interest publics, organized through new ICTs, caring about issues of consequence, such as environmental policy, child safety and government malfeasance. As virtual interest publics, these “crowds” are deliberative players in the public sphere, and should be able to demand accountability from public institutions.

Accountability

An additional dimension of crowdsourcing is “crowdfunding.” It is a form of crowdsourcing, applied to finance. Instead of seeking finance from institutional sources, the supporting community is asked to support the project, e.g. advocacy, virtual warehousing, in a distributed fashion. The challenge for this form of collaboration is indeed accountability and the ways that those responsible for mobilising and expending resources from diverse sources comply with acceptable accountability standards. This one dimension speaks even more widely about the prospects for accountability and collaboration mechanisms in the 21st century.

Focusing on Collaboration Futures

This note began with three questions, and ends with the same three:

1. In light of possible humanitarian futures, what will be the sorts of collaboration gaps that will need to be filled to meet that future? To what extent, for example, will the interaction between greater capacities to anticipate and monitor potential threats and the spectre of more complex crises lead to collaborative networks focusing on preparedness and prevention? What would such collaborative networks look like? Who would be collaborating partners, and what would be the objectives and the results of their collaborative efforts?

2. What will the be the consequences of moves away from “off-line” to “on-line” communications for traditional collaboration structures? The key the future lies with the concept of connectivity, especially connectivity through the internet and by mobile phones. To what extent will such forms of connectivity result in collaborative methods that by-pass the traditional fixed organisational structures that circumscribe much of present approaches to collaboration today?

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17 The term, “crowdsourcing”, as pointed out by The Economist [“The Economist Technology Quarterly”, 6 September 2008] comes from an article by Jeff Howe in Wired in 2006.

3. What are the critical challenges that the humanitarian sector will have to face in light of new forms of “on-line” collaboration? Who, for example, will be able to ensure that objectives, guidelines, processes and quality are agreed and ensured in new forms of collaboration? Who and what will determine the participants in collaborative initiatives and networks in an increasingly on-line world?