EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND SOLUTIONS

-- SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS --

Dr Randolph Kent
Joanne Burke
Amanda Taylor
King’s College London
Never before have we been able to disrupt the fundamental processes of Earth’s ecology, and never before have we created social, economic and technological systems – from continent-wide industrial agriculture to the international financial system – with today’s enormous complexity, connectedness and speed of operation. Whether the issue is drug resistant diseases or shiploads of migrants dumped on our shores, our problems spill across geographical and intellectual boundaries, their complexity often exceeds our wildest imaginations, and they converge and intertwine in totally unexpected ways. The real danger of the 21st century is ‘synchronous failure.’

Introduction: The Copernican challenge

Nicholas Copernicus at the beginning of the 16th Century announced his theory that the earth was not at the centre of the universe, but actually rotated around the sun. This proposition, though resisted initially by the establishment, ultimately formed an alternative basis of knowledge and understanding about our universe that continues today.

The underlying assumptions upon which knowledge and the search for knowledge are based are generally referred to as paradigms. The search for alternative paradigms is intended to improve both understanding and explanations by challenging the assumptions that underpin present conceptual constructs. It is not about improving understanding and explanation by building upon existing assumptions, but rather by proposing alternative assumptions that might provide different frameworks for ordering evidence that leads to knowledge.

This note comes at a time when there is growing concern that the present humanitarian sector may not be adequate to meet the crises – the disasters and emergencies -- of the present, let alone the future. Directly and indirectly a series of global consultations and meetings, including the World Humanitarian Summit, have been seeking ways to make humanitarian action more relevant to ever growing types, dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian threats. And, while there has been a wide spectrum of suggestions aimed at improving the sector, this spectrum is nevertheless sustained by a traditional set of assumptions that might be described

---


2 Two key figures in the understanding of paradigms and the assumptions that sustain or challenge them are Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, University of Chicago Press, 1962 and Imre Lakatos, Proofs and Refutations: The Logic of Mathematical Discovery, Cambridge University Press, 1976.
as 'the Western hegemonic' paradigm.\(^3\) Is there an emerging alternative?

This exploration of alternative ways of understanding the contexts and factors which underpin crisis threats and their solutions is closely tied to the *Planning from the Future* [PFF] project. The PFF is primarily concerned with the loosely defined ‘humanitarian sector’s capacities to deal with ever more complex and uncertain humanitarian crises, or, disasters and emergencies. Towards that end, the PFF partnership, consisting of King’s College London, the Overseas Development Institute and Tufts University, will in the first instance explore the present landscape of the humanitarian sector, how that sector responds to ‘game changers’ that confront it with unanticipated challenges and the extent to which that sector is fit for the future.\(^4\)

In that context, if the sector is not fit for the future, plausible solutions may emerge for improving it through institutional change and methodologies that reflect our present understanding of the nature of crisis threats and mitigation. Or, alternatively, the assumptions that are made about crisis threats and appropriate action may stem from a paradigm which by analogue might be Copernican in consequence, and may well lead not only to different understandings about the nature of crises, but also to different approach to solutions.

This exploration began with extensive research about the nature of paradigms and the assumptions that underpin humanitarian action. The concepts incorporated in the paper were frequently the result of seven meetings with humanitarian experts, and at the end with a major consultation that brought together all of those who had helped in the past.

\(^3\) See, for example, the forthcoming *Planning from the Future* report (Chapter 1). www.planningfromthefuture.org

\(^4\) See the forthcoming *Planning from the Future* report (Chapter 2). www.planningfromthefuture.org

The result is *Exploring alternative ways of understanding humanitarian crises and solutions*. The paper is divided into three main sections: Section 1 suggests five assumptions that might serve as guideposts on the journey for alternative perspectives. In Section 2, the three key elements of the emerging paradigm are considered, each with a set of reflections about what will be described as their ‘normal life’ implications. Finally, Section 3 draws specific conclusions about what might be considered as the humanitarian implications that can be drawn from this emerging paradigm.

In its totality, the paper links directly into what is called the Synthesis Report, or, *Planning from the Future: Humanitarian spectres*, a PFF product intended to make futures real for humanitarian practitioners. *Exploring alternative ways* has been designed to suggest different approaches for understanding the nature and drivers of risk as well as new ways to understand alternative solutions. The Synthesis Report is intended to incorporate these new perspectives into broad but practical approaches to planning and decision-making.

I Hypotheses guiding the paradigmatic exploration

There are five hypotheses that guide this effort to identify the possibility of an emerging alternative humanitarian paradigm:

[1] Humanitarian crises are reflections of the ways that societies structure themselves and allocate their resources. They are not aberrant phenomena, divorced from ‘normal life,’ but rather a reflection of it,\(^5\) everything

\(^5\) ‘Normal life’ in this context refers to the fact that disasters and emergencies are an integral
from governance and leadership to human security and socio-economic opportunities;\(^6\)

[2] Humanitarian crisis drivers, their dimensions and dynamics are directly linked to human progress and related change, including technological advance;\(^7\)

[3] Except for existential crises, e.g., asteroid impact\(^8\), the types of humanitarian crisis drivers, their dimensions and dynamics, have increased exponentially over the past 200 years, and continue to do so even more intensely. This latest phase of exponential increase is due to a rapidly changing, interconnected and globalised world, one in which technology will continue to act as a major driver of change and determinant of human progress;

[4] Increasing extra-terrestrial, or, outer space involvement by humankind is but one dramatic example of highly plausible change in the nature of vulnerability and the perception of what and who is vulnerable. The prospect of existential risk that have potential global impacts are increasing, all in one way or another underscoring the increasing speed of global vulnerability\(^9\);

[5] As suggested in #1, above, humanitarian crises are reflections of the ways that societies structure themselves and allocate their resources. This is what was referred to above as the 'normal life proposition', and is based upon the dynamics of complex systems. Such systems are open, dynamic, non-linear and in a state of perpetual disequilibrium. This, therefore, suggests that "...in many of the pressing issues for our future welfare as well as for the management of our everyday life, [we] will need such a systemic complex system and multidisciplinary approach\(^10\) to be adequately prepared to deal with ever more complex and uncertain threats.

II An exploration of paradigmatic assumptions

The search for the possibility of an emerging alternative paradigm might begin with the 'normal life' proposition that suggests that all societal phenomena, including disasters and emergencies, reflect highly complex part of environmental abuse and economic and social exploitation. Rather than the assumption that disasters and emergencies foster vulnerability, the ways in which human beings organise their social and economic lives do. Randolph C. Kent, *Anatomy of Disaster Relief: The International Network in Action*, Pinter Publishers Ltd, London, 1987, p.4ff

\(^6\) See the forthcoming *Planning from the Future: Humanitarian spectres* for specific discussions on governance and human security and human agency.

\(^7\) Linked to societal structure and resource allocation is the impact of technological advance, which over the past 200 years has bent the curve of human history – of populations and social development – by almost 90 degrees. See Eric Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2014, p.6

\(^8\) The Cretaceous–Paleogene (K–Pg) extinction event was a mass extinction of some three-quarters of plant and animal species on earth that occurred over a geologically short period of time, 66 million years ago


messes,\textsuperscript{11} and that such ‘messes’ are not restricted in either space or time. They perpetually evolve. This runs contrary to standard assumptions underlying the term, ‘humanitarian’. That term is principally concerned with systems failures, and reflects a belief that such failures have finite beginnings and ends. An emerging paradigm might be based upon the assumption that humanitarian crises from a whole of society perspective are not bound by clearly defined space and time dimensions. And, emerging from this perspective are three interconnected sets of propositions that form the basis of the proposed alternative humanitarian paradigm:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{[1] Reflections of normal life –}

The proposition that humanitarian crises are reflections of normal life is on the one hand generally accepted.\textsuperscript{12} Yet, on the other, ‘disasters are still predominantly seen as exogenous and unforeseen shocks that affect supposedly normally functioning economic systems and societies.\textsuperscript{13} However, what all too often have not been appreciated are the full implications of ‘the normal life’ proposition. In this regard, a more comprehensive societal focus changes the ways that crisis threats are defined and solutions posited. This focus in turn suggests the following:

- **humanitarian crises consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. No crisis driver is in itself the sole explanatory factor for a crisis event or its consequences.**

People ‘are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other’.\textsuperscript{14} These are defined as ‘messes’, and this concept is an important starting point for understanding and explaining humanitarian crises. The need to understand and prepare for humanitarian threats and actions in terms of complex systems and interacting problems will become increasingly evident as such ‘messes’ reflect ever more fluid manifestations of vulnerability.

Accepting the concept of ‘messes’ should narrow the perceived bifurcation between so-called natural disasters and man-made emergencies.\textsuperscript{15} And,

\textsuperscript{11} In defining the use of the term, ‘messes’, Alpaslan and Mitroff state that problems ‘resist our attempt to confine them and rein them in by reducing them to a single discipline or point of view. For example, different stakeholders rarely have the same definition of the individual problems that constitute a mess and of the entire mess itself. Indeed the fact that different stakeholders have different perceptions of a mess is itself one of the keys defining attributes of messes! As a result “problem negotiation” is one of the most important aspects of managing messes. Before one can “solve” a problem one first has to agree on the nature of the problem. And if agreement is arrived at all, it should be reached only at the end of an intense debate about the “nature” of the problem instead of the all-too-common pressure to get a quick consensus.’ Can M. Alpaslan and Ian I. Mitroff, Swans, Swine and Swindlers: Coping with the growing threat of mega-crises and mega-messes, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, pp xx ff.

\textsuperscript{12} Op cit. #5 See, for example, Randolph C. Kent, Anatomy of Disaster Relief: The


\textsuperscript{13} Allan Lavell and Andrew Maskrey, The Future of Disaster Risk Management: An Ongoing Discussion

\textsuperscript{14} Russell L. Ackoff, Re-creating the Corporation, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p.324

\textsuperscript{15} The definition of ‘emergency’ within a humanitarian context has various interpretations. Quarantelli sees ‘emergency’ as one of a threshold of events, each depending upon resource requirements, from accidents to emergencies to disasters and finally to catastrophes. The OCHA orientation handbook sees emergencies as ‘a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency.’ The IFRC views a complex emergency ‘as a reflection of disasters [which] can result from several different hazards or,
yet, while there are perceptible moves towards recognising the interconnectedness between certain types of humanitarian crises (e.g., natural hazards and technological failures), there continues to be resistance in the humanitarian world to accepting the interdependent nature of most if not all crisis events, including natural events and conflict.

In that sense, ‘some of the greatest mistakes are made when dealing with a complex mess, by not seeing its dimensions in their entirety, carving off a part, and dealing with this part as if it were a complicated problem, and then solving it as if it were a simple puzzle, all the while ignoring the linkages and other connections to other dimensions of the mess.’ This tendency to accept if not reinforce the dichotomy and to ignore basic causation and solutions can also be perceived as a convenience. Not unlike the reactions of the establishment in the time of Copernicus, politicians, policymakers and planners resist alternative perspectives because it goes against the inherent ‘short-termism’ of most institutions and their incremental approach to problem solving.

One prevailing assumption underpinning the predominant humanitarian paradigm is that there is an inherent human motivation that explains why human beings respond to the plight of other human beings, namely, an overarching moral sense of responsibility, benevolence and empathy that is universal. This abiding motivation in turn justifies what are regarded as universal humanitarian principles. Morality as motivation and universal principles, however, ignore the relationship between crises and the ways that they test and reinforce basic values – religious, spiritual, philosophical. There are profound differences in the ways that societies explain and interpret their respective worlds.

Increasingly, ‘we will have to deal with “contending” and not “universal principles,”’ suggests the renowned anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai. In a world in which different power structures will emerge, with their concomitant local and regional perspectives and values, the presumption of common principles will be less and less relevant. More and more, perceptions of self-interest and possible mutual self-interest will be at the heart of humanitarian action.


18 ‘Thank you for explaining your principles,’ said a member of a Middle Eastern group that had come to hear an ICRC delegate’s explanation of the organisation’s humanitarian role. ‘However, we, too, have our own principles,’ he continued, ‘Ours begins with justice. To what extent do your principles incorporate the concept of justice?’ In so many ways, the avowedly universal principles presented by humanitarians reflect a Western hegemony that can be traced to the age of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries, to the age of industrialisation, colonialism and economic dominance of the 18th and 19th centuries – past Solferino – and clearly into the post 1945 world.

19 Students of humanitarian affairs will have ‘to deal with “tactical humanism” – a humanism that is prepared to see universals as
humanitarian crises always have transformative consequences that go well beyond the geopolitical and socio-economic boundaries of the event, itself.

As in physics, so, too, in the nature of ‘normal life’, dynamics are not constrained by fixed time and space. Their effects continue in various forms over time and across spatial boundaries. While these dynamics are inherent in all matter, they are becoming increasingly evident in a world that is overtly more interconnected, through trade and through movements of capital, people and information. ‘What we call “flows”’.  

The ‘normal life’ dimension of humanitarian crises means that the drivers of such crises are part of systems that are in constant flux, driven by a ‘persistent need for energy’. They are in a state of ‘non-equilibrium’. In that sense, as suggested below in the technological paradox, humanitarian crises also reflect the ever-fluctuating boundaries of ‘normal life’, and those boundaries are moving in myriad directions, including beyond the earth’s atmosphere. Hence, another assumption underpinning the alternative paradigm is that a growing number of crisis drivers and ways to mitigate them will become extraterrestrial. Extraterritoriality will emerge as a major factor in what we continue to call ‘humanitarian response’, and will fundamentally change many aspects of what is a crisis driver and who and what is a ‘humanitarian actor’.  

The implications across the humanitarian crisis spectrum is that this more dynamic view of crisis drivers and their effects will call for different ways of understanding crisis drivers, for analysing potential threats and determining their scope and multifaceted dimensions, including what is referred to as ‘human agency’. ‘Humanitarian’ may eventually be understood as ‘normal phenomena’, involving a wide range of self-interests and sectors. The linkages between short-term impacts and longer-term consequences may also require greater attention to longer-term perspectives and plausible future threats and transformations as an essential part of effective humanitarian action.

humanitarian crises and global consequences need to be viewed as transcendent episodes

If crisis threats may be viewed from a whole of society perspective -- bound

---

asymptotically approached goals, subject to endless negotiation, not based on prior axioms. [This is] not a recommendation in disguise for relativism, for tactical humanism does not believe in the equal claims of all possible moral worlds. It believes in producing values out of engaged debate. ‘A. Appadurai, ‘Tactical Humanism’, in Jerome Binde, The Future of Values, UNESCO, Paris, 2001, p.18


An example is ‘asteroid impact avoidance’ where technology enables human intervention to divert asteroids. Hence, the ‘humanitarian actor’ might well be someone who has the capacity to prepare for and prevent potentially existential threats. This could well be the humanitarian actor of the future.
neither by space nor time -- then technological change and concomitant globalisation suggest that humanitarian crises ultimately have to be seen as 'global' in their impacts. The implications of this perspective is, for example, that conventional distinctions between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ will conceptually be less relevant, and that a more appropriate focus will be on ways that any single event triggers multiple and complex reactions globally.

From a humanitarian perspective this assumption suggests that such interactions mean that responses to crises stem principally from self-interest and mutual self-interest, and that not only are such events ultimately global in consequence, but that human-beings in the final analysis are all potentially vulnerable or at least affected at different stages of a crisis event. While in no sense wishing to discount what might be seen as the inherent humanity in human kind, one cannot ignore the driving force of self-interest in addressing such vulnerabilities. This perspective, historically as well as ‘futures’ based, will become increasingly evident with, for example, societally transformative technological factors.

[2] Globalisation, multi-polarity, the technological paradox and humanitarian crises

Technological advances have been one of the most transformative factors in society over the past three centuries. These advances, though highly significant, are by no means the sole determinants of human action and humanitarian crises. Human agency and human interaction in and of themselves have to be recognised as factors that explain transformation. The prospect of an atomised society, reactions against authority and cultural and religious norms are all clearly positive and negative drivers that determine the course of future events.

And, yet, In light of technology’s transformative impacts, it could be argued that such transformative factors might serve as examples of a highly relevant paradigmatic starting point, in various ways as important as such normal life factors as underdevelopment and poverty, per se. Technology clearly reflects the inherent paradox of the normal life proposition, namely, that advancing progress and shifting vulnerabilities are deeply intertwined. This is not to deny the importance, for example, given to those factors already noted as significant crisis drivers, but rather to suggest that technology-led complex societal dynamics – ‘the messes’ – may provide valuable starting points for understanding insights into the causes of crises, their dynamics and possible solutions.

- technological advance is a key starting point for explaining and ultimately addressing socio-economic vulnerability, one that is ever more important in the context of what is called ‘modernity’ and ‘post-modernity.

This is not a Luddite perspective, nor is it to suggest that technology is the sole determinant of all crises, but rather to suggest that if one looks, for example, at the progress associated with the 19th century industrial revolution, it is worth noting that ‘even the most beneficial developments have unpleasant consequences that must be managed. The Industrial Revolution was accompanied by soot-filled London skies and horrific exploitation of child labor.'23 In the same sense that technological progress has and continues to determine economic

---

growth, so, too, does such progress determine the ways that the environment, resources and human interests and values are sought, used and exploited.

In that sense technological progress changes the ways that vulnerabilities develop throughout societies. A great debate about the digital age – as technological transformations increase at exponential rates – concerns its potential impacts. Whom, for example, might technology make redundant, and what will be the consequences in terms of the economy and finance, infrastructures, governance institutions and societal dynamics? Can indeed human-beings keep pace with such change, or might they become subservient to it? All in various ways will determine the up-side and down-side of human progress; all in one way or another will suggest the dynamics of crises, their consequences and the fluidity of vulnerability.  

\section*{while technological advance results in different types of complex crisis drivers and in different types of vulnerabilities, it also offers critical perspectives about the interrelationship between natural hazards and conflict.}

It was suggested earlier (p.3) that humanitarian crises reflect dynamic situations, which consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. This perspective suggests the need to look at conflict-based crises and those stemming from natural hazards in a far more holistic and integrated way than is often the case.

In this instance, technology appears to be an example of a highly relevant catalyst that demonstrates how complex synergies bring conflict and ‘natural disasters’ into one fold. A growing number of humanitarian crises over the past three centuries can be traced to technological advance. The poverty and conflict that ensues due to such advances – be they the result of the pursuit of energy sources, raw materials or the geo-political space that is needed to gain them – demonstrate a clearly identifiable and intricate link between the consequences of natural hazards, economic drivers, societal collapse and conflict.

\section*{humanitarian crisis drivers and response will have to be considered in a technology-driven extraterrestrial context}

Crisis vulnerability is normally assumed to be terrestrial bound. Now, however, as one looks into plausible futures for the Earth in the 21st century, outer space and the planet will assume a more immediate and in a sense more tangible interrelationship; and, in so doing, create unprecedented dimensions of vulnerability due to four factors. In the first place a growing portion of what the planet has created for its economic and societal functions, e.g., the Internet, is increasingly dependent upon outer space, what one might describe as the inter-relationship between space and cyberspace systems.

\begin{itemize}
\item A leading expert in Artificial Intelligence noted in an Exponential Finance conference in New York, ‘Technology is a double-edged sword. Fire kept us warm and cooked our food, but also burnt down our houses.’ Statement by Ray Kurzweil, director of engineering at Google and author of The Age of Spiritual Machines, found in ‘Brains of the future will be hybrid of man and machine,’ The Times, 5 June 2015, p.19
\end{itemize}
Secondly, the very infrastructure and demographic movements of human beings into, for example, urban areas could intensify their exposure to such things as outer space debris and meteor particles. A third dimension of the growing interrelationship between outer space and Earth is the access to resources that can be found beyond the planet, and that could in various ways fundamentally transform aspects of the Earth’s economy and production. Finally, there is an interrelationship between these three and the steps towards exploration of outer space that will eventually extend the very habitat of the human species, and in various ways change the sense of what it is to be human.

The technological-humanitarian paradox is reflected not only in the vulnerabilities that result from technological advance, but also in the growing unwillingness of decision-makers and specialists (e.g., scientists) to confront, let alone address, the consequences of such advances.

If technological advance offers a significant explanation for the evolution of crisis drivers and their consequences, then one might assume that technology could in turn provide technological solutions for meeting such challenges. The complexities and extensive inter-relationships that are inherent, for example, in extraterrestrial activities could transform attitudes about the very nature of solutions as well as problems.²⁵

[3] Change and collaboration in a global context

Many of the assumptions that underpin traditional perspectives about humanitarian crises will change in the context of what might be regarded as the proposed new paradigm. Perspectives on vulnerability, the dimensions and dynamics of potential crisis drivers, a new conception of the nature of humanitarian crises and who is responsible for addressing such crises all in various ways will demand fundamentally different approaches to the ways that humanitarian crises are defined and addressed.

Preparing for humanitarian threats from a normal life perspective will require a new approach to anticipation.

As noted in several instances above, there continues to be resistance across many fields of expertise – be it in science, business or humanitarian affairs – to speculate about ‘the what might be’s’. Nevertheless, those concerned with the humanitarian consequences of a growing number of crisis threats will inevitably be forced to be more anticipatory and sensitive to messes and their enduring dynamics. In so saying, such complexity may demand far more proactive and collaborative measures than is today’s norm.

²⁵ Using a commercial perspective, it has been noted that the traditional approach to strategy ‘often underestimates uncertainty in order to lay out a vision of future events sufficiently precise to be captured in a discounted-cash flow analysis. Hugh Courtney, Jane Kirkland and Patrick Viguerie, ‘Strategy under Uncertainty’, Harvard Business Review, November-December 1997, p.81
In other words, those concerned with longer-term humanitarian threats will need to view ‘normal life’ from an anticipatory perspective where drivers may only be ‘plausible’ but not necessarily certain, where timeframes for speculation and analysis extend well beyond conventional planning cycles and where multidimensional and multisectoral approaches underpin the search for understanding. No single actor or expertise will be adequate to effectively anticipate plausible futures.

Anticipation, however, should not be confused with ‘forecasting’ or ‘prediction’. Anticipation in this context suggests a willingness to be speculative, to recognise the importance of considering the potential impacts of a wide range of events which in turn could result in possible crises as well as ways to mitigate them. To be appropriately anticipatory will also mean that those organisations seeking to anticipate future threats will have to be adaptive, willing to adjust not only their perspectives, but their procedures and operations as well to meet such challenges in order to remain sensitive to myriad threats and ways to offset them. Successful anticipation will demand a willingness to promote cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration that few conventional organisations promote.26

‘Who will be the humanitarian actors’ from a normal life perspective becomes a critical issue.

The normal life perspective suggests that threats and their implications are fluid and ‘borderless’. As messes, they impact in myriad ways, creating diverse vulnerabilities as well as intensifying them, and in so doing give a whole new meaning to the nature and dimensions of ‘the affected’. They, too, add to the meaning of ‘self-interests’ when it comes to those embroiled in humanitarian action.

From a normal life perspective, that full panoply of self interest defines not only crisis effects, but also the sorts of different approaches and understandings about ways to anticipate and deal with such crises. In that sense, the wide range of self-interests that result from messes means that ‘humanitarian actors’ are not limited to any one sector, but self-interests and identified mutual self-interests can identify the various cross-sectoral, cross-disciplinary expertise and approaches that might be required.

Using this perspective, in the words of a senior ICRC representative, ‘We are all humanitarians now’.27 In determining ‘who is a humanitarian actor?’, the issue may not be between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional actors’, where the former defines the border into which the latter crosses. Rather in light of the intensifying dimensions and dynamics of crisis threats, the issue may lead to the propensity to anticipate so called humanitarian actors based upon

---

26 See, for example, James Maltby, Human Dimensions of Analysis: In strategic futures for defence, NATO Unclassified, DSTL/CP88796, paper #4
27 This statement was made in a meeting held by the Humanitarian Futures Programme, King’s College, London, 27 November 2013, bringing together representatives of the private sector, the military and the humanitarian sector to discuss future humanitarian challenges.
perceptions of self-interest and mutual self-interest. Such perspectives may in turn lead to a process in which capacities to identify and resolve potential threats will be determined. That prospect raises the issue of who when faced with a potential or actual threat has the comparative advantages and value-added to deal with them? In a related vein, what sorts of mechanisms and platforms will from today’s perspectives transcend conventional humanitarian structures to make myriad self-interests mutual?

While the prospect for the emergence of a ‘normal life’ paradigm is still not clear, it is possible that such a paradigm might reflect a multidimensional and multisectoral approach for dealing with humanitarian crises that would be fundamentally different from the present humanitarian paradigm. One could foresee that the former might bring together the sorts of innovation, resources and capacities for dealing with messes that the latter may not be able to do.

In summary

The implications of what might be seen as an emerging alternative paradigm are many. Some of these are in various ways already reflected in changing attitudes about the nature of humanitarian action and its operational boundaries. That said, despite such changes, there might be less awareness that such changes reflect alternative assumptions about the very concept of humanitarianism.

While paradigmatic changes, per se, may not in and of themselves be of paramount interest to humanitarian practitioners, the practical implications of an alternative paradigm are worth considering. In this context there are at least six issues that should engage those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities:

1. **The source of human vulnerability.** The nature of humanitarian action will be too complex and uncertain to limit the scope of planning, preparedness and response to the immediate or to single sector or single actor solutions. To ensure that timely and appropriate preparation and response will be in place to meet future challenges, those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities must ensure that their organisations are inherently anticipatory. This is not a call for attempting to predict the future, but rather an acknowledgement that greater attention has to be given to devoting organisational time to planning from the future, to considering the “what might be’s” in order to ensure that the organisation is sufficiently adaptive to cope with future threats;28

2. **Fluid space and time and planning consequences.** The humanitarian-development divide has been a persistent source of tension and debate over decades. The challenge for both sides is to deal with what earlier had been described as the fluid ‘space and time’ dimension of humanitarian action. The fact of the matter is that humanitarian planning and response cannot rest alone on ways to deal with a single, spatially confined event. Any event will spill over into a host of constantly shifting environment. Adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency.” Stanley McChrystal, Team of Teams: New rules of engagement for a complex world, Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2015, p.20

---

28 ‘The pursuit of ‘efficiency’ – getting the most with the least investment of energy, time or money – was once a laudable goal, but being effective in today’s world is less a question of optimizing for a known (and relatively stable) set of variables than responsiveness to a
others, and that means that planning has to begin by abandoning that well-known bifurcation, and, with the creation of integrated planning methods, monitor and deal with potential spillovers. Integrated planning, in this context, will go well beyond development and humanitarian expertise, into conclaves of a number of scientific and social-scientific disciplines;

3. The nature of humanitarian actors. The traditional humanitarian sector is faced with a ‘humanitarian capacities challenge’. As presently configured, it has neither the material nor human resources nor the capacities to meet with ever more complex and uncertain humanitarian threats. This in the first instance means that humanitarians of the future will consist of a wide spectrum of actors, from the private and military sectors to the diaspora and cyber networked groupings. Their utility will be based upon their comparative advantages and value added, and their involvement in humanitarian action will be motivated in no small part by what they perceive as their immediate interests;

4. the search for innovation. Once one moves the concept of humanitarian action away from time and space-bound perspectives, the sources and identification of relevant innovation for humanitarian needs also gain greater fluidity. Too often traditional humanitarian actors begin their search for relevant innovation from their particular perspectives of what they feel the ‘problem’ is, and how ‘innovations’ fit into their preconceived mindsets. Similar to the issue of anticipatory and adaptive capacities, noted in #1, above, the search for innovation has to begin to look beyond self-imposed limits of discovery, and has to actively seek ‘innovation intelligence’ that would introduce a multiplicity of actors whose innovations were by no means intended for humanitarian purposes. Stepping well outside the limits of discovery is a function as well as a reflection of effective anticipation and adaptation;

5. new forms of collaboration. In recognising that the nature of humanitarian actors will change, so, too, will the concept of collaboration. Hitherto, for many reasons, the traditional humanitarian sector presumed that collaboration was founded upon potential actors such as the military and private sector providing cash and in-kind support according to needs and procedures defined by humanitarians. The emerging reality, however, is that an ever widening group of actors will be engaged in humanitarian-related crisis preparedness and response based upon their own sectorally specific motives and concerns. Therefore, collaboration between traditional humanitarian and others will require a new form of collaboration – collaboration based upon an appreciation of self-interests, respective value-addeds and comparative advantages;

29 Ben Ramalingam et al., Strengthening the Humanitarian Innovation Ecosystem, University of Brighton, May 2015, p.42
6. rationale for humanitarian action. There is a propensity across the traditional humanitarian sector to explain and justify its activities by referring to a universal morality that underpins humanitarian principles. As discussed earlier, such assumptions ignore the very cultural, historical, sociological and social-psychological dimensions that determine different societal attitudes. For the traditional humanitarian actor, greater sensitivity to this increasingly evident reality means that for those wishing to be truly humanitarian, they will have to cease taking such universals for granted, and begin to practice the art of constructing mutually empathetic values on a case by case basis, one emergency at a time. ‘This is a hard prospect but perhaps our best one: a humanism prepared to negotiate across borders unaccompanied by any non-negotiable universals.’

It is a humanism that recognises that the so-called moral stance has too often led to disguised and most likely unintended condescension between provider and recipient. Mutual self-interest is a major step towards equality, in a world where any crisis threat ultimately has global consequences.

Extending the journey:

While the perspectives that have emerged out of this PFF initiative have been met with considerable interest, its full impact will have to be measured with more extensive groups of practitioners, those from different countries and cultures, those who have had a wide range of experiences in the humanitarian world, and indeed those who come from different occupations and sectors.

It is intended, therefore, to extend the journey of exploration through such PFF tools as Futures Roundtables and Testing the Future initiatives, both designed to immerse those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities into a world that is not based upon the traditional assumptions that underpin so much of the traditional humanitarian sector.

---


31 For a description of the purpose and implementation of Futures Roundtables and Testing the Future initiative, see Planning from the Future website: www.planningfromthefuture.org
Bibliography


