Uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change will increasingly characterize humanitarian threats in the foreseeable future. These threats may range from the prospect of the 320-meter asteroid 99942 Apophis crashing into the Pacific rim in 2035 to Himalayan snow meltdown that would leave an estimated 300 million South Asians without water. Regardless of the particular event, the effects of such potential catastrophes are essential but almost too cataclysmic to contemplate.

Those responsible for preventing and responding to large-scale crises face a monumental challenge. They have to contemplate possible futures and drive toward solutions. And yet responses to such recent disasters as Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 tsunami, avian influenza, the Darfur conflict, and the 2005 Niger food crisis offer little assurance that organizations’ anticipatory and adaptive capacities are adequate to meet the challenge.

Across the wide spectrum of governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental organizations, few have shown sustained interest in predicting catastrophic trends and their consequences. Even fewer have attempted to incorporate these trends into organizational strategies and operational activities. Far fewer still have demonstrated any inclination to adjust organizational behavior to become more agile, innovative, and flexible.

These are challenges for all, especially for the UN institutions that will be directly and indirectly involved in large-scale catastrophes in the future. These challenges will test how the United Nations determines its priorities and how far it is willing to abandon self-serving but outmoded assumptions. At the same time, they also will be a test for member states, who must ultimately commit to a UN role that individual states cannot perform alone.

The Rise of UN Humanitarianism

In November 1970, 250,000 Bengalis lost their lives in a matter of six hours as a cyclone from the Bay of Bengal swept across the flat coastline of what was then East Pakistan. UN Secretary-General U Thant was determined to respond to this catastrophe. He was warned off, however, by the representative of the Soviet Union, who stated categorically that “disaster relief” was not the United Nations’ responsibility. Indeed, until the mid-1980s, humanitarian issues—disaster and emergency prevention, preparedness, and response—were at most peripheral concerns for the United Nations and at the least an unwelcome interference with the core functions of “peace and security.” Over the last 20 years, however, humanitarianism has moved from the periphery to the center of UN concerns due to four intersecting factors.

First, media technology brought the plight of the increasingly disaster-prone developing world into the living rooms of richer nations, triggering the consciences of many political constituencies. The 1984 drought affecting 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa underscored the need for the United Nations to become more
attuned to the political and public relations implications of mobilized public conscience.

Second, there were more humanitarian crises. The impact of poverty, the erosion of infrastructure, and the inability of many countries to maintain minimal social safety nets meant that an ever-widening swath of human population was vulnerable to disasters and emergencies. Whether the so-called “disaster agents” were earthquakes, floods, volcanic explosions, or mudslides, their effects clearly demonstrated that vulnerability was inversely related to wealth. Humanitarian intervention has become more necessary.

Third, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, superpowers paid less attention to former client states. This also contributed to the growing centrality of humanitarian affairs within the United Nations. The support that had sustained many governments declined in the late 1980s. “Development aid”—whether military assistance, institution building, or agricultural and rural development—was on the decline. At the same time, many former client states began to lose their tenuous abilities to govern. In Somalia, Liberia, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Zaire, it became clear that governments of afflicted peoples had at best a limited ability and at worst a blatant disinclination to deal with humanitarian crises befalling their people.

A perverse consequence of the post-Cold War peace dividend was thus a general stagnation of development aid. Yet humanitarian assistance did not decline. Over the past decade it has fluctuated but always trended upward, falling in the range of US$2 and 6 billion per year for UN activities alone. Hence a fourth fundamental reason for humanitarian assistance’s move from the periphery to the core of UN activities was the emergence of the “humanitarian enterprise.”

Humanitarian assistance became an important element in maintaining the growth of organizations that had increased in scope and size to address humanitarian crises. The humanitarian enterprise beast had to feed off humanitarian crises to survive. As resources for humanitarian response became an important source of institutional survival, more organizations joined in the feeding frenzy. The competition became intense and sometimes ferocious, and the organizations of the United Nations were very much part of that resource competition. For example, nine NGOs were operating in Kosovo at the beginning of the crisis in July 1999. Three months later, more than 300 were present to provide humanitarian aid.

From the periphery, humanitarian affairs had arrived at the core of UN activities. In the words of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, humanitarian affairs had become a fourth pillar of the organization, along with peace and security, development, and human rights.

**Self-Sustaining Assumptions and Change**

As humanitarian affairs emerged as a UN priority, organizational innovations reflected its new status. In 1991, for example, a resolution of the General Assembly added an Under-Secretary-General and a special office to coordinate humanitarian assistance. This was only one of a variety of instruments added to the UN toolkit to coordinate humanitarian activities within the United Nations and beyond. Representatives of major international and non-governmental humanitarian organizations comprised an Inter-Agency Standing Committee designed to foster greater operational coherence. So-called Consolidated Appeals were introduced to present donors with a prioritized package of relief needs, and a Central Emergency Revolving Fund was intended to

**Opposite:** French soldiers disembark on their way to reinforce UN peacekeepers in post-conflict Lebanon. **Above:** Relief goods arrive in Pakistan in October 2005, days after the massive earthquake hit and the United Nations requested more aid.
give a quick start to relief efforts that otherwise would have to wait for the often cumbersome decisional processes of bilateral donors.

Yet even with these and a host of other innovations, the United Nations still operated within a set of assumptions that reflected an outmoded structure and an even more arcane view of humanitarianism. These assumptions inevitably raise one basic issue: the extent to which they constrain the United Nations’ ability to deal with the humanitarian threats that will emerge this century—those that are marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and deep complexity. To have the capacities it requires to meet these emerging challenges, an organization must anticipate what might be and must be sufficiently agile and adaptive to address potential threats. As a July 2005 analysis of UN peacebuilding missions made all too evident, the United Nations has virtually no capacity to formulate strategy and even less ability to be speculative—in other words, to anticipate.

The potential is there. Hidden in the recesses of UN agencies and programs are levels of technical analysis and forecasting expertise that can compete with the most sophisticated research institutions in the world. That such potential is not used to anticipate potential global hazards reveals a disjointed and disparate system. It also reveals a system that is at its core concerned about the political consequences of daring to be predictive. UN agencies fear donors’ wrath for being the messenger of uncomfortable news.

These factors reinforce and perhaps make convenient the pride that the humanitarian community all too often takes in being “reactive.” The last minute, “cavalry to the rescue” ethos of humanitarian assistance is inherent in the system, and the United Nations is no exception. The acceptance of reaction rather than prevention helps to deter a more anticipatory humanitarian environment.

Linked to the perceived heroic quality of humanitarian assistance is the sense that humanitarian assistance is a charitable act. To the extent that the act is seen as charitable, its intention seems more important than its consequences. Acting with good intentions leaves only misanthropes to question whether the threat could have been anticipated and whether the charitable act did more harm than good. While the past decade has seen various initiatives to set standards for humanitarian response, there remains no measure of accountability that offers reasonable consumer protection.

This same ethos also explains in part the attention paid to technical expertise in the field of humanitarianism and the relative disinclination to see the causes of disasters and emergencies from a more anthropological and social scientific perspective. The humanitarian community focuses upon the “fixers,” those with technical competencies rather than a deep understanding about the nature and causes of human vulnerability. The former are essential to responding to basic human needs, but the latter are critical to understanding ways to mitigate and prepare for crises and deliver sustainable assistance.

Reactive rather than proactive, tactical rather than strategic, technical rather than conceptual, charitable rather than accountable, the UN approach to humanitarian action—like that of the wider humanitarian community—continues to substitute good intentions for true effectiveness.

The New Dynamics of Crisis
The humanitarian community has become used to the idea that disasters and emergencies are a burden born by the developing world, that other place whose people fall victim to an endless stream of “natural disasters” and “complex emergencies.” But future humanitarian threats are likely to bridge the North-South divide. So, too, will there be different agents of disasters and emergencies. Perhaps even more important, new possibilities for prevention, preparedness, and response will emerge as new technologies become more relevant to those responsible for humanitarian concerns.

One only need look at the potential threat of H5N1 avian influenza (AI) to understand that the potential dimensions of humanitarian threats and the speed with which they can become a cross-sectoral catastrophe are unique in the history of humankind. The prospect of globalized transport and the unparalleled movement of peoples and economic inter-linkage make the AI threat incomparable with earlier pandemics. The point, however, is that these same factors will turn pandemic threats, industrial accidents, and technological collapses into potential global catastrophes. More and more, disaster and emergency agents know no North-South divide.

While poverty has grave local consequences, it also creates disaster agents that produce significant global threats.
Geographically localized activities can have global dimensions. Local poverty prompted under-investment in the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that led to transnational dangers, and China’s attempt to divert river routes to provide water for burgeoning new towns will have global environmental consequences. Conversely, the local impact of developed countries’ use of natural resources is equally well recognized.

These generally well-understood dynamics are part of a more basic trend. Since the mid-20th century, humanity has transformed its relationship with nature more profoundly than ever before. Nature’s reactions to this transformation are evident around the world. They take the form of very deep challenges to the ways human beings have sustained themselves as a species on the planet. Humanity’s approach to sustaining itself requires major adjustments if the warning signals of disasters and emergencies are not to transform into exponentially more devastating catastrophes.

The Challenge of Change

The United Nations, with its specialized programs and agencies, has an extraordinary capacity to anticipate trends and understand their implications. But its capacity has been severely underutilized. Its semi-autonomous components vie for funds and rarely integrate their capacities or commit to common objectives. This is true in part because member states have rarely focused on the kind of institutional reform that would add substantive coherence to the system.

Chronic underutilization also stems from the inherently reactive nature of the United Nations. As a system it is reluctant to take initiative, because it has always seen itself as a servant of its members—unwilling to go beyond what it thinks those members would tolerate. This institutional passivity is further reflected in what can only be seen as an extraordinary lack of capacity to formulate strategies. Whether in peacebuilding or disaster management, the United Nations has little ability or seeming interest in determining strategic end-states and advancing toward them in its operational activities.

There are two prerequisites to overcoming this failing. First, the United Nations needs a capacity and ethos that enables it to think strategically. The system as a whole will need to prize strategic thinking and inter-institutional collaboration. This needs to be supported by an ability to collect information and data—hitherto regarded by member states as intelligence gathering, an unwarranted interference into sovereign affairs. But in 21st century reality, these capabilities are available and accessible to all. These two prerequisites should improve the UN capacity to think and plan strategically. Thus armed, the United Nations should focus its humanitarian mandate upon five key activities: standard-bearing, anticipation, innovation, coordination, and advocacy.

The United Nations as standard-bearer. The cries for greater accountability and transparency in the field of humanitarian affairs are legion. In reality, however, there are few agreed-upon benchmarks. Even when standards exist, intense competition for resources too often means that action is guided by the will of donors rather than the needs of the vulnerable. As long as the relief beast of UN agencies and programs needs to be fed, compromises will be made to ensure a steady flow of resources.

The UN system needs to withdraw from the relief resource trough and leave operational activities—distribution of relief aid, for instance—to the myriad NGOs with a greater capacity for emergency field operations. The United Nations should instead use its universality and expertise to establish prevention, preparedness, and response standards to serve as “benchmarks” for the wider humanitarian community. This would require the United Nations to have a far deeper understanding of the nature of vulnerability in individual societies than it has today. That cannot be accomplished without a far more robust local presence.

The United Nations as anticipator. The technical capacities...
of the UN system are impressive. From health and agriculture to climate and meteorology, its range of expertise is wide and deep. Yet little if anything is done to bring these resources together to focus on future threats that might prey upon human vulnerability. The organization’s global reach and status give it a unique position from which to speculate about the future.

The United Nations as innovator. The same expertise that abounds throughout the system should also be used to experiment with ways to mitigate and respond to human vulnerability. The United Nations should be far more creative in using advanced technology and emerging financial mechanisms like food security insurance schemes to prevent and prepare for catastrophes.

The United Nations as coordinator. When one asks what humanitarian responsibilities the United Nations should undertake, coordination is an almost visceral response. Certainly this was the intention of member states when the General Assembly created the post of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator almost 15 years ago. But that role needs to be reconsidered. The United Nations has always assumed that it should coordinate humanitarian activities, but far more important, it should make sure that humanitarian activities are coordinated.

Coordinating mechanisms of the future may well include different types of actors, including private corporations with highly efficient and well-established management experience. A single NGO or an NGO consortium could coordinate the wider community engaged in a complex humanitarian operation. Alternatively, the troika of a business, an NGO, and a UN agency could collaborate. The United Nations need not itself coordinate to fulfill its coordination mission.

The United Nations as advocate. On occasion the United Nations has pointed to particular crises, such as those in Darfur and in Indonesia’s Aceh region after the 2004 tsunami, and challenged the global community to respond with concern and generosity. In that sense, it is not unaccustomed to the role of advocate. However, the challenge of the future is to ensure that the United Nations speaks authoritatively to that same community about the threats the global community has to anticipate. By speaking in advance rather than after the fact, the United Nations can ensure that future crises are not handled in today’s piecemeal, reactive fashion.

These sorts of innovations will require UN member states to reverse a 60-year behavior pattern that is constitutionally and psychologically disjointed, passive, and un-strategic—characteristics not suited to provide the foresight that an increasingly vulnerable world requires. What incentives are there for member states to reverse this pattern?

Our Best Hope

For all the disdain certain member states have shown for the United Nations, when it comes to humanitarian issues—be they in post-conflict Lebanon, in the post-Tsunami Pacific, in Iraq, or elsewhere—the institution’s importance has been recognized. The United Nations’ ostensibly “impartial and neutral” humanitarian role has proven to be an acceptable convenience for even its harshest critics. In light of foreseeable global trends, this role can only expand.

The UN is the only system that has some semblance of perceived impartiality, a global mandate, and the expertise to coherently monitor, advise, and advocate about future threats the world may face. In and of itself, this may be wishful thinking, but given that individual member states have shown relatively little consistent willingness to think globally or strategically about the catastrophes we might face, this is perhaps our best hope for averting humanitarian crises.