

HPG Working Paper

# Constructive deconstruction: making sense of the international humanitarian system

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# Acronyms

<b>CERF</b>	Central Emergency Response Fund
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DEC</b>	Disasters Emergency Committee
<b>ECB</b>	Emergency Capacity Building project
<b>GCC</b>	global commodity chain
<b>GHD</b>	Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative
<b>HAP</b>	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
<b>HPN</b>	Humanitarian Practice Network
<b>HRI</b>	Humanitarian Response Initiative
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>NEO</b>	New Economics of Organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>SCHR</b>	Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response



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# 1 Introduction

The shortcomings of the humanitarian sector are well-rehearsed. The flaws that are perennially at the top of the list include international humanitarian actors' weak adherence to humanitarian principles, unresponsive and politicised funding, weak accountability to crisis-affected people, poor leadership and coordination and inadequate involvement of national and local actors in affected countries (Ramalingam and Barnett, 2010). The extent to which the same problems in critical areas of humanitarian performance are highlighted again and again leads one to ask why, despite the almost ritualistic self-criticism within the sector and repeated attempts at reform over the years, the basic configuration and incentive structures of the sector remain unchanged (*ibid.*; see also Krause, 2014: 126–27; de Waal, 1997: xv).

Despite their shared dissatisfaction with the sector's performance, aid professionals have not reached a point where they 'can begin to grapple with its deeper, structural pathologies'; instead, these pathologies 'have taken on the air of the inevitable' (Stoddard, 2004). Much like a sick patient who is all too familiar with and resigned to the symptoms of a prolonged illness, but remains in the dark about what disease they have or what treatments might help, so attention in the humanitarian sector has got largely stuck on the symptoms of dysfunction, with little progress made over the years to properly understand the underlying causes of this dysfunction so that more effective remedies might be identified. Commanding a combined annual budget upwards of \$20 billion, and charged with the critically important task of assisting and protecting some of the world's most vulnerable people in the midst of crisis, one of the sector's main shortcomings over recent years has been its failure to properly diagnose its own weaknesses before trying to come up with measures to address them. Instead of the circular, self-referential and essentially descriptive critique that has dominated much of the discourse in recent years, a more objective, dispassionate and explicitly analytical appraisal of the international humanitarian sector and its weaknesses is needed before a proper appreciation can be achieved of the real nature and extent of the sector's problems, and the possibilities and prospects for substantive reform and improvement.

Perhaps the first challenge to acknowledge before embarking on any kind of analytical exercise is the question of what is meant by the international humanitarian 'system' or 'sector' – both terms being in regular use without any real clarity about what they actually refer to. Indeed, quite apart from any challenges entailed in attempting to analyse the sector, simply *describing* it in terms of its boundaries, identity, nature and purpose is hugely problematic.

The concentration of official humanitarian assistance and shared discourse and relationships among a relatively small number of dominant organisations might make the humanitarian sector appear a cohesive entity. Of the total \$18.7 billion of government contributions in 2014, \$16.8bn was donated by governments from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); almost half of international humanitarian assistance from these donors was channelled through the six UN agencies with key roles in humanitarian assistance, and 18% through NGOs – predominantly INGOs. The proportion of funds channelled directly to the government authorities of affected states was just 3% (Development Initiatives, 2015b). The boundaries of the 'established' or 'formal' international humanitarian sector are additionally defined and reinforced by a range of overlapping institutional structures and initiatives connecting the main actors, including the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Clusters, Humanitarian Country Teams, and the Code of Conduct for Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief.

At the same time, however, there is an underlying uncertainty within this international 'core' about what are – or should be – the boundaries of the international humanitarian sector and the principles or other attributes that should define these boundaries, and hence an ever-present anxiety over what defines humanitarian identity (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; see also Krause, 2014: 92–125; Carbonnier, 2015: 63–64). In practice, those agencies that explicitly identify themselves within the international humanitarian sector jostle with one another for leverage, funds, public profile and market share, and often ignore or distance themselves from norms or joint operational

frameworks when these are not deemed in their interest (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 2; Cooley and Ron, 2002).

What is beyond question is the continuing dominance of the established ‘core’ of lead donors, UN agencies and major INGOs in the mechanisms of international humanitarian action in terms of the overall share of resources they control and the power they command over where and how the sector responds to crises; hence, it is no accident that complaints of extreme dysfunction and deep dissatisfaction with the performance of the sector on various fronts have been directed almost entirely towards this grouping and how it functions. Whatever the sector is today and could be in the future is heavily determined and controlled by these actors.

This HPG Working Paper is intended as a first step in a longer-term project that aims to analyse the global humanitarian sector and, in particular, its suitability to meet the demands of current and future crises. Based on a wide-ranging literature review focused primarily on the ‘formal’ humanitarian sector, the study is designed to identify theoretical and analytical frameworks that might be particularly useful for understanding the pathologies in the current sector that impede effective response, and for pointing to potential ways to improve effectiveness in the future. This is an extremely challenging undertaking given the sheer size and complexity of the international humanitarian sector, the huge range of performance demands on it at different levels and the wide variation in the contexts of international crisis response. Moreover, weaknesses in how international mechanisms of humanitarian response function cannot be explained entirely in terms of failings that are internal to the humanitarian sector itself. Indeed, many aid analysts would point first and foremost to external factors, such as the difficulties posed by poor security and lack of access, the unpredictability and intractability of many conflicts and political crises, the effects or interference of international military and/or political action, and the escalation and sheer scale of humanitarian needs.

A further challenge is methodological. Deciding how best to go about analysing and understanding the

sector is by no means a straightforward or value-free exercise; the selection of any particular analytical approach will reflect a priori judgements about the nature of the sector, for example whether it is seen as a ‘system’, an ‘industry’ or a ‘network’ – or whether it is seen to have properties of each or all of these. Whichever key attributes of the sector are prioritised will influence the choice of analytical frameworks that would be considered relevant, and the application of these frameworks will in turn reveal only those aspects of the sector that they are intended or designed to tackle (Barnett and Finnemore, 1990). For this reason, this Working Paper explores a wide range of relevant (or potentially relevant) theoretical perspectives and approaches. Because many of the problems of the past remain stubbornly also the problems of today, this paper purposefully draws on literature spanning two decades or more. However, a systematic literature review would have been beyond the remit of this project – this paper is intended as a more modest attempt to inform the theoretical and conceptual direction of future HPG research on the nature and potential improvement of the international humanitarian sector.

The literature and approaches reviewed are grouped according to how the sector is metaphorically and/or theoretically conceived:

1. As a distinct type of governance formation or *configuration* that structures relationships among the key organisations within the sector and determines how the sector functions – e.g. characterised as ‘networks’, or as a ‘system’, or as a formal mandate-based ‘architecture’.
2. As a distinctive *social and political arena* with particular patterns and processes of interaction among key actors within the sector, affecting patterns of behaviour and action and power relationships within and between organisations, and between humanitarian organisations and people affected by crisis.
3. As an *industry*, with the focus on the marketisation of humanitarian services and vertical contract-based chains of donor–agency and agency–agency contracting and sub-contracting, with implications for national and local organisations and beneficiaries.

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# 2 The humanitarian sector as a configuration

## 2.1 Networks

Networks are ubiquitous across every area of economic, social and political life, including the humanitarian sector. In international relations, the rise of networked governance ‘has been touted as a panacea to the problems of cumbersome multilateralism and slow-moving and inefficient international organisations’. Networks have been promoted for ‘their general virtues of speed, flexibility, inclusiveness, ability to cut across different jurisdictions, and sustained focus on a specific set of problems’. Networked governance is portrayed empirically as the next wave in global and regional governance as well as the optimal solution to the dilemmas of international institutional design. With ‘both hope and alarm, NGO networks have been pitted against states as rivals for international influence and possible substitutes in domains previously monopolised by [international governmental organisations] and other more hierarchical forms of interstate collaboration’ (Kahler, 2009: 28).

### 2.1.1 Networks in the humanitarian sector

Ramalingam (2011) identifies a variety of networks, including professional or technical networks, knowledge-sharing networks, campaign networks, fundraising networks and operational networks. Some are formalised, perhaps with a central secretariat and controlling substantial resources, while others are highly informal, based on friendship or shared experience.

Much of the literature concerned with networks in the aid industry has focused on analysing the governance and other functions of *particular* networks or types of formal networks so as to better understand or support the networks themselves (e.g. Court and Mendizabal, 2005). Collinson (2011) approaches the question from the opposite side of the lens, to explore what functions various networks (both formal and informal) play *both separately and together* in the governance of the overall humanitarian system. Mindful of the huge diversity of network types across the humanitarian

sector in terms of scope, objectives, structures and impacts, Collinson (*ibid.*) presents a loose typology of networks according to their primary function:

- Supporting policy-making and policy implementation (e.g. the IASC).
- Supporting and facilitating policy verification and accountability (ALNAP, the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, the Humanitarian Response Initiative (HRI), DARA, the Emergency Capacity Building project (ECB), the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)).
- Enforcing binding rules (advocacy networks directed at national governments and other duty-bearers).
- Linking and resolving different issue areas and policy agendas (e.g. the UN Integration Steering Group).
- Setting norms and standards (e.g. the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), GHD, Sphere).
- Mobilising and tracking resources (e.g. the DEC, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) Partnership Taskforce, the IASC Task Group on Humanitarian Financing, the DAC).
- Direct support for humanitarian action and coordination on the ground (the Clusters, Sphere).
- Information-sharing, monitoring, developing usable knowledge and influencing policy and practice (e.g. IRIN, AlertNet, the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)).

Collinson emphasises the importance of networks-based forms of interaction in almost every aspect and level of policy-making, decision-making and action across the humanitarian sector. Dominant international networks such as the IASC are highly significant in defining and shaping the international humanitarian sector, establishing shared norms, rules and institutional structures to govern relationships and modus operandi among key actors (*ibid.*). The importance of fluid networks-based governance in the humanitarian sector is all the greater, Collinson suggests, for the fact that neither donors

nor affected governments have tried to develop an explicit regime of multilateral governance based on the kind of binding rules seen in many other areas of international cooperation. Even though regional and international rules-based regimes intersect with and govern particular aspects of humanitarian action (e.g. refugee protection, human rights and humanitarian law and certain UN Security Council Resolutions), these do not establish a distinct or coherent normative regime for the sector as a whole. The international humanitarian sector can therefore be understood as a partially self-regulating transnational community composed of various non-governmental, private and public governmental and intergovernmental actors, in which 'contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries ... are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of governments' (Keohane and Nye, 1971: 331). Relationships and rules between these networks are fluid and dynamic and they mostly rely on voluntary compliance. Networks-based governance demands that humanitarian actors negotiate among themselves within the system in an attempt to come to agreed positions and actions. This has led to the normative development of common standards and codes of conduct which are often endorsed in theory, but adhered to weakly and unevenly in practice.

Paradoxically, where networks come together they also create barriers to entry and reinforce boundaries between those that are deemed part of the system and those outside. Barriers to entry can exclude other types of actors and networks involved in humanitarian responses, such as Southern, regional and local actors, the military, the private sector and religious and political organisations, and affected state governments. While these barriers may appear to strengthen the system in some respects, they may also encourage or reinforce perceptions that the system is an exclusive and mostly Western project and a vector for certain values and modes of behaviour that many may distrust or reject (cf. Donini, 2010).

These aspects of networks-based governance, action and interaction cry out for more systematic research and analysis because of their potentially profound implications for what can or cannot be expected of the international humanitarian sector. The success or failure of key aspects of humanitarian reform, for instance, has not been properly analysed or assessed in terms of the inherently networks-based nature of the system and the implications of this for leadership,

coordination, accountability and adherence to shared norms across the system (*ibid.*).

### 2.1.2 Network analysis

The call for more systematic analysis of humanitarian networks raises the question of what *type* of analysis will be the most useful in understanding better the nature and functioning of the international humanitarian sector. Kahler (2009: 2) distinguishes two main strands within network studies, both of which can be applied to international politics: networks as actors, and networks as structures. Kahler quotes the commonly cited definition offered by Podolny and Page (1998) of a network as 'any collection of actors ... that pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organisational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange'. Networks as actors are identified as a specific organisational form of collective action which can be distinguished from markets, on the one hand, and hierarchical forms of organisation on the other. The networks-as-actors approach lacks a common methodology, however, and apart from highlighting the absence of a recognised dispute settlement authority that would reside in a hierarchy, efforts to distinguish networks are generally lacking in precision. In the main, investigators are not particularly interested in structure beyond the fact that the network exists (Kahler, 2009: 8–9).

According to the networks-as-structure approach, relational network structures influence the behaviour of network members, and, through them, produce consequential network effects. This approach typically assumes that networks emerge from the actions of their members, i.e. they are not the result of intentional design. To define and analyse network structure, this approach often relies on social network analysis, on network economics and on the 'new' science of networks. Social network analysis provides both a toolkit of concepts and a methodology for empirical research (cf. Kadushin, 2012); it focuses on relational data among interdependent actors rather than depicting individual agents and their attributes, and identifies the ties or links among actors creating a structure through persistent patterns of relations. These links in turn serve to constrain actors or provide opportunities for action. Network economics also emphasises structural attributes of networks, such as scale or degrees of hierarchy, and the implications of those attributes for efficient operation and policy

intervention. And the ‘new’ science of networks has introduced a focus on the dynamics of network development (Kahler, 2009: 5–10).

Kahler (*ibid.*) criticises both approaches for paying too little attention to the nature or content of the links within networks, and what these links convey (e.g. information or resources), and for paying too little heed to the consequences and effects of networks. Perhaps even more importantly, he questions the overly ‘consensual and trust-laden’ view of networks that dominates the field: issues of network power and power within networks are too often ignored as networks are portrayed as the antithesis of a hierarchical power structure. By contrast, Kahler proposes the application of insights from political analysis to reveal distributional and status conflicts that are often resolved through the introduction of centralisation and hierarchy, whether within or outside of the network. Kahler concludes from an empirical analysis of a range of networks active in different aspects of international relations (including ALNAP) that ‘successful networked organisations often demonstrate an ability to incorporate elements of hierarchy and centralisation into their networked structure: in effect, they can become more or less “networked” as political demands shift or their environments change, so, counter to much of the overdrawn rhetoric that surrounds networks, their ability to “hybridise” with hierarchical forms when necessary has often been part of their organisational repertoire’ (*ibid.*: 26).

Likewise, Sacchetti and Sugden (2003) are concerned with the distribution of resources and power within a network, rather than with the conditions that regulate the optimal allocation of resources. They posit an explicit necessity to examine who decides about strategic issues inside networks – i.e. to ask who has the power of decisions and control. To capture the significance of power and hierarchy in network relationships, Sacchetti and Sugden outline two ‘ideal type’ networks: ‘networks of mutual dependence’ and ‘networks of direction’. Based on ideas developed by Powell (1990), within networks of mutual dependence the more the ties between actors are based on long-term relations, reciprocity and mutual trust (embeddedness), the more strategic decision-making power becomes evenly distributed amongst the participants in the network. The dependence of actors on one another’s resources and activities is at the basis of continuous exchange – both economic and social – and allows for the gradual building of trust in the network.

Strategic decision-making is based on the ‘mutual’ (not necessarily symmetrical) framing of decisions. In networks of direction, planning may remain concentrated in the hands of one or a few actors in the network. Although this does not necessarily mean that decisions are taken against the will of others, Sacchetti and Sugden argue that it ‘heavily obfuscates (or rather nullifies) the actual capability of those who are left out of decision-making to actively participate in the determination of broad policies and objectives. It is because control is concentrated at the top of a hierarchical structure within the network that the idea of mutual interdependence must be substituted with that of direction’ (*ibid.*: 675).

To the extent that comparable structures of asymmetrical power can be identified in the international humanitarian sector, there is a compelling case for applying a much more explicitly political lens to the analysis of networks than is typical in mainstream sociological approaches. The international humanitarian sector is far from a network of equals; although authority is dispersed and certainly more difficult to pin down than in the centralised form of authority structure that characterises most state bureaucracies, still ‘power radiates downwards’ throughout the sector, and as the sector has expanded and modernised, it has developed ‘a growing machinery that organizes action from the top down’ (Barnett, 2011: 221, 236). Arguably, therefore, an explicit attention to power relations would need to be brought into any network analysis of the humanitarian sector before it could generate any useful explanations (rather than simply descriptions) of the actions and outcomes that are influenced, constrained or facilitated by humanitarian actors’ relationships and positions in a particular network.

Appreciating the centrality of network-based structures and processes for the mobilisation of international humanitarian action is essential for understanding the humanitarian sector and exploring its limitations and potential for change. However, these structures and processes themselves cannot be understood without close attention to the nature and implications of differential power relations within and between actors and networks across the system. As discussed in subsequent sections, any normative analysis of the humanitarian sector must consider the extent to which the sector’s key networks (such as those identified in the typology above) equate with networks of mutual dependence or networks

of direction, what the implications of this are for leadership, coordination, coverage, accountability and partnerships between key actors across the system, and whether more or less mutuality or more or less direction would be desirable or feasible for reducing or solving the sector's dysfunction in any of these areas. In order to analyse the source, nature and dynamics of asymmetrical power relations within the sector's numerous networks, additional analytical tools drawn from political economy are needed.

### 2.1.3 Networks, coordination and leadership

In reviewing the demands that the (network-based) humanitarian sector imposes on leaders in humanitarian action, Knox Clarke (2013) emphasises the atomised nature of the sector and the problem that a very large number of organisations are typically involved in any response. He suggests that the 'requirement to collaborate, in a highly politicised environment, with a large number of diverse entities is one of the central leadership challenges presented by the humanitarian context', and notes that the large number of inter-agency structures that are increasingly part of the humanitarian landscape reflect perennial tensions between individual agency and collective action (Knox Clarke, 2013: 10, citing Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Hothschild, 2010). Although most of the inter-agency structures created to support collective action are usually described as having a 'coordination' function, Knox Clarke suggests that closer scrutiny of their actual or intended purpose reveals that they are 'often expected to provide vision and objectives, build consensus and find ways to collectively realise the vision'. In these cases, therefore, 'they are not merely fora for the exchange of information to facilitate parallel actions – they are expected to lead'. For the leader of any inter-agency group (such as the Humanitarian Coordinator), these structures create a specific challenge: how to 'lead' a group over which one has very limited formal authority, where the people who are 'led' represent organisations accountable to different stakeholders (Knox Clarke, 2013: 10–11).

Given the constant demand for improved coordination among practitioners, policy-makers and commentators over many years, and the level of attention that this issue has received in the major reform processes of the past decade, there has been surprisingly little attention given to what coordination actually means or should mean in practice, or what forms of coordination are attainable or optimal for different levels, phases or contexts of

humanitarian response. Indeed, little has changed in this respect since James Ingram observed over two decades ago that '[w]hen discussing deficiencies in the UN response to disasters, donor government representatives use the word "coordination" as an ill-defined catchall' (Ingram, 1993: 174).

How particular networks are configured in practice in key areas or levels of crisis response (for instance, if they are structured more as networks of mutual dependence or as networks of direction) has profound implications for the nature, limitations and potential of different forms of leadership and coordination (and vice-versa). And just as viewpoints differ as to the actual or potential level of mutual cooperation and dependence or centralised direction (versus atomised anarchy and competition), so associated perceptions and visions of humanitarian coordination and leadership differ too. According to Seybolt (2009: 1,030), '[s]hared understanding of a strategic goal and jointly developed plans to complete the necessary tasks using agreed means constitute the gold standard of coordination during humanitarian assistance operations' – he notes, however, that this standard has rarely if ever been reached.

A more top-down approach has been advocated in the past by Ingram, who argued that: '[c]oordination is one of the principal, top-level managerial tasks in all complex, large organisations. Successful management requires a strategic plan understood and acceptable to the various units needed for division of labour or other reasons. Successful management also requires a scheme of implementation delimiting organisational roles, systems to promote cooperation between units, and a means of gathering and feeding back information in order to monitor progress and make adjustments in the plan' (Ingram, 1993: 174). The greater the number of autonomous units, the more complex the task; hence, as major humanitarian emergencies are so inherently complex, 'even if their management was in the hands of a single autonomous agency, efficient operations would require good coordination' – and with so many UN agencies involved, good coordination is even more important: '[m]anagement must have the power of direction' as, at least in Western management culture, 'committees cannot coordinate' (*ibid.*). Ingram points to military operations, which require a high level of coordination and which 'epitomise management by a commanding general who is held personally responsible for the outcome'. According to Ingram, major, sudden

humanitarian crises require a military-type response to be effective, yet the UN system is inherently incapable of mounting one (*ibid.*).

On the basis of recent research conducted for ALNAP on coordination in the humanitarian clusters, Knox Clarke and Campbell (2015) consider the possibilities for different forms of coordination at the operational level. Using a spectrum from simple communication at one extreme (organisations share information with one another but are otherwise independent) through to alignment (organisations retain a high degree of independence but may adjust their activities to create a more effective response on the basis of the activities of other organisations) and full collaboration (with explicit, formalised coordination relationships and actors sharing agreed objectives and priorities, coordinating on multiple things at once, with high mutual expectations), they found that, overwhelmingly, cluster activities in practice fall at the ‘alignment’ level. They observed that, although clusters had produced ‘joint strategies’ and ‘joint assessments’ which ought to sit at the collaborative end of the spectrum, in fact activities were not as collaborative as they might have appeared at first sight. Instead, cluster members were usually planning and initiating their own organisation-specific activities, then putting these together to make a common strategy, so the strategy is guided by the activities, and not the other way round.

In the complex coordination environment that characterises humanitarian action, it is unsurprising that the importance of leadership suited to complex and dynamic network environments has been particularly emphasised in recent research: in their 2014 study for ALNAP, for example, Buchanan-Smith and Scriven point to ‘the importance of “relational leadership” based on networking, communication and team-building that brings out the leadership potential of others’ – this, they report, ‘is underscored by the finding that the ability to build consensus across agencies is critical to effective leadership – however, it is equally important for those in leadership positions to know when to bring consultation to an end in order to make a clear decision; this requires judgement, courage, and being comfortable with dissent’ (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2014: 5). Knox Clarke, meanwhile, finds that ‘“shared leadership” approaches have been demonstrably successful in humanitarian operations and other contexts’ – although he concedes that the benefits of shared leadership are hard to achieve. Leaders in inter-agency bodies (or networks)

cannot rely on hierarchical authority, and so he argues that there may be a case for establishing shared leadership mechanisms. The success of these would depend on clear and explicit joint commitments to shared leadership, decision-making procedures that do not rely on unanimous consent, joint training and reduced staff turnover to help build trust within the team and more emphasis on the facilitative role of the leader, rather than on decision-making (Knox Clarke, 2013: 15). According to Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, many highly successful individual leaders identified in their study were successful because they were able to build high-performing teams, which in turn implies an element of collective leadership, yet also ‘highlights the individual’s role in creating a leadership environment around them that was valued by their colleagues and peers’ (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2014: 7).

## 2.2 System

Within network analysis there is potential to incorporate and examine a wide range of organisational forms from (at the least integrated end of the spectrum) groupings of very loosely connected, disparate, partially overlapping and/or competing networks or sub-networks, through to (at the most integrated end of the spectrum) highly connected, organised structures with a high level of mutual dependence and/or an established authority structure. A ‘system’, by contrast, should contain a group or combination of interrelated, interdependent or interacting elements forming a collective entity; by extension, ‘systems theory’ relates to an approach to industrial relations which likens the enterprise to an organism with interdependent parts, each with its own specific function and interrelated responsibilities.

Ambivalence about the basic nature of the international humanitarian sector – and particularly whether it is correct to refer to it as a ‘system’ – is often evident in analysis of it. The authors of the 2010 edition of the *State of the Humanitarian System*, for example, remark that to term the huge diversity of networks involved in humanitarian action a system ‘risks implying a degree of cohesion and uniformity of objectives that simply is not the case’. Nevertheless, ‘by virtue of their shared broad goals and underlying values, and their interdependence in field operations, there is a very real sense in which international humanitarian actors and their national counterparts involved in disaster management do

comprise a system – albeit a loosely configured one – that is worthy as a unit of analysis’ (ALNAP, 2010: 13). As regards the UN’s specialist agencies, however, Weiss (2015) argues that the term ‘system’ is a misnomer: the Secretary-General heads only the UN Secretariat in New York and is only first among equals with the executive heads of the other agencies, who are responsible for their own programmes and report to autonomous governing boards. Similarly, Ingram (1993: 175) observes that the UN ‘is not a single organization, but a loosely organized system of independent, specialised agencies set up by separate treaties and autonomous programmes, usually established by General Assembly resolutions, with a very large measure of de facto independence’. As discussed further below, analysis focused on the marketisation of humanitarian services paints a picture of a highly fragmented, conflictual and competitive ‘humanitarian scramble’ (Smillie and Minear, 2004; Cooley and Ron, 2002). In his 2013 book *Humanitarian Business*, Weiss’s depiction of a sector that is ‘shaped by the complexly intertwined disintegrative and integrative forces of globalisation’ captures well the contradictory dynamics that continually thwart any categorical description either way (Weiss, 2013: 4). What these tensions suggest, however, is that the sector is far from settled and fully functional as a system in the sense that this term ought to imply.

Limits to the sector’s systemic attributes are explored by Taylor Seybolt in his 2009 article ‘Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network’. Seybolt applies a particular analytical approach within network analysis – ‘systemic network theory’ – to explore the challenge of coordination during complex emergencies. Consistent with the concept of ‘networks of mutual dependence’, and drawing directly on the systemic network model conceived by Alter and Hage (1993), he uses a concept of a network ‘in which units jointly develop a shared understanding of the tasks to be completed, the means to achieve them, and (sometimes) an overall strategic vision’. He depicts a systemic network as a particular type of network in which clusters of organisations make decisions jointly and integrate their efforts to produce a product or service on the basis of a shared understanding of a strategic goal and jointly developed plans to complete the necessary tasks using agreed means (Seybolt, 2009: 1,028–1,030). This is similar to the ‘collaboration’ end of the coordination spectrum described by Knox Clarke and Campbell (2015: 7).

Seybolt uses the main elements of the systemic network approach to generate a series of hypotheses about the structure and function of the humanitarian aid system which he applies to empirical case studies of particular international disaster responses. His hypotheses and ensuing analysis focus on five key elements of any open system: exogenous influences, the (internal) systemic environment, structure, processes and output. In relation to each of these key elements, he identifies a number of challenges that conspire against the sector functioning overall as a systemic network: the interests and actions of actors outside the system make its external environment complex and uncertain; the internal environment ‘imposes a high volume of complex, uncertain tasks on organisations’; structurally the sector is poorly differentiated, large, complex, unstable and only moderately connected and centralised; organisations act simultaneously but not according to a jointly developed plan; and the sector’s performance gap is often dramatic, particularly during the early days and weeks of a crisis response.

If the international humanitarian sector was operating as a systemic network, it should have an increasingly differentiated structure (supporting mutual dependency), a more connected and less centralised structure with dense communication links, joint planning and adaptive responses, decision-making authority devolved to the operational level and planning and action at the operational level evolved from reciprocal to collective processes, at least some of the time, supported by intense information-sharing mechanisms. However, the case studies showed much more ‘lumpy evolution’, with no consistent or smooth development towards a more systemic network: clusters of network development can be identified, but amidst continuing barriers to collaborative work.

While this framework seems useful for describing the various ways that the sector fails to match up to a systemic network, it does not explain many of the main impediments that it identifies. Overall, this approach perhaps reveals more about what the sector isn’t than about what it is. One is left guessing *how* the dependency of operational actors on a small number of donors affects the exercise and location of decision-making power within the system. And although the analysis identifies only minimal devolution of decision-making at the operational level, it cannot adequately explain why control remains concentrated at higher administrative levels. Populations affected by crisis, moreover, are more or less invisible as actors within the

‘system’. Although elements of systemic network theory are useful to help structure analysis – particularly for helping to identify and distinguish external factors, the internal environment and the structure, processes and outputs of the sector – like network approaches more generally, additional analytical tools are required to adequately *explain* the political, economic and social structures and processes that sustain and define the sector in its current form.

The question of whether the international humanitarian sector has the qualities of a system, and what this might reveal about key aspects of how it currently functions – or could function in the future – remains worthy of further research. While the micro level of inter-organisational interaction may be fraught with contradictory competitive and integrative dynamics and tensions, this does not necessarily mean that the sector cannot have genuine systemic properties at the broader macro or whole system level. It does not work as a well-oiled machine with each part complementing and supporting others to achieve optimum efficiency in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, but does this disqualify it as a system? The extent to which the overall sector has expanded over recent decades, and the extent to which it has adapted and continued to grow, suggests that, while perhaps not fully functioning as a *systemic network* as such, it has nonetheless fared rather well as a large, growing and adaptive system of sorts. How well, or not, the system is performing in the task of assisting and protecting people affected by crisis is a somewhat separate question from whether it is performing well as a system per se. There is almost certainly value in taking a step back from the primary normative demands on the sector to appraise its qualities as a system more objectively, since a more dispassionate understanding of its system-like properties may reveal much that helps explain the properties, resources and incentives that continue to sustain and drive it and that, irrespective of outputs or performance on the ground, account for its success in terms of overall expansion, longevity and adaptation. Arguably, without properly understanding the system and what accounts for this success, it will not be possible to ascertain how it could be made to work better for the people it is intended to help.

## 2.3 Architecture

Seybolt suggests that one of the strengths of the systemic network approach is that it moves away from understanding systems as inherently competitive

without assuming that the alternative must be central control through hierarchy. So, he argues, this theory is particularly well suited to understanding systems where there is a strong incentive for autonomous units to work together in common cause, where the objectives are too challenging and complex to be achieved by any one system (Seybolt, 2009: 1,047–48). Similarly, champions of network analysis have touted networked governance ‘as a panacea to the problems of cumbersome multilateralism and slow-moving and inefficient international organisations’ (Kahler, 2009: 28). But if the humanitarian sector’s networks collectively fail to achieve the humanitarian outputs and impacts that it is charged with delivering, is it necessary to revisit the potential for a more hierarchical structure to achieve what the current networks or system ostensibly cannot? According to Weiss (2015: 174) ‘[o]ne obvious but seemingly impossible solution is business-like: the sector should be rationalised by a spate of mergers that enhance specialisation and efficiency’.

In their 2004 book *The Charity of Nations*, Ian Smillie and Larry Minear argued forcefully for a strengthening of the sector’s ‘multilateral core’. They write that ‘[a]t the center of humanitarian action lies the multilateral ideal and its manifestation in the United Nations – the software and the hardware of combined efforts to achieve common objectives’. However, what we see in practice is ‘a set of UN agencies in competition with each other, with NGOs, and with commercial and political interests, and sometimes even the military’ (Smillie and Minear, 2004: 233). They are far from convinced that the answer to this dysfunction lies in further devolution of operational control and decision-making away from the UN. In critiquing a proposal to the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative that the UN should be reduced to a ‘standard setting’ institution (cf. Dalton et al., 2003), they discount the idea that anything would be improved by passing control over to other actors, noting with extreme scepticism how ‘[i]t is assumed that NGOs (much criticised in other studies) will do almost everything. Or possibly they will be complemented by greater humanitarian efforts on the part of the private sector and the military ... The UN would assess needs, set priorities, and somehow coordinate the dozen or five dozen or even twenty dozen NGOs that would do all the running around, commissioned by a dozen donors according to their own priorities, policies, and predilections’ (Smillie and Minear, 2004: 227–28). Weiss is equally unconvinced by the potential of a more decentralised structure:

‘[t]hat somehow the dynamism and decentralization of the humanitarian family outweighs the advantages of centralization and integration has been a doubtful proposition for many years. In today’s turbulence and in light of the size of the business, such atomisation is unacceptable’. He notes that ‘[a]dvocates for *laissez-faire* humanitarianism argue that creative chaos is better than botched efforts at coherence’ – but ‘within the hopelessly decentralised UN and NGO systems’ and hence the absence of meaningful central authority, ‘coordination lite’ is all that is possible (Weiss, 2005: 18). For Weiss, the most obvious route to improving international humanitarian responses would be through a more top-down model with a much clearer division of labour among the UN and the most important NGOs. But despite the appeal of reforming and improving structures at the top, tough political realities mean that this may remain ‘a lofty aspiration’ rather than a viable policy option (Weiss, 2015: 174).

Writing two decades previously, Ingram was similarly sceptical about the prospects of meaningful improvement within the UN, noting that governments had shown little support for the root and branch changes in structure that would be required (Ingram, 1993: 173). Instead, it might be ‘more fruitful to look to organizations outside the UN system on which to base a restructured humanitarian order’. As an alternative, he recommended a dual system for sudden conflict and internal displacement crises, whereby access would normally be negotiated by an internationally recognised and constituted NGO with no other function than the relief of life-threatening suffering (e.g. a remodelled ICRC or an entirely new organisation set up for this purpose); this organisation would also

provide the operational nucleus for quicker and more effective international response, with the UN agencies, including UNHCR, assuming responsibilities according to their mandates and capabilities only once the initial relief situation was under control, at which point other organisations, including NGOs, would operate under its overall direction (Ingram, 1993: 190–91).

While these ambitious approaches to the international humanitarian ‘architecture’ may be discounted as hypothetical wishful thinking, the exercise of imagining and proposing alternative structures helps to elucidate much about the current establishment and its problems that might otherwise be too easily accepted as inevitable and consequently not receive critical scrutiny. The real-life obstacles to rationalising and strengthening the multilateral humanitarian system cannot be underestimated, however. As a reminder of the colossal political challenges that would be involved, Weiss points to Kofi Annan’s failed efforts to consolidate the UN’s humanitarian capacities through the system-wide review initiated in 1997: rather than achieving the more rational, centralised structure that had originally been envisaged, the review ‘hatched an OCHA mouse’, with ‘delivering as one’ looking very much like ‘old-wine-in-a-new-bottle’ (Weiss, 2015: 174). As discussed in the following section, the obvious question this then raises is how to understand and explain the tensions and rivalries that prevent improved cohesion within the sector’s core structures and coordination mechanisms. While economic explanations may provide a partial answer (as explored later in relation to conceptions of the humanitarian sector as an industry), social aspects of organisational behaviour – discussed in the following section – inevitably have a large part to play.

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# 3 The humanitarian sector as a social and political arena

According to Hilhorst and Jansen (2010), it is important to look beyond the formal institutional ‘architecture’ and avowed policy aims of the international aid system to understand it also as, fundamentally, a cultural and spatial phenomenon. Within a shared humanitarian ‘arena’ a variety of different actors – donors, UN agencies and INGOs, headquarters and field staff, aid recipients, local private suppliers, militaries – negotiate the various activities and outcomes associated with aid. This social negotiation ‘encompasses any kind of strategy, including coercive violence, written statements, formal interactions, schemes deployed in the shadows of the official process and the banalities of everyday gossiping’ (*ibid.*: 1,120). How people define and organise their work is influenced by the mission or mandate of their agency, their understanding of the context and assessment of needs, their personal expectations and frustrations and the associated organisational culture. Through close ethnographic observation of the everyday practices of different actors, it is possible to depict how various drivers and dynamics of aid delivery interact with and influence each other.

This actor-oriented approach – focused on the ‘life-worlds’ of aid workers and the ways that they shape and interpret the reality of aid in a given context – assumes that people’s behaviour will often be reactive, irrational and unpredictable, that their practices are influenced by others and that they will be driven by different motives and in response to their subjective interpretation of the situation they are in. It recognises that action will be based on a range of driving forces, and that motivations for action will be mixed; humanitarian action, for instance, is unlikely to be based solely on a desire to alleviate suffering, but will also be driven by other motivations, such as organisational pressure to continue operations and retain staff or to demonstrate publicly that the agency is doing ‘good work’ (*ibid.*).

While this actor-oriented ethnographic approach is undoubtedly useful for describing and understanding

the particularities of humanitarian aid practices in a given context, other sociological approaches, also starting from a concept of the humanitarian sector as a social arena or ‘social field’, instead focus attention more explicitly on identifying and explaining general or expected patterns of behaviour, action and interaction within and between *organisations*. Indeed, in a sector largely constituted and defined by its organisations, even individuals’ behaviour at the micro level may be seen as fundamentally influenced and structured by the organisations that they are operating within. As Barnett and Finnemore (1999: 719) observe, ‘[o]nce in place, an organization’s culture, understood as the rules, rituals and beliefs that are embedded in the organisation (and its subunits), has important consequences for the way individuals who inhabit that organisation make sense of the world. It provides interpretative frames that individuals use to generate meaning. This is more than just bounded rationality; in this view, actors’ rationality itself, the very means and ends that they value, are shaped by the organisational culture’.

A key rationale for prioritising (intra- and inter-) organisational analysis of humanitarianism is the extent to which processes of rationalisation, bureaucratisation and professionalisation have progressively institutionalised the sector over recent decades (Barnett, 2005: 729). Barnett explains how, since the 1990s, humanitarianism has developed as a distinct and established institutional field, reflected, for example, in the density of interactions and collective awareness of a common enterprise among members, the proliferation of abstract rules for standardising responses, the adoption of common procedures to improve efficiency, growing reliance on specialised knowledge and accepted methodologies for calculating results. Understanding bureaucracies and how they function, and understanding organisational behaviour more generally, have therefore become increasingly relevant and important for understanding how the international humanitarian sector functions as a whole. Sociological analysis provides valuable insights both into single organisations, and into

the interactions and large-scale structures among organisations across the sector at the meso level (Krause, 2015: 22).

### 3.1 The sociology of bureaucratic dysfunction

In an article published in the journal *International Organisation* in 1999, Barnett and Finnemore develop a sociological approach to understanding the power of international organisations and their propensity for dysfunctional or pathological behaviour (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). Whereas international relations theory tends to treat international organisations as structures that are subordinate to states and state interests, Barnett and Finnemore draw on Weber's observations about the normative power of bureaucracies to argue that international organisations can be treated as purposeful actors in their own right, rather than simply structures. As agents or 'social facts' in international affairs, they have power and can exercise authority independently of the states that created them, and can channel that power in particular directions.

At the same time, however, the social aspects of bureaucracies can be highly significant sources of dysfunction, reflecting the '[f]olk wisdom about bureaucracies' that 'they are inefficient and unresponsive – infamous for creating and implementing policies that defy rational logic, for acting in ways that are at odds with their stated mission, and for refusing requests of and turning their backs on those to whom they are officially responsible' (*ibid.*). Sociological theories anticipate and explore a broad range of impacts that organisations can have, particularly related to issues of legitimacy and power, and highlighting their role in constructing interests, actors and social purpose; thus, by bringing a sociological approach to the study of international organisations, Barnett and Finnemore seek to provide a more complete understanding of what bureaucracy is to inform explanations of how certain kinds of bureaucratic behaviour 'are possible, or even probable, and why' (*ibid.*: 715).

Central to this sociological view of organisations is the expectation that they not only respond to other actors pursuing material interests in the environment (as economic approaches would tend to imply), but also that normative and cultural forces powerfully shape how they engage and interact with the world.

Moreover, an organisation's existence or continuation may have as much to do with issues of legitimacy or 'normative fit' as with efficiency or effectiveness. Barnett and Finnemore note that, although some organisations operate in competitive environments that may encourage efficient or responsive behaviour, many do not; and while some operate with clear 'success' criteria, others may have ambiguous missions and few evident criteria for success or failure (and no serious threat to organisational survival). Thus, specific empirical conditions, such as vague mission and weak feedback from the environment, can increase the propensity and severity of dysfunctional or pathological (i.e. mission-defeating) behaviours. Hence, they argue, '[t]he very nature of bureaucracy – the "social stuff" of which it is made – creates behavioural predispositions that make bureaucracy prone to dysfunctional or pathological behaviour' (*ibid.*).

Focusing on how distinctive internal cultures can develop within organisations, Barnett and Finnemore highlight two features of modern bureaucracies. First, the organisation of bureaucracies around rules, routines and standard operating procedures – precisely the features bureaucracies are supposed to exhibit – may create 'ritualised' behaviour in bureaucrats and construct a very parochial normative environment which is only very tenuously connected to the larger social environment. Second, because bureaucracies create a division of labour by specialising and compartmentalising – again, a rational structure given complex demands on the organisation – narrow expertise and specialisation can limit bureaucrats' field of vision and create subcultures that are distinct from those of the larger environment. Barnett and Finnemore suggest that a number of interacting processes can play a part in the dysfunction that results very often from bureaucratic culture, including:

- Irrationality of rationalisation: the danger that means become ends in themselves as bureaucracies tailor their missions to fit the existing, well-known and comfortable rulebook.
- Universalism: bureaucracies flatten diversity and sensitivity to particular contexts because they are supposed to generate universal rules and categories that are, by design, inattentive to contextual and particularistic concerns; this is partly justified by the bureaucratic view that technical knowledge is transferable across circumstances.

- Normalisation of deviance: deviance or exceptions to rules over time become routine and normal parts of procedures.
- Organisational insulation: organisations that are insulated from feedback from their environment about performance may develop internal cultures and worldviews that do not promote the goals and expectations of those outside the organisation. Professional training represents a key cause of insulation by seeking to shape the normative orientation and worldviews of those who are trained and creating concentrations of people with the same expertise or professional training and a shared organisational worldview. Where ‘successful performance’ is difficult to measure, bureaucracies are protected from selection and performance pressures, reinforcing the organisation’s insulation from feedback from the environment.
- Cultural contestation: where there is incomplete organisational control within a putative hierarchy, there may be pockets of autonomy and political battles within the bureaucracy. Different constituencies representing different normative views will suggest different tasks and goals for the organisation, resulting in a clash of competing perspectives. Particularly relevant to the humanitarian sector is Barnett and Finnemore’s observation that the ‘[t]he existence of cultural contestation might be particularly true of high-profile and expansive [international organisations] like the UN that have vague missions, broad and politicised constituencies, and lots of divisions that are developed over time and in response to new environmental demands’ (*ibid.*).

Taking the lead from Barnett and Finnemore, looking afresh at international bureaucracies through a sociological lens might well reveal new insights into precisely how certain cultural bureaucratic processes affect and constrain the individual and collective behaviours of networked humanitarian actors of all kinds – not only the UN agencies, but also NGOs – and how they affect and constrain their interactions with other types of networks. This type of analysis is perhaps particularly warranted in areas where the humanitarian domain overlaps with other related domains of international action and intervention, including development, stabilisation, human rights and peacekeeping.

## 3.2 Institutionalisation, isomorphism and differentiation

The progressive institutionalisation of the international humanitarian sector over recent decades means that humanitarian organisations have become increasingly embedded in a shared institutional environment. Working within the sociological institutionalism branch of organisational theory, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) conceive of organisations interacting in ‘highly structured organizational fields’ comprising suppliers, consumers, regulatory agencies and other organisations that produce similar services or products. The concept of an organisational field directs attention not only to organisations that are directly interacting, but also to the totality of relevant actors. Like network theory, the idea of an organisational field focuses on the ‘connectedness’ between organisations (such as formal contractual relationships, professional associations, or informal ties such as personnel flows) and structural position: two organisations are structurally equivalent if they have ties of the same kind to the same set of other organisations, even if they themselves are not connected. The structure of a particular organisational field can only be determined through empirical analysis – it cannot be assumed a priori. ‘Structuration’ processes within the organisational field (cf. Giddens, 1979) include interactions among organisations, the emergence of sharply defined inter-organisational structures of domination and patterns of coalition, growth in the information load that organisations have to contend with, and the development of mutual awareness among a set of organisations that they are involved in a common enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2.1 Isomorphism

Once organisations in the same line of business are structured into an actual field, ‘powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another’ – a process known as isomorphism. Processes of isomorphic change within organisational fields directly contradict the logic of increasing efficiency through progressive differentiation and specialisation among

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens argues that, just as an individual’s autonomy is influenced by structure, structures are maintained and adapted through the exercise of individuals’ agency – i.e. social processes are more than random individual acts, but are not only determined by social forces.

organisations (what may be termed ‘interoperability’) that is expected of systemic networks as described by Seybolt (2009). Seybolt’s finding (based on empirical case studies) that international humanitarian organisations are only minimally differentiated from one another suggests that, in the humanitarian ‘organisational field’, isomorphic tendencies are stronger than forces favouring differentiation (Seybolt, 2009: 1,044). It is therefore important to recognise and try to explain isomorphism as a significant factor influencing how the international humanitarian sector functions and performs.

DiMaggio and Powell’s theory of isomorphism distinguishes between ‘competitive isomorphism’ (driven by market competition and most relevant to fields where free and open competition exists) and ‘institutional isomorphism’, which can take place through three (not necessarily empirically distinct) processes: ‘coercive’ isomorphism, ‘mimetic’ isomorphism and ‘normative’ isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 150–52). They note that, while these three processes may combine together in practice, they tend to stem from different conditions and may lead to different outcomes.

Coercive isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent, and by cultural expectations in the social context in which organisations function. These pressures may be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in collusion. Sometimes, organisational change is a direct response to government mandate, such as new regulations or the requirement to report accounts. The existence of a common legal environment affects many aspects of an organisation’s structure and behaviour, for example financial reporting and other requirements that ensure eligibility for the receipt of state contracts or funds. As larger organisations increase in size and scope, standard performance criteria are not necessarily imposed on subsidiaries, but it is common for subsidiaries to be subject to standardised reporting mechanisms. Hence, ‘the expansion of the central state, the centralisation of capital, and the coordination of philanthropy all support the homogenisation of organisational models through direct authority relationships’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

When organisational technologies are poorly understood, goals are ambiguous, or the environment creates uncertainty, organisations may model themselves on other organisations perceived as more

legitimate or successful (note, for example, the extent to which many INGOs have modelled themselves on the ICRC, at least in terms of guiding principles and objectives). In mimetic isomorphism, models may be diffused unintentionally, indirectly through employee transfer or turnover, or explicitly by organisations such as consulting firms or trade associations. Even innovation can be accounted for by organisational modelling (for example the expansion of cash and voucher programmes in humanitarian assistance over recent years). The wider the population of personnel employed by, or customers served by, an organisation, the stronger the pressure will be to provide the programmes and services offered by other organisations.

DiMaggio and Powell observe that, although much modern social theory posits an image of society as consisting of tightly and rationally coupled institutions (e.g. Weber on rational bureaucracies, functionalists, Marxists), organisational research reveals ‘a reality populated with confused and contentious bumbler’ (*ibid.*: 156). In real life, less efficient organisational forms often persist, and sometimes efficiency or productivity cannot even be measured. Selection may occur on political rather than economic grounds, with actors often more concerned with non-economic values than with efficiency per se. DiMaggio and Powell suggest that a focus on institutional isomorphism can add an important perspective on the political struggle for organisational power and survival – particularly the power to set premises and define the norms and standards which shape and channel behaviour.

Normative isomorphism stems primarily from professionalisation: either formal education, training and legitimation (as also emphasised by Barnett and Finnemore (1999)) or the elaboration of professional networks that span organisations and across which new models diffuse rapidly. These mechanisms create a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organisations and possess a similar orientation and disposition. One important mechanism for encouraging normative isomorphism is the ‘filtering’ of personnel. Within many organisational fields, filtering occurs through the hiring of individuals from firms within the same industry through common promotion practices and common skill-level requirements for particular jobs. One consequence of filtering is that managers and key staff tend to view problems in a similar way,

see the same policies, procedures and structures as normatively sanctioned and legitimated and approach decisions in much the same way (*ibid.*).

DiMaggio and Powell list a number of hypotheses about organisational structure and behaviour that can be used for analysing isomorphic processes, many of which can be seen as directly relevant to the international humanitarian sector (*ibid.*: 154–56). For example:

- Organisations that depend on the same sources for funding, personnel and legitimacy will be more subject to the preferences of resource suppliers than organisations able to play one source of support off against another.
- In situations where alternative sources are not readily available, the stronger party to the transaction can coerce the weaker party to adopt its practices to accommodate the stronger party's needs.
- Norms of social legitimation often conflict with efficiency and system rationality. For instance, hospitals may increase their range of services because they will only be seen as fit for purpose if they offer everything that other hospitals in the area do, regardless of what local needs actually are. Homogenisation is encouraged as organisations seek to provide the same benefits and services as their competitors.
- Organisations with ambiguous or disputed goals are likely to be highly dependent on appearances for legitimacy. These organisations may find it advantageous to meet the expectations of important constituencies about how they should be designed and run.
- The greater the participation of an organisation's managers in trade or professional associations, the more likely the organisation will be, or will become, like other organisations in its field.

At the organisational field level, DiMaggio and Powell predict:

- The greater the extent to which an organisational field is dependent upon a single source of support for vital resources (or on several similar sources), the higher the level of isomorphism. The centralisation of resources within a field directly causes homogenisation by placing organisations under similar pressures from resource suppliers.
- The greater the extent to which the organisations in a field transact with agencies of the state, the

greater the extent of isomorphism in the field as a whole. This follows not only from the previous hypothesis, but also the formal rationality of state–private sector transactions and the emphasis of government actors on institutional rules. Governments routinely designate industry standards for an entire field which require adoption by all competing firms.

- The smaller the number of visible alternative organisational models in a field, the faster the rate of isomorphism in that field.
- The greater the extent to which technologies are uncertain or goals are ambiguous within a field, the greater the rate of isomorphic change. Abrupt increases in uncertainty and ambiguity should lead to rapid isomorphic change following brief periods of ideologically motivated experimentation.
- The greater the extent of professionalisation in a field, the greater the amount of institutional isomorphic change.
- The greater the extent of structuration of a field, the greater the degree of isomorphism: fields that have stable and broadly acknowledged centres, peripheries and status orders will be more homogeneous both because the diffusion structure for new models and norms is more routine and because the level of interaction among organisations in the field is higher.

In line with these predictions, Barnett observes that an important driver of rationalisation and isomorphism in the international humanitarian sector has been the challenge to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the humanitarian field, with pressures to rationalise emanating both from donors and from operational organisations themselves. Attempts to standardise relief activities have been a major component of this rationalisation process. So too has been the introduction of new accountability systems and associated methodologies and technologies for measuring impact. These developments have been pushed by donors in the expectation that humanitarian organisations would provide evidence that their money was being well spent (Barnett, 2005: 729–30). Some aspects of this institutionalisation have been broadly welcomed within the sector, to the extent that they have helped to standardise expectations, strengthen coordination and improve efficiency and quality. Other features suggest more controversial transformations in the character of international humanitarianism, with bureaucratisation encouraging the prioritisation of organisational self-preservation and survival, weaker

responsiveness to local needs in favour of standardised templates and guidelines and an increasingly dominant corporate culture (*ibid.*: 725). This institutionalisation of the sector, Barnett underlines, has gone hand-in-hand with the progressive politicisation of humanitarian organisations, with states taking greater control of their actions (*ibid.*: 731).

### 3.2.2 Differentiation

In contrast to the sociological institutionalists' emphasis on shared culture and norms among organisations in a particular field, Krause (2015) is equally interested in the extent to which organisations in the humanitarian field also (seek to) differ from one another. While isomorphic processes are certainly important in the institutionalisation and legitimisation of humanitarian organisations, so too, she argues, are the ways in which these organisations distinguish themselves from one another within the field. The heterogeneity that she is interested in is not so much the kind of functional differentiation that would be the focus of an ecological or systemic networks approach, nor simply the type of branding-based distinctions that help organisations compete for visibility and funds (as discussed below), but rather a form of symbolic differentiation based on how different organisations are legitimised – or legitimise themselves – on the basis of a distinctly humanitarian form of authority. Like Barnett, Krause is interested in the extent to which the humanitarian field has become institutionalised as a field of practice that is distinct from other areas of international action. However, rather than focusing on the implications of this institutionalisation for the common evolution of humanitarian agencies as increasingly rational, bureaucratic and politicised organisations, Krause explores how organisations identify themselves and compete with one another about what it means to be legitimately humanitarian (*ibid.*: 96–99, citing Bourdieu, 1991, 1996).

Because the humanitarian field overlaps with a number of other related fields of international practice, such as politics, religion, security and development, actors within the humanitarian field can draw on and combine different symbolic resources or 'capital' to support and legitimise, and differentiate, their practice. Krause depicts a spectrum between an 'autonomous pole' within the humanitarian field, which is very high in field-specific symbolic capital, i.e. humanitarian authority (e.g. compliance with core humanitarian principles), and a number of 'heteronomous poles',

where organisations are more dependent on authority and other resources that derive from other overlapping fields, such as religion, donor government political or security interests, human rights, development or for-profit activities. All organisations have to contend with this conceptual map to the extent that they draw on claims to be 'humanitarian'.

Krause observes that one of the most significant dimensions of differentiation that has emerged in the humanitarian field is organisations' relationships to actors in the political field. She argues that '[t]he way an agency positions itself vis-à-vis political actors – whether donor states, recipient states, or non-state actors – will affect its symbolic standing: humanitarian authority is inversely related to resources accessed through political actors'. Hence, 'the lowest [humanitarian] field-specific capital is afforded to those who act directly as subcontractors for governments with an obvious political agenda' – and consequently, military or commercial actors working in this way 'have very little authority within the field'. Positioned explicitly and intentionally at the autonomous pole of the humanitarian field (alongside ICRC), MSF by contrast 'consistently insists on its independence and distances itself from the pollution of political capital and economic capital' (*ibid.*: 117).

This kind of symbolic differentiation among organisations in the humanitarian field plays a crucial role in influencing how or whether different organisations engage in an area or activity, and how this is justified and branded. Krause notes, for example, how MSF emphasises the role of humanitarian principles in setting limits on what kind of activities it will or will not engage in; agencies that are oriented more towards development (and derive symbolic capital also from the development field) are more likely to emphasise beneficiary participation in project design and implementation. Meanwhile, agencies with religious roots and missions are likely to emphasise a responsibility to act based on religious grounds (*ibid.*: 121). The dynamic and varied sources of symbolic capital at play within the humanitarian field – some deriving from the perceived authority of core humanitarian principles, and much also from other overlapping fields of international action and engagement – is also a fundamental aspect of how the humanitarian field and the organisations positioned variously within it are connected with other realms of practice on the ground.

### 3.3 Power

The symbolic authority or capital that organisations possess is important, not only in structuring relationships *among* humanitarian agencies in the humanitarian field, but also as regards the nature of authority and power that organisations positioned within the field exercise over other actors, including the recipients of aid. Drawing on Weber's analysis of bureaucratic agency, Barnett and Finnemore (1999) argue that authority and power does not emanate only from organisations' direct control of material resources, but also from the legitimacy of the rational-legal authority that they embody, and from their control over technical expertise and information. Thus, a bureaucracy's autonomy or agency derives in part from specialist technical knowledge, training and experience that are not immediately available to other actors; this knowledge not only enables the bureaucracy to carry out the tasks accorded to it by politicians, but also gives bureaucracies power over politicians and other actors. They note, for example, how UNHCR, with its 'expert' status, associated authority in refugee matters and mandated role in implementing international refugee conventions and law, has empowered it to the point that it has 'made life and death decisions about refugees without consulting refugees themselves, and has compromised the authority of states in various ways' (*ibid.*: 710). Barnett develops the theme of organisational power further in his 2011 book *Empire of Humanity*: aid organisations, he argues, 'have taken on state-like functions such as providing public goods and serving as *de facto* government ministries'. Decision-making is far from pluralistic: 'a ruling class is made up of well-to-do foreigners, and local populations largely provide security, support, and menial labor in a way that is reminiscent of earlier empires'.

Humanitarians' expert authority is presented as objective and impartial, and provides a vehicle for humanitarians to demonstrate their competence. This specialised knowledge and a culture of expertise, Barnett argues, pulls in opposite directions from a culture of liberalism that emphasises inclusion and participation: '[e]xpertise and the overall modernization of the sector ... has the potential to expand the physical and emotional distance between humanitarians and those in need', as reflected in the fact that '[t]he lifestyle of the humanitarian, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations, is increasingly a world apart from those on the street'; the expertise of the professional humanitarian 'is not a place but a method,

their presence is always temporary, their qualifications prioritise technique at the expense of local cultures and languages, and their orientation is always home base, thousands of miles away' (*ibid.*: 235–36). Duffield (2010) likewise observes how aid compounds have come to represent a highly visible and separate island of modernity, with the concentration of vehicles, diesel, electricity, medical supplies, safe water and telecommunications exposing the exclusivity of the international space and its unequal relationship with the surrounding environment.

Drawing directly on Michel Foucault's concept of 'biopower' and Giorgio Agamben's ideas of the 'state of exception' and power over 'bare life' (stripped of political and legal attributes), McFalls describes a specific kind of power relation between international humanitarian intervenors and local populations which he terms 'therapeutic domination'. In crisis contexts where there has been a rupture of the existing norms and institutions of governance, NGOs claim authority by appealing to impersonal norms such as freedom, equality, health and security: international professionals with expert training descend on a local crisis, imposing values and applying standard procedures to their intervention and, in so doing, denying a state's sovereignty and depersonalising and decontextualizing social relationships, 'reduc[ing] social agents to human bodies' (*ibid.*: 10).

It follows from this that humanitarianism can never be apolitical, not least because the exercise of compassion itself involves 'politics and privileges in the power of the passionate' (Barnett, 2011: 223). Even if humanitarians intend to stay out of politics, their actions have political effects; whereas humanitarians are hyper-aware of the power of states over them, 'they have been amazingly insensitive to the power that they have over those they want to help' (*ibid.*: 232–33). For McFalls, by 'feigning a non-political humanitarian vocation' humanitarian NGOs hide their embodiment of 'a politics of arbitrary life imposing its values and visions' (McFalls, 2010: 17).

Nicholas Stockton observes how the standard practice of aid coordination typically 'encourages and then sanctifies the creation of mini aid agency "bush governorates"', often reflected in the population labelling of particular villages, provinces or refugee camps, e.g. the CARE camp, etc.' Beneficiaries 'are typically denied any choice in the selection of the aid provider by humanitarian coordination mechanisms,

and legitimate complaints are all too often dismissed as the work of political troublemakers or rent-seeking freeloaders', and in most cases there are no systems for the safe handling of complaints (Stockton, 2005: 3).

Humanitarian NGOs thus exercise considerable direct power in situations of crisis – but without the mechanisms, institutions or expectations of political accountability that would be taken for granted as a basic prerequisite of governing authorities in the (democratic) states in which most of these organisations are based. Moreover, as articulated by Alex de Waal in his seminal book *Famine Crimes*, humanitarian aid and international NGOs' role in providing basic services weaken indigenous political accountability and other governance structures and processes (de Waal, 1997).

While forms of direct domination over beneficiaries (and potential abuse of this domination) are undoubtedly a key aspect of how power and authority are exercised by organisations operating in the humanitarian field, Krause argues that this power is also exercised in more indirect ways, not least through neglect or omission in the coverage of humanitarian relief – i.e. the power that agencies have to determine not only who receives relief, but also, importantly, who does not. As Tony Vaux famously reflects, his power as a relief worker meant that he was able to 'decide whether people received life-saving aid and whatever I chose they had to accept' (Vaux, 2005: 49). This is, Krause argues, driven by the market for projects within the humanitarian sector (as discussed further below) (Krause, 2015: 62–64).

While the mantra of 'according to need' is an important principle for determining the distribution of relief, need is not the only factor that affects agencies' decisions about which particular people in need should receive their help. Other considerations include the definition of an 'emergency', the location of people in need, security conditions and material factors on the ground, such as the characteristics of particular populations (e.g. how scattered or mobile they are) and associated calculations about how much value a particular project can add (*ibid.*: 26–36; see also Rubenstein, 2015: 143–70). Krause observes how humanitarian relief 'posits populations in need as the justification for its existence', but 'in the course of planning and delivering projects ... only a subset of populations in need becomes relevant as potential or actual "beneficiaries" – that is as the chosen part of a population in need receiving services or said to be benefiting from an intervention' (*ibid.*: 40; see also Rubenstein, 2015: 143–70). Humanitarian agencies' relationship with beneficiaries (and those excluded from assistance), Krause remarks, 'is an open wound within the relief sector; beneficiaries are continuously evoked in self-criticism and reflection'. This problem is not the result of the attitude of aid workers or aid organisations or a matter of choice for individual programme managers, but instead is hard-wired into the political economy of the international humanitarian field (*ibid.*: 42). The 'pursuit of the good project', Krause argues, 'develops a logic of its own that shapes the allocation of resources but also the kinds of activities we are likely to see, and the kind of activities we are not likely to see' (*ibid.*: 16).

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# 4 The humanitarian sector as an industry

Arguably, the economic hard-wiring of the international humanitarian sector – its distinctive political economy – underpins most of the key attributes of the sector that have been highlighted by the different analytical approaches and insights reviewed in this paper up to this point. How and why the sector is structured and influenced by networks, by its (un)systemic qualities, by its core institutional ‘architecture’, by institutionalised social dynamics and/or by power relationships among organisations and between agencies and populations in need, can all be conceived as fundamentally shaped by the way that the sector as a whole captures, allocates and uses the financial and material resources of humanitarian assistance – resources that are as critical for how the sector itself survives and functions as it is for the people in need that it exists to assist. Thus, as Gilles Carbonnier claims in his recent book *Humanitarian Economics*, understanding the economics of humanitarian assistance is key to understanding the humanitarian sector itself (Carbonnier, 2014: 5).

Thus, rather than looking for how different parts of the ‘system’ fit and work together (or not), or how the formal ‘architecture’ structures relationships between the various parts within and around the UN, or at the dense social and cultural dynamics that influence organisational behaviour across the system, a more explicitly political economy perspective seeks out the powerful role of resource flows, material incentives and competitive struggles within the system, and the implications these have for how the sector functions and performs, including, crucially, its relationship with beneficiaries. Weiss observes that ‘die-hard humanitarians ... undoubtedly will be ... offended by being analyzed as part of a “marketplace” ... yet this is the reality of humanitarianism in the 21st Century’ – ‘the market drives business, but it also drives humanitarians’ (Weiss, 2013: 3). For Weiss, then, the marketplace and business economics provide a crucial lens or metaphor through which to analyse the humanitarian sector. Commenting on Weiss’s approach, Slim (2013) observes that ‘[w]hile the market is not the whole truth about the global humanitarian project

... it is an important element of the truth’; in ‘the multimillion-dollar humanitarian sector’ with a strong market dynamic ‘[i]t makes sense to talk of supply and demand, competition, market distortions, monopolies, cost, price, efficiencies and investor bias’.

## 4.1 Buyers, suppliers and ‘product’

As would be necessary in the context of any ‘market’ or business, a first step in analysing and understanding humanitarian economics – or the ‘humanitarian market’ or ‘industry’ – is to identify the primary buyers, suppliers and consumers involved in the supply and demand chain or network. Although the most obvious ‘consumers’ of humanitarian aid are crisis-affected people assisted by operational actors, from a business perspective the main buyers or commissioners – and thus to a large extent the main clients of humanitarian assistance services (as distinct from material aid) – are actually donors (both government and private).<sup>2</sup> As Weiss observes:

*Among the ‘buyers’ of humanitarian services are governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), corporations, and individuals (i.e., compositely ‘donors’). Contributing to saving lives can be a means to another end, a by-product in the pursuit of less lofty goals, including re-election, security, ‘soft power’, a positive corporate image, and even raw financial profit ... Typical ‘suppliers’ would obviously include aid agencies, but also for-profit actors such as private military and security companies (PMSCs) (Weiss, 2013: 5–6).*

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2 The marketing of these services commodifies beneficiaries as part of the humanitarian assistance ‘package’ that agencies can supply. According to Weiss (2013), ‘[t]he marketing logic is crystal clear. Marketing involves the four “P’s” of product, price, place, and promotion ... NGOs need contributions from donors who wish to have their heartstrings pulled with a story of one suffering child’.

Krause concurs with this analysis, noting that while '[i]n classic attempts to determine how nonprofits compare to the neoclassical model of the for-profit firm in terms of efficiency, the product has been assumed to be the one given to clients or beneficiaries', and the concept of 'third-party buying' takes more fully into account that the buyer may not be the receiver; but in the case of charities, the donor does not just choose between products, but also between recipients, so the concept of third-party buying obscures what the donor is actually buying, which is an *opportunity* to provide assistance to the needy, rather than the material assistance itself: 'donors are consumers, the buyers of a service', so '[w]hat is being consumed by donors are not pots and pans or tents or food, but the act of giving' (Krause, 2015: 47). This, she notes, should encourage a rethink of expectations about the process of planning, production and marketing in the humanitarian sector.

Because donor resources usually flow through chains of contracting and subcontracting between UN agencies, international NGOs, national or local organisations and sometimes the private sector, the UN and (particularly the largest) non-governmental agencies involved in humanitarian relief are also 'buyers' of humanitarian services, e.g. by subcontracting to local NGOs (cf. Weiss, 2013: 6). As noted by Collinson and Elhawary (2012: 19), as the biggest organisations have grown and their coverage has expanded internationally, they have evolved into funding institutions for numerous smaller sub-contracted operational providers, while still exercising dominance as the main contractors in the system. Since only around 3% of international humanitarian assistance was channelled through government authorities of affected states in 2014, it is safe to assume that, by contrast, affected state governments do not currently figure as important buyers in this industry.

Because the bulk of financing/commissioning of humanitarian assistance is dominated by a relatively small number of OECD government donor agencies, the principal donor 'buyers' of humanitarian services can be seen as an 'oligopsony' (defined as a market in which only a small number of buyers exists for a product).<sup>3</sup> As discussed further below in the context of global value chain analysis, a market with a concentrated buyer structure typically allows the main buyers (in this case, government donors) to exert a high level of control over suppliers (a buyer-

driven value chain, discussed later). And so it is in the international humanitarian sector: as Stoddard (2004) points out, humanitarian assistance is 'driven by supply rather than needs' and 'deriving from a small and exclusive donor base, devoting finite resources ... its application is inevitably selective'; consequently, 'aid dollars flow to areas of political importance to the donor group while leaving other areas and activities critically under-funded'.

Once it is recognised that donors are buying something, it is important to examine the product in those terms (Krause, 2015: 47). According to Krause's analysis, it is evident that the humanitarian 'project' is the commodity that is bought and sold in the humanitarian 'market': agencies produce relief in the form of relief projects, and, as the unit of production is the project, managers seek to do 'good projects'. It also follows that those assisted, the beneficiaries, become part of the commodity. Through the practices of project management, the routines and procedures through which projects are created and delivered develop 'a dynamic relatively independently of values, interests, and needs on the ground' (*ibid.*: 11). Particular management tools are especially significant for making the project possible as a unit of planning and exchange. The logframe, for example, has introduced an emphasis on goals and evidence for results according to the very specific aims of the project, rather than assessing activities against the broader aims and effects of the totality of interventions in a given situation (*ibid.*). According to Barnett, the drive to develop technologies and methodologies to calculate and demonstrate effectiveness reflects a wider drive to apply 'new public management' principles in the humanitarian sector, pushed particularly by donors concerned to strengthen mechanisms for monitoring how aid funds are being used (Barnett, 2005: 730). Krause describes how the project now dominates not only as the primary unit of planning interventions, but also, for those organisations that receive funding from institutional donors, it has become the primary unit of fundraising: the initiative for a project may come from the donor through a call for proposals, or from the

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3 Seybolt's reverse identification of the humanitarian sector's main donor grouping as an 'oligopoly' (i.e. characterising donors as suppliers), rather than an oligopsony, and his identification of the dominant grouping of aid agencies as an 'oligopsony' (i.e. a limited number of consumers) I see as an incorrect attribution of roles: donors are not suppliers but purchasers, and agencies are not consumers but suppliers of the humanitarian assistance services they offer (cf. Seybolt, 2009).

agency when making the case to donors for relief in a particular context; either way, donors pay for projects based on the proposal and expect reporting against it (Krause, 2015: 25):

*Projects are not things, and projects are not easily comparable to each other in monetary terms ... That said, I do wish to examine the ways in which projects can be treated as things that are potentially comparable to each other, and the ways in which they are in fact compared to each other when allocating scarce resources. The concept of commodity highlights the way projects are produced, paid for, and involve labor, including in this case also the labor of beneficiaries. The producers in this market are not maximising profits but, to the extent that they work with institutional donors, they produce with an orientation to exchange relief projects for money ... [H]owever good the content and design of a specific intervention, its form as a commodity in a global market in beneficiaries shapes its overall effect. It is a product within a limited range of possible products, given consumer preferences of those with resources, and it pits those helped against those not helped (ibid.: 40, 68).*

So much for the product; what of the suppliers? Cooley and Ron (2002) paint a picture of international NGOs struggling with the insecurities and pressures of never-ending competition for short-term donor contracts in a relief industry that has experienced an explosion in the number of INGOs, all scrambling to win contracts and grow. Drawing on a body of theory known as New Economics of Organization (NEO) to explain relations among international aid donors, INGO contractors and aid recipients, they challenge the liberal expectation that growing competition in the aid sector will improve efficiency and performance among INGOs. Instead, while INGOs are in the business of implementing programmes, they are ‘tacitly preoccupied with organisational survival, and in unstable or competitive markets, aid contractors cannot take their survival as a given. Securing new contracts – or renewing existing ones – is the best way to remain solvent’ (ibid.: 14). They point to the high level of dependence of some major US relief agencies on US government contracts (e.g. 63% of CARE-USA’s total revenue, and 54% for SCF-USA): in turn ‘principal-agent problems, competitive contract tenders, and the presence of multiple principals

exacerbate INGO insecurity and create organisational imperatives that promote self-interested action, inter-INGO competition, and poor project implementation’ (ibid.).

Stoddard depicts the sector’s implementing agencies in similarly stressed terms, observing that they ‘feel trapped in the crisis-response cycle, unable to plan or invest for the long term because they must struggle to meet immediate needs using short-range mechanisms and resources’; hence ‘[d]espite significant strides at improving coordination and collaboration, both within the UN system and throughout the broader humanitarian community, they nonetheless remain locked in competition with each other for the resources provided by the small donor club’ (Stoddard, 2004: 7). Smillie and Minear describe NGOs ‘vying for attention and money, many of them becoming little more than underpaid contractors in the world’s humanitarian soup kitchen, where there are obviously far too many cooks’; case studies show ‘NGOs tripping over themselves for contracts, with little ability to operate on their own initiative or to strengthen their counterparts in developing countries’. Kept on ‘short donor leashes’ and ‘permitted woefully inadequate overheads’, they are ‘made to compete for contracts in ways that lead to tardy and inadequate delivery, dysfunctional behaviour, and an absence of learning’ (Smillie and Minear, 2004: 236; see also Cooley and Ron, 2002).

Yet, at least as regards the biggest INGOs operating in the sector, the data on humanitarian resource flows indicates that some, at least, have achieved and maintain a highly secure share of the humanitarian services ‘market’, and do not look nearly as vulnerable, insecure and put-upon as these representations suggest. Indeed, the market share of the very largest INGO supplier/contractors is so disproportionately large compared with smaller and/or national and local agencies that they are increasingly – and justifiably – referred to as an ‘oligopoly’ (cf., for example, Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 19) or even as a ‘cartel’ (ibid.; cf., for example, Easterly, 2002). Moreover, as Weiss observes, there is more money for humanitarian action than ever before, with an estimated \$110bn spent on humanitarian assistance over the past decade (Weiss, 2015). As detailed by Collinson and Elhawary (2012) and echoing Barnett’s and others’ appraisal of humanitarian agencies’ ‘imperial’ power discussed above, the biggest humanitarian agencies – both UN agencies and INGOs

– in fact command considerable power and resources, both generally and in particular operational contexts.

As well as (arguably) overplaying the insecurity of INGOs in the sector (particularly as regards the larger INGOs), a focus on the horizontal competition for contracts also risks caricaturing the landscape of inter-agency relations as one of ever-increasing conflict over material interests and institutional survival with, it would seem, little in the way of cooperation and collaboration. Yet what we know from work on networks in the humanitarian sector is that agencies *do* communicate, cooperate and collaborate a great deal on a great many issues in all sorts of contexts and at all levels, both formally and informally (cf. Collinson, 2011). Although this cooperation rarely reaches the highest levels of joint strategy, integrated planning and properly joined-up programming, the clusters and other formal and less formal mechanisms designed to support improved coordination and information exchange among agencies can hardly be written off as a complete failure. Indeed, as the sector has grown, so too have the number and density of voluntary horizontal networks connecting agencies to one another – these networks are so numerous now, in fact, that they would probably defy any effort to reach a reliable count in any area of humanitarian policy or action. In effect, as Collinson and Elhawary (2012) argue, market pressures simultaneously stimulate cohesion and fragmentation across the system.

## 4.2 Competition and cooperation

A crucial part of the picture missing from the ‘NGO scramble’ perspective is the extent to which, in reality, cooperation and competition co-exist in the interactions between agencies. Competition can take complex and varied forms, for example sometimes resulting in the monopolistic or oligopolistic control and consolidation by one or a small number of lead organisations, and at other times or other levels favouring the emergence and proliferation of new organisations; sometimes stifling innovation but sometimes encouraging it. In his widely-celebrated book *Dynamic Marketing Behaviour*, published in 1965, Wroe Alderson set out a theory of marketing interaction and cooperation based on his belief that ‘marketing cries out for a theory of cooperation to match theories of competition and conflict’ (Alderson, 1969). Yet, since then, remarkably little research has focused on inter-organisational dynamics that entail both competition *and* cooperation.

Using the term ‘co-opetition’ to refer to a hybrid inter-organisational relationship between competition and cooperation, Aihie Osarenkhoe’s empirically-based research into business networks reveals that firms do not always engage in either competitive or cooperative relationships with each other; rather, they create conditions that enable both relationships to coexist (Osarenkhoe, 2010). Bengtsson and Kock (2002, cited by Osarenkhoe, 2010) claim that ‘co-opetition’ is the most mutually advantageous relationship for competitors; similarly, Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996, cited by Osarenkhoe, 2010) contend that co-opetition goes beyond the conventional rules of competition and cooperation in order to achieve the advantages of both. Luo (2007, cited by Osarenkhoe, 2010) discusses how multinational enterprises engage in complex and simultaneous competitive–cooperative relationships with global rivals – for example, Ericsson, Nokia and Motorola cooperate to improve the infrastructure of China’s telecom industry, negotiate with the government for greater market access and build telecom equipment clusters to increase efficiency. At the same time, these companies also compete fiercely to improve their own gains. Thus, through cooperative relationships global rivals work together to collectively enhance performance by sharing resources and committing to common goals in certain domains, while at the same time competing in other domains to improve their own performance.

As explored by Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) and more recently by Ramalingam and Barnett (2010), game theory can offer useful tools for analysing and understanding interactions between organisations that involve both cooperation and competition. Ramalingam and Barnett draw particularly on work by Elinor Ostrom (2005) on ‘collective action’ problems, which demonstrates that aid reforms are frequently hindered by a lack of attention to the underlying incentives that drive aid agencies’ work. They explain how, in some situations, actors in a process or episode of interaction may have an incentive to cooperate *and* seek what is best for themselves in the short term; in other words, actors might want cooperation, but are rewarded for ‘defecting’ and seeking more individualistic gains. Game theory predicts that cooperation is most likely where converging interests exist, where the potential gains from cooperating are great, and where there is no strong incentive to defect. But where there are large numbers of actors and potential resources, aid agencies are naturally incentivised to think of their immediate actions and the gains that will result, as opposed to

sector-wide absolute gains. Aid agencies rarely sacrifice principles for interests in a conscious manner, they suggest: ‘instead, organisational activities play out in the context of the wider incentives and motivations that shape the sector’ (Ramalingam and Barnett, 2010: 5).

These insights resonate with what is observed in inter-agency behaviours in many contexts of humanitarian policy and action. Ramalingam and Barnett note how competition itself not only generates conflict and rivalry between organisations, but also creates incentives for the lead humanitarian actors to club together and seek to define themselves as distinctive from other spheres of international engagement and other types of actors, including military and for-profit contractors. The rhetoric of the principles of humanitarian action plays an important part in humanitarian actors’ efforts to mark out and protect for themselves a distinctive market niche – as well as a distinctive political and operational space. But – as described by Krause in her analysis of the humanitarian field, described above (Krause, 2015: 92–125) – in practice different humanitarian agencies take different positions with regard to these competing sectors and actors; some, for instance, are willing to engage directly with peace-building or state-building activities, while others insist on a more purist and isolationist approach to humanitarian engagement.

This explains the ease with which aid agencies come together to create a common discourse of principled humanitarian action, and the difficulty they have in replicating this discourse in practice. Collinson and Elhawary also describe how a variety of established and ad hoc networks in the humanitarian sector have succeeded in developing and agreeing joint standards and codes of conduct for different levels, sectors and contexts of humanitarian policy and operations (e.g. operational codes of conduct such as the Ground Rules in Sudan and the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) principles and the various guidelines developed by the IASC), but also how these have typically failed to ensure consistency across the sector (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 21). On the ground, aid agencies have pursued individual approaches to operational challenges and risk management, with competitive relationships prevailing among multilateral agencies and between international and national NGOs, resulting in limited collaboration, coordination and information sharing. Despite the system’s outward manifestations of institutional and

material power and common discourses of principled humanitarian action, there is a clear tendency for systemic weakness in the face of the often intense and highly complex pressures and risks of supporting or implementing humanitarian action in difficult and insecure operating environments.

Ramalingam and Barnett conclude that, ‘by being morally sound but organisationally focused, and acting rationally in line with the incentives that arise at the point of disasters, aid agencies will continue to deliver against their narrow objectives, and to the detriment of the wider system’ (Ramalingam and Barnett, 2010: 6). They offer some explanations for why reform efforts in the aid sector are so often frustrated by competitive incentives, predicting (on the basis of game theory) that reforms are likely to succeed in those areas that do not impose a lot of costs (short-term or long-term), e.g. the creation of common standards and voluntary codes of conduct which remain unenforced; reforms become more difficult, however, and meet more resistance in areas that impinge on organisational interests and that have resource implications. And as aid agencies (at least those who hold the most power) benefit from the system as it is currently funded and structured, changing it is not in their individual interests. Although they are concerned about their beneficiaries, money, individual reputation and political interests are also at stake. This dilemma ‘will continue to define the system unless the game changes in ways that produce reforms with real teeth, that is, rewarding cooperation and punishing defections’ (*ibid.*).

Advancing feasible ideas for reforms with any real bite depends first on locating the actors within the sector that have sufficient power to create and sustain new incentive systems. This, in turn, requires much closer analysis and explanation, not only of the kinds of horizontal and delimited interactions that are the stuff of game theory and studies of contract-based marketisation, but also of the vertical asymmetries and dependencies that the wider ‘industry’ creates among the various levels or layers of commissioning, contracting and subcontracting, down to aid delivery to beneficiaries on the ground.

### 4.3 Vertical segmentation

Just as it fails to fully capture the nuances of cooperative and competitive incentives and behaviours between humanitarian aid organisations, so a focus

on the horizontal competition for contracts among agencies also risks obscuring the stark *vertical* asymmetry, dependency and inefficiency that exists in the humanitarian sector. This plays a key part in creating and sustaining the oligopoly of UN and INGO 'main suppliers' in the sector, and is arguably a far more significant source of dysfunction and poor performance in the sector overall.

Of the reported 483 NGOs directly receiving international humanitarian assistance in 2014, the majority (70%) were INGOs, with funding concentrated in the ten largest international NGO recipients (accounting for 36% of all funding to NGOs that year); meanwhile, only a small proportion of reported funding is currently channelled directly to local and national NGOs (Development Initiatives, 2015b: 74). As observed by Carbonnier, many INGOs can be seen to be promoting or following the drive towards greater globalisation by establishing international networks, global alliances, federations or confederations involving both Northern and Southern national and local organisations. Among those agencies that have genuinely global reach, the majority depend on complex supply chains involving an expanding web of affiliates, contractors and sub-contractors (Carbonnier, 2015: 58).

It is probably not surprising, therefore, that recent years have seen increasing attention to humanitarian supply chain analysis, particularly analysis intended to inform logistics management. As argued by Beamon and Balcik, '[s]ince logistics is central to relief operations and the most expensive part of any relief operation, measuring the performance of relief chains has become vital for all organisations involved in disaster management' (Beamon and Balcik, 2008: 5). Yet, while coordination mechanisms in commercial supply chain management have been well studied, coordination in humanitarian relief chains is still in its infancy (*ibid.*). While significant differences between supply and relief chains may preclude supply chain coordination mechanisms from being feasible or practical for relief chains, they suggest that studying supply chain coordination nevertheless enables an evaluation of the adaptability of conventional supply chain coordination mechanisms to the unique relief environment. Several authors have demonstrated how some supply chain concepts share similarities to relief chains, and therefore some tools and methods for supply chains can be adapted to relief chains. For example, Blecken (2010) suggests that standardisation of supply chain processes can be a key to improving operational effectiveness and

efficiency as well as cooperation and coordination in humanitarian operation, and seeks to adapt a supply chain process modelling method to the requirements of humanitarian logistics. Examining field vehicle fleet management, Besiou et al. (2011) explore the application of a 'system dynamics' methodology to humanitarian decision-making (see also Cozzolino et al. 2012; Oloruntuba et al., 2006; Tatham et al., 2012; Da Costa et al., 2012).

In addition to inefficiencies in the day-to-day management of relief identified in the logistics and supply chain literature, deeper structural inefficiencies resulting from the vertical chains through which humanitarian assistance flows have also long been the target of frustrated and highly critical commentary within the sector. Writing a decade ago, Peter Walker and Kevin Pepper pointed to persistent and serious inefficiencies in humanitarian funding and supply chains (Walker and Pepper, 2007). Carbonnier echoes this concern, noting that the overheads and other margins levied by brokers and intermediaries along the aid chain – typically between 5% and 20% – results in substantial gaps between the initial donor funding and the resources that actually reach beneficiaries (Carbonnier, 2015: 59).

Of course, money is not the only resource that flows vertically down humanitarian relief chains; power is also a fungible resource that depletes rapidly from one level to another, creating stark differences in relative control and bargaining power between actors – both organisations and individuals – located at different levels within the sector. Political economy analysis of the subcontracting relationships among companies in for-profit industries can be highly instructive in terms of what they reveal or imply about the international humanitarian sector. Akkermans (2011), for example, analysed subcontracting relations in a single industry using segmentation theory, identifying a dual industry structure, with two groups of firms differing from one another substantially in terms of bargaining power and product and labour market performance. Akkermans found that sales and job fluctuation levels are higher and job security is lower in the subordinate/dominated group. What gives these subcontracting networks their hierarchical structure is the concentration of managerial and controlling power in the hands of the core firm. Similarly, in the context of large-scale integrated firms (which could be compared with the humanitarian sector's largest multinational and transnational agencies), Chandler (1990) found that the most highly

skilled jobs are concentrated in departments specialising in conception functions, closest to the managerial department, while the least skilled jobs are concentrated in operational units.

Carbonnier notes that the humanitarian labour market has long been highly segmented between expatriates and national staff, with internationals typically benefiting from internationally competitive remuneration packages, while local staff receive a much lower salary that is deemed commensurate with local market conditions. Despite the various arguments to justify this dual salary system (e.g. needing to prevent the distortion of local labour markets and brain-drain from local private and public sectors), Carbonnier notes how the lower salaries, more limited career opportunities and weaker job security have the potential to breed resentment, demotivation and burnout among national staff, who make up the vast majority of the international humanitarian labour force. According to Carbonnier: '[a]s humanitarian organisations grow into large multinational organisations, they face issues that multinational corporations have long been dealing with: institutional decisions regarding internationalisation, increased fiscal pressure leading to different options regarding tax optimisation, strikes for improved wages, local content issues and rethinking labour force segmentation, make-or-buy decisions in the face of ever more complex supply chains, and so on'.

In the humanitarian sector, where many agencies are seeking to operate in non-permissive political and security environments, personal safety is also a resource that is sharply depleted between the top and bottom of the relief chain (Collinson and Duffield, 2013). Under so-called 'remote control' arrangements, key decision-making is retained by international managers who are relocated in a safe and usually distant location, while national and/or local staff and subcontracted organisations remain in situ to deliver assistance and implement operations on the ground, usually with little in the way of direct monitoring or support and often in conditions of considerable insecurity and volatility. Whether intentionally or not, such arm's-length aid management involves the effective transfer of security risks and associated liabilities from international staff to national and local staff or subcontracted and partner organisations and their personnel. Despite the fact that national and local personnel represent over 90% of aid workers in the field and consistently suffer far higher rates of security incidents and fatalities compared to internationals, agencies' staffing policies and guidelines

rarely consider the distinct threats faced by their national staff (Fast et al., 2011b: 12, citing Rowley, Burns and Burnham, 2010: 4; see also Van Brabant, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011, citing Stoddard, Harmer and Haver, 2006).

Given the extent of vertical segmentation among agencies delivering humanitarian assistance across the sector, it is clear from the discussion so far that the lead agencies (UN, INGOs and Red Cross/Red Crescent organisations) possess considerable power over subcontracted and less dominant agencies, local employees and other subsidiary actors. Perhaps less evident, however, is the power that *donors* possess and the influence they can exert, particularly government donors who control by far the greatest share of total reported humanitarian funding. Smillie and Minear (2004) observe that 'the political economy of humanitarianism is based to a great extent on the needs and demands of those with the resources – donor governments – and to a decreasing extent on the professional assessments and capacities of front-line delivery agents. The actual needs of those in trouble as framed by the people in extremis themselves are given fairly short shrift in the overall scheme of things' (Smillie and Minear, 2004: 225). This observation immediately throws into question the common assumption that somehow donor governments are external to the sector except to the extent that they resource it and, through the strings attached to these resources, politicise it (note, for example, Seybolt's description of 'exogenous factors' impinging on the humanitarian aid system, of which donors' politicisation is identified as the most significant). In any political economy analysis of the sector, donors must be treated as central actors – the primary 'buyers' of humanitarian services, as discussed earlier – and so fully integral to the sector, or 'industry', and how it functions.

#### 4.3.1 Humanitarian 'value chains'

Conceptualising the humanitarian sector as an industry, with 'buyers', 'suppliers' and 'products', opens up the possibility of using value chain analysis to explore the resources and power relationships between its various layers and components. To date, however, this appears to be a largely untapped analytical resource. This is surprising given the 'voluminous literature' on international trade and production chains and networks over the past two decades (Bair, 2008: 1). In one of the most widely cited contributions to this field, Gary Gereffi (e.g. Gereffi, 1994) identified four dimensions along which commodity chains could be analysed:

1. *Input–output structure*, which describes the process of transforming raw materials and other inputs into final products.
2. *Territoriality*, meaning geographical configuration.
3. *Governance structure*, describing both the process by which particular players in the chain exert control over other participants and how these lead firms (or ‘chain drivers’) appropriate or distribute the value that is created along the chain.
4. *Institutional context*, which describes the ‘rules of the game’ bearing on the organisation and operation of chains.

According to Gereffi, one of the central contentions of the global commodity chain (GCC) approach is that the internationalisation of production is becoming increasingly integrated in globalised coordination systems that can be characterised as producer-driven and buyer-driven commodity chains. This distinction between producer-driven and buyer-driven commodity chains highlights distinct patterns of coordination, power and control in global industries (*ibid.*). However, while the producer-driven/buyer-driven distinction aims to describe the composite power structure of a chain, global commodity chain analysis offers no predictions about the way in which particular activities or the relationship between specific links are coordinated. By the end of the 1990s, some scholars had begun to reappraise the GCC approach, especially its focus on *commodity* chains (Bair, 2008: 11). This led to the adoption of the term ‘global value chains’, intended to include a wider range of possible chain activities and end products (*ibid.*; Gereffi, Humphrey, Kaplinsky and Sturgeon, 2001). Global *value* chain analysis is better suited than GCC for analysing a particular link in the chain, e.g. the transaction between lead firms and first-tier suppliers.

Research encompassing a range of industries over the years suggests that producer-driven value chains are characteristic of more capital-intensive industries in which manufacturers control and often own several tiers of vertically organised suppliers (e.g. motor vehicles), while buyer-driven value chains refer more typically to industries (e.g. garments) in which far-flung subcontracting networks are managed with varying degrees of closeness by retailers, marketers and other ‘intermediaries’ that generally make few or none of the products that are sold under their label. In producer-driven chains, ownership is more closely correlated with control of the production process. In buyer-driven

chains, ownership is less correlated with control of the production process – instead, non-equity ties between lead firms (or ‘big buyers’) and first-tier suppliers, as well as between suppliers and several tiers of contractors, are more prevalent than either vertical integration or direct arm’s-length market transactions (Bair, 2008: 19–20).

A key question is whether chains in a particular industry are characterised by a single governance structure, or whether multiple forms of governance are possible. Bair refers to work by Talbot which identifies distinct ‘threads’ within the coffee industry – instant versus roasted and ground coffee, and both distinct from fair trade and speciality coffees (different ‘strands’ within particular ‘threads’) (cf. also Sturgeon, 2001). Although the inputs and activities associated with fair trade and speciality coffee are the same or similar to other coffee, they take place in the context of distinct governance structures and institutions that are particular to each of the two ‘threads’ or ‘strands’ of the international coffee industry. This finding is consistent with the bipolar governance structure of the cocoa chain identified by Fold (2002).

These studies are intriguing and potentially important for the fact that they point indirectly to the possibility that the humanitarian sector or ‘industry’ may also be comprised of a number of different threads or strands, each with qualitatively different governance structures and institutions. For instance, emergency food assistance may represent a distinct strand with (vertical) governance attributes that differ significantly from other strands, such as medical assistance or cash-based programmes. This is an important and unexplored question in the political economy of humanitarian assistance that deserves further empirical investigation, not least because of the potentially far-reaching implications for reform initiatives across the sector: particular strands of the humanitarian sector may be more or less amenable to, or in need of, particular aspects of reform, and clues to how the wider sector as a whole might potentially be reformed or improved may lie within how particular strands operate.

Bair argues that ‘[i]f commodity chain analysis as a mode of critical inquiry is accepted, it is perhaps not a great leap to see how it might also constitute a form of politics – not only a method for unveiling the prevailing social relations of production but also a means for resisting the exploitation and alienation that these entail’ (*ibid.*: 32). She notes that many activist organisations have made use of the commodity

chain approach in this way to ensure that production processes are carried out in a particular way (e.g. to avoid child labour or to preserve local biodiversity) or to establish a particular distributional outcome (e.g. that growers of 'fair trade' coffee secure a minimum price for their beans). Bair also points to the utility of chain analysis for understanding processes of interest formation and identity construction among constituencies and stakeholders in the chain: consumer struggles for social or ecological objectives are shaped, not just by the specific production networks they target, but also by struggles to shape the organisation and operation of global chains (Bair, 2008: 34).

Although almost every analytical framework considered by this literature review says very little directly about the role and involvement of people affected by crisis in the sector that is established to assist them, there are plenty of indirect clues along the way as to how surprisingly tenuous the accountability and other links are between aid providers and aid beneficiaries: although in the rhetoric surrounding the international humanitarian sector, its founding principles and (significantly) its key marketing messages are all about the assistance that is delivered on the ground to people in need, analysis approached from all of the vantage points explored here – networks, system, architecture, culture and political economy analysis – suggest a sector that is profoundly distanced in social, cultural, political and economic terms from the people it serves, from most governments of the countries affected by disasters and from the majority of local aid workers charged with the often dangerous job of delivering material assistance and protection services on the ground. However, insights from the political economy study of ethical trade movements are intriguing for the potential they suggest for creating a more ethical model of international humanitarianism, at least as regards strengthening the inclusion of, and downward accountability to, affected populations, better involving affected state authorities wherever possible and strengthening inclusion and accountability for local aid workers.

Just as the creation of more ethical and sustainable production, marketing and consumption structures has been possible in the coffee and other commodity trades, so too should it be within the power of the buyers and suppliers of humanitarian assistance

services. In terms of the prospects for bringing about change, the international humanitarian sector has one key advantage over these fair trade markets for coffee, tea and chocolate: rather than seeking to influence and change the preferences and buying habits of millions of individual consumers across the world who have no direct accountability for the structure of any particular commodity trade, the humanitarian sector is dominated by a handful of very powerful buyers who not only have an interest but a clear responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian industry is as ethical, sustainable, responsive, effective, inclusive and genuinely needs-based as possible.

To the extent that it was specifically designed to strengthen humanitarian agencies' (and the wider sector's) downward accountability to beneficiaries, it is worth considering what insights might be gained from the experience and influence of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP). A recent analysis of the HAP initiative by Krause is particularly instructive as she explicitly takes into account the significance of market dynamics within the humanitarian sector in influencing HAP and its outcomes. HAP is inspired, she suggests, by a quality management model borrowed from the private sector, as it asks its certified members to put in place effective feedback mechanisms to improve the products and services that they offer. She concludes that it is fundamentally a 'process standard' that communicates reassurance to those up the chain (donors) who are in a position to choose between different suppliers. Therefore, 'it does not give consumer power to beneficiaries; rather, it has come to operate like a fair trade or voluntary labor standard, seeking to encourage ethical consumption among donors and seeking to empower those producers who are willing to avoid the forms of competition that are most exploitative toward people involved in the process of production [of projects]'.

The impact of HAP and other reforms (including Sphere), she suggests, has not only come to be mediated by the focus of agencies on producing projects, but has in fact contributed to building a 'thicker infrastructure' for the market for projects (Krause, 2015: 127). Krause further observes that, despite all the reform efforts and initiatives undertaken in the humanitarian sector over recent decades, 'not one initiative addresses the specific aspect of the market for projects' (*ibid.*: 175).



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# 5 Conclusion

The key question posed at the outset of this literature review asked what theoretical frameworks and methods provide useful tools for analysing the institutional ‘architecture’, performance and political economy of the current formal sector, and for understanding how the structures and processes underpinning international humanitarian responses are shaped by key political and economic relationships among actors, governments, the military, private sector actors and affected populations.

What is most evident from the outcomes of this review is the extreme complexity of the international humanitarian ‘sector’, or ‘system’, or ‘field’, or ‘industry’, however it is conceived or depicted, and, mirroring this complexity, the very wide range of theoretical approaches and analytical tools that are relevant and useful for understanding how the sector is structured and how it functions. Clearly, the sector is structured and governed to a large extent by dynamic networks. It also shows some systemic properties, albeit very unevenly. Its central multilateral architecture is critical to how it functions, and to understand this architecture requires an understanding of the specific bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structures that define the established core of the sector. The bureaucracies and networks that comprise the sector have developed into an increasingly institutionalised social field, with all the complexities of intra- and inter-organisational relationships and cultural or symbolic interactions that would be expected in an extensive global field of this kind.

Humanitarian organisations also wield considerable power over affected populations/beneficiaries, both directly and indirectly, to an extent that is often not well recognised. And, although it might seem anathema to the basic humanitarian purposes and principles that the international humanitarian field is largely defined by (or defines itself by), the scale of financial resources, and the size and reach of the lead organisations that govern and undertake the bulk of activity across the sector, means that it clearly shows many of the characteristics and dynamics of an established (and growing) global industry or market, with all the challenges and opportunities that this

implies. Since there is no shortage of analytical tools and insights to draw upon, the challenge is as much one of defining the problem that the analysis seeks to address as it is of selecting the ‘most useful’ analytical approach.

To explore how the structures and processes underpinning international humanitarian responses are shaped by key political/economic relationships among actors across the sector, and what the implications of these are for crisis management, those analytical tools that fall within a political economy approach would seem a good place to start. Analytical frameworks concerned with vertical resource and power relationships among actors, such as value chain analysis, seem particularly well-suited to exploring the dynamics and implications of how humanitarian actors and resources are related within the sector (buyers, suppliers, beneficiaries) – and yet these frameworks appear generally to be under-used in analysis of the humanitarian sector to date.

Value chain analysis is likely to be useful in relation to aspects of the international humanitarian sector or industry as it is currently configured – to explore, for instance, contrasting value chains within the sector (e.g. for food aid versus medical aid, for cash programmes versus material aid, or aid to protracted or recurrent emergencies versus sudden-onset crisis responses) – and also for analysing the outcomes of previous reform efforts and the likely implications of or barriers to possible future reforms, such as a significant scaling-up of cash programming. Insights from other analytical frameworks reviewed in this paper – focused, for example, on how networks and bureaucratic organisations function, or on the potential for (correcting) dysfunctional power imbalances – can be drawn upon selectively to complement and strengthen this primary political economy analysis, particularly where possible reforms or alternative scenarios are being considered.

To tackle more specific questions, such as what enabling or restrictive factors might be most significant as incentives and disincentives for progressive change, it should be possible to draw on more than one frame

of reference. For example, an analysis of factors inhibiting or supporting improvements in international humanitarian coordination and leadership might apply a political economy analysis (focused, say, on the dynamics and implications of the market in projects) while also drawing on insights from network analysis and analysis of organisational behaviour. Meanwhile, identification and diagnosis of the barriers to the empowerment of people affected by crisis and/or the inclusion of a broader range of regional, national and local actors (and consideration of reforms to address these) might start with value chain analysis or other tools drawn from political economy approaches, but could also draw on sociological and political theory and insights to deepen understanding of the potential power relations involved. By drawing on a range of perspectives and associated analytical tools, it should be possible to identify and analyse not only what is (assumed to be) wrong or dysfunctional about the sector, but also to identify and understand what works (at least reasonably) well and to assess what reforms might achieve.

Political economy frameworks, network and systems analysis and other approaches reviewed here, taken together, have the potential to progress analysis beyond (or beneath) the most immediate challenges that past reform efforts have sought to tackle. These can be drawn upon to probe the deeper structural and functional attributes of the sector that ultimately account for many of the more visible and familiar problems with how it functions, such as poor coordination, weak leadership and lack of downward accountability to crisis-affected people. Thus, rather than starting and ending the analysis with these (and

other) symptoms of dysfunction, it is possible to refocus analysis on these underlying structural and functional features of the system, and to assess the potential for progressive change across the sector.

Key themes to explore might include closer interrogation of different forms and distribution/ structuring of power across the sector, including among donors, UN agencies, INGOs and national NGOs – asking questions about which actors exercise what particular forms of power, and what the implications of these power relations are for how the sector is structured and how it performs – and, by extension, what forms of power and decision-making are or could be devolved (or not), and what this means for how different forms of accountability are (or could be) distributed across the sector. Another area that could be given closer attention – which is particularly highlighted by systemic networks analysis but not sufficiently explained by this approach – is the extent of/lack of/potential for functional specialisation among the dominant international humanitarian actors, exploring what would need to change to enable further specialisation, and scrutinising what could be gained from this.

Given the urgency and complexity of the many demands and crises affecting international humanitarianism, it is high time that the different tools and associated insights that can be drawn on to interrogate the sector are put to work together to support a holistic and systematic analysis of the most important challenges ahead, and proposals for addressing them.

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