

## New players through old lenses

### Why history matters in engaging with Southern actors

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#### Key messages

- The formal international humanitarian system has reached a critical juncture: the importance of Southern humanitarian actors has been widely recognised but reactions to their presence have been varied. It is important that the international system seek to understand and be open to the diverse cultural, political and contextual forces that have shaped these actors.
- Greater attention to the past will facilitate sharper reflection on the current system and clearer understanding of key stakeholders within and beyond it. Recognising the diversity and divergence of the system's history will create a stronger platform from which to engage with actors that have developed outside of this system.
- Like the Northern system, Southern actors have been shaped by past experiences. An understanding of these experiences over time and their cultural and political context will enable more effective dialogue and partnerships.

In recent years humanitarian actors and scholars have been describing and analysing with increasing urgency their sense that their world is changing. Many analysts point to the rise of 'new' or 'non-traditional' actors, originating from and based in the global South, whose presence on the international stage is often pointed to as both desirable – indeed, essential – and potentially problematic. What is absent from this encounter between the 'old' and the 'new' is an appreciation of history; the humanitarian system is facing a critical juncture in its evolution, but not for the first time. A historical perspective, this Policy Brief argues, will help to sharpen thinking about humanitarian actors from across the globe – North as well as South – and their place within the broader system. It outlines the key questions informing ongoing HPG research on the global history of modern humanitarian action, which aims to make the history of humanitarian action from a Southern perspective accessible

to international actors, with a view to improving the sector's knowledge of its own past.

#### Recognising and reacting to a 'new' set of actors

Many humanitarian actors based in the global South have strong links with the formal sector. The 2012 *State of the Humanitarian System Report* by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) identifies some 2,800 national NGOs with partnership arrangements with one or more parts of the formal international humanitarian system.<sup>1</sup> Certain countries outside of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have become important humanitarian donors and contribute significant amounts of funding to the formal system; Brazil, for

<sup>1</sup> ALNAP, *State of the Humanitarian System 2012* (London: ALNAP, forthcoming, 2012), p. 31.

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instance, provided \$2.9 million in humanitarian assistance following the Haiti earthquake in 2010, much of it channelled through UN agencies.<sup>2</sup> More and more information about the operational role of Southern actors in disaster and conflict response is becoming available, and regional organisations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union (AU) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have developed mechanisms and policies for humanitarian action. The response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, when the Burmese government denied access to most Northern-based agencies, was a powerful reminder of the value of regional networks, expertise and resources.<sup>3</sup>

Other actors operate outside, in parallel or in apparent opposition to the methods and principles that underpin the formal system of humanitarian assistance. It has been estimated that between \$200 billion and \$1 trillion are spent each year in 'mandatory' alms and voluntary charity across the Muslim world, a figure that dwarfs global humanitarian aid funds.<sup>4</sup> Yet the beneficiaries, channels and impact of this money are very poorly understood. The relief role of diaspora networks has been recognised, with the crisis in Syria providing another example of their importance, but the emphasis they place on solidarity may pose a challenge for Northern agencies that prefer the language of impartiality. The involvement of Islamic charities and NGOs in Somalia has attracted attention, with concerns being raised about the almost total isolation of OIC operations from UN-led efforts in the country.<sup>5</sup> Turkey's unilateral approach to aid in Somalia has won praise for its effectiveness, but is likewise independent from other international efforts.<sup>6</sup> The active role that China plays in Africa may also be seen as a challenge to the stance adopted by much of the international system.

There is now widespread acknowledgement that 'new donors and NGOs from around the world provide a significant share of humanitarian aid. Future humanitarian action will rely on them, and on the governments and civil society of crisis-affected countries even more'.<sup>7</sup> Reactions to this new reality have however varied. There are many calls for greater engagement, dialogue and collaboration, and research initiatives have begun

2 A. Binder, C. Meier and J. Steets, *Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal? A Mapping Study of Non-Western Donors*, GPPI Research Paper (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2010), p. 11.

3 Y-K Creac'h and L. Fan, 'ASEAN's Role in the Cyclone Nargis Response: Implications, Lessons and Opportunities', *Humanitarian Exchange*, no. 41, 2008.

4 'A Faith-based Aid Revolution in the Muslim World?', IRIN, 1 June 2012, <http://www.irinnews.org>.

5 E. Cairns, *Crises in a New World Order: Challenging the Humanitarian Project*, Oxfam Briefing Paper, 2012, p. 14.

6 R. T. Erdogan, 'The Tears of Somalia', *Foreign Policy*, 10 October 2011, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>.

7 Cairns, *Crises in a New World Order*, p. 1.

to develop a better understanding of the range of actors outside of the formal system.<sup>8</sup> Efforts have been made to understand the place of remittances in emergencies, and scholars have stressed the importance of cultural contexts, seeking to illuminate how different societies understand the nature of humanitarian action.<sup>9</sup> Another approach focuses on building the capacity of Southern actors and bringing them into the networks and values of the formal humanitarian system.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, there is a fear that 'non-Western' groups may not subscribe to the principles underpinning the formal system, and may have a misguided understanding of what it is to be 'humanitarian'.

The increasing prominence of actors from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia has thus been met with a mixture of interest, suspicion, concern, openness and opportunism: interest in their origins and attitudes; suspicion of their motives; concern at a lack of professionalism and coordination; attempts to reach out and bring them into line with established principles and standards; and eagerness to improve access to areas to which mainstream humanitarian organisations are not admitted. However, in the absence of a full attention to history there is a risk that the complexity of both Northern and Southern perspectives will be overlooked. On the one hand, the lack of appreciation for history among humanitarian actors hinders effective analysis of Southern actors, their motives and evolution and the traditions they belong to. On the other, greater historical analysis also sheds light on lessons about the formal humanitarian system's own evolution, and the way this affects engagement with actors that have emerged in other contexts.

## The international humanitarian system as a Western construct

The international humanitarian 'system' as it stands today is heavily influenced by the Red Cross movement and the formation and experience of international NGOs and the United Nations. The role of the system is to respond to emergencies, whether man-made, natural or complex, with the principal objectives of saving lives and alleviating human suffering. The core principles of humanitarian action – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – have become a central component of the system's collective identity and are seen as key to its ability to respond effectively. Yet in truth, for all that

8 This was the aim of a recent conference organised in Washington DC by the Elliott School of International Affairs (George Washington University) and the Munk School of Global Affairs (University of Toronto), entitled 'Mapping the World of Humanitarianism'. See <https://sites.google.com/site/ngosproject/conference-information>.

9 One example is the 'Cultures of Humanitarianism' project of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies (University of Nottingham) and the Australian National University. See <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk>.

10 Cairns, *Crises in a New World Order*, p. 18.

humanitarian actors emphasise their distance from international political authorities, the humanitarian system has always been linked to dominant political, economic and social processes.

Although acts of compassion have a long and truly global history, the origins of the modern humanitarian system can be traced to the Enlightenment period and to Western notions of charity and philanthropy and limits on the conduct of war. Early uses of the word 'humanitarian' in the nineteenth century covered multiple objectives: 'humanitarian' activists were as likely to be reformers of education or campaigners for temperance as crusaders against slavery.<sup>11</sup> The same period saw the emergence of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), not in response to the idea of war in general but as a reaction to the particularly European conflict of the Battle of Solferino in 1859. The humanitarian aims of Henry Dunant and his fellow ICRC founders dovetailed with the rules of sovereignty and methods of warfare of the European powers to produce the Geneva Convention of 1864 – the first codified expression of the Red Cross principles. Likewise, the expansion of humanitarian action during the First and Second World Wars was focused on humanitarian needs on European soil. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the forerunner of today's UN agencies, was deliberately mandated to address European needs arising from the Second World War, while the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) specifically limited it to helping European refugees, a geographical restriction only lifted in the late 1960s. A similar trend is evident among NGOs, exemplified by the name change of the US organisation CARE, founded during the Second World War, which went from the 'Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe' to the 'Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere'.

This turn towards needs in the South was not simply a belated recognition of others' needs – though this played a part – but again reflected Western interests. The emergence of development frameworks in the 1950s and 1960s was related to the desire to retain influence in colonial territories as they moved towards independence, as well as a sense that 'development' would promote strategic alliances and foster international stability in the context of heightened tension during the Cold War. Cold War tensions also encouraged the insertion of Western NGOs into international affairs, with private organisations able to exploit the space created by the standoff between the Communist and capitalist superpowers.

The decades since the end of the Cold War have exposed the humanitarian system's Northern and Western design and functioning, for two principal

reasons. First, the rise of regional powers such as Brazil, China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey has challenged the global order and brought the humanitarian system's link with the West to the surface. Second, in the wake of the attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, humanitarian organisations found themselves caught up in the confrontation between Western powers and jihadist insurgents. In contexts such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia, humanitarian actors have faced a significant backlash from radical groups, many of which see humanitarian organisations as part of the Western global order that they are challenging. Yet it is important to remember that humanitarian action across the globe has a rich and varied history that should not be amalgamated with a particular political order. Recognition of this reality is as important when approaching the formal international system, with its predominantly Western and Northern face, as it is in seeking to understand South Asian, East African or Latin American experiences.

### The multiple faces of humanitarianism

There is no homogenous or 'pure' and legitimate conception of humanitarian action. A report from the Feinstein International Center captured this view in arguing that 'trying to universalise a particularistic blend of humanitarianism that is inextricably linked with Western history, thought, and values is unlikely to sway doubters and nay-sayers in the South'.<sup>12</sup> By taking a longer view, we can see that even the Western 'blend' of humanitarianism is the result of many divergent forces, has been shaped by a variety of philosophies and beliefs and has perpetually been confronted with – indeed, constructed by – novel or unorthodox actors. British NGOs used to working more discreetly, for instance, have had to adjust to more outspoken French organisations, while space has been made for faith-based organisations within secular fora.

Although humanitarian action in the West today is predominantly defined by the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, it was not always this way. Political agendas have often shaped the way humanitarian needs were constructed – for instance in the Allies' decision to exclude Germans from UNRRA's relief programmes, insisting that its remit was to address the suffering inflicted by Germany upon other European countries. The history of humanitarian NGOs offers many examples of action based on solidarity rather than impartiality. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) was founded in 1943 to assist Catholic refugees and prisoners of war; the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was founded in 1947 with the primary aim of helping Lutherans displaced during the war. Norwegian

<sup>11</sup> See F. T. Carlton, 'Humanitarianism, Past and Present', *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1906.

<sup>12</sup> A. Donini et al., *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions* (Medford, MA: Tufts University, 2006), p. 16.

People's Aid (NPA) was established in 1939 by the trade union confederation Lands Organisasjonen, whose members had previously helped to create a committee to support the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. NPA went on to support national liberation movements during the decolonisation wars, and continues to promote a solidarity-based version of humanitarianism.

The Red Cross/Red Crescent model, with its discourse of principles and emergency relief, has its own history of change and adaptation. In its earliest years, the ICRC envisioned itself as a coordinating agency rather than an operational one – an idea that was rendered obsolete by the great practical importance of the ICRC's work during the First World War. The creation of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society (1868) and the Japanese Red Cross (1877) challenged the Western, Christian and in particular Calvinist moral values of the ICRC. In the 1920s, the ICRC had to adjust to what it viewed as a potential rival in the form of the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS), the forerunner of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). In the second half of the twentieth century, amid criticism of the ICRC's silence regarding Nazi crimes during the Second World War, the Red Cross approach to the principles of impartiality and discretion was challenged by a new generation of NGOs. Spearheaded by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), these organisations emphasised the principle of '*témoignage*' – speaking out as part of humanitarian efforts to end suffering and injustice.

This brief survey of the history of the Western sector indicates that there is no 'pure' brand of humanitarianism. If we consider the history of humanitarian action in other regions of the world, yet more understandings and expressions of humanitarianism emerge. In the Chinese case, Confucian forms of compassion promoting moral self-cultivation were changed by China's encounter with the West in the early twentieth century; the resulting association between modernity and humanitarianism was subject to criticism following the Communist Revolution of 1949, and seen as a bourgeois and imperialist smokescreen. Signs of a revision of this attitude came in the context of the opening up of China in the 1980s, when the idea of humanitarianism was acknowledged as 'an ethical value in cases of emergency'.<sup>13</sup> For some Islamic organisations, humanitarian action is an expression of solidarity with other Muslims and is part of a broader effort to defend the Islamic community (the *ummah*) from outside threats. One particularly crucial period for modern Islamic humanitarian action resulted from the Soviet

<sup>13</sup> M. Hirono, 'Why does China Behave Differently from Traditional International Donors? Three Legacies of Humanitarianism in China', *Disasters*, forthcoming.

invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which became the first terrain of operations for transnational Islamic NGOs.<sup>14</sup> Since then, 'the fighter, the militant and the doctor' have become 'emblems of the commitment of individuals from Muslim societies who came to support the Afghan resistance'.<sup>15</sup> In Latin America, the Church has played a prominent role in humanitarian efforts because of the longstanding importance of Catholic internationalist traditions and, from the 1960s onwards, under the influence of a more radical and locally activist liberation theology.<sup>16</sup>

These examples indicate the importance of an understanding of key values and formative experiences when engaging with governments, NGOs and affected populations whose conception of humanitarian action has developed outside of the European and North American frameworks that currently dominate the international humanitarian system.<sup>17</sup> As part of the same endeavour, recognition of the complex emergence and evolution of these frameworks over time provides a basis for reflection on the ways they might be changed in the future.

### Conclusion: the need for a truly global history of humanitarian action

'Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter' says the West African proverb. Despite the increasing attention on Southern actors, much of the history of humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Latin America, and indeed as experienced by the indigenous populations of North America and Australia, remains to be written in a way that is accessible to Northern humanitarian actors, yet not dominated by them.

This is one of the objectives of the HPG project 'A Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action'. Examining the Northern and Southern histories, including their points of convergence as well as their points of difference, will help to bring the terms of dialogue and frameworks of analysis into line with the reality of today's multifaceted humanitarianism. Both the geopolitical reality of the global decline of the West, as well as the ethical imperative of greater representation for the South, make this engagement paramount to more effective humanitarian action in the future.

<sup>14</sup> A.-R. Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire: enquête sur les ONG islamiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> J. Benthall and J. Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> C. Lynch, 'Acting on Belief: Christian Perspectives on Suffering and Violence', *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 1.

<sup>17</sup> ODI research on the historical forces that have shaped Southern thinktanks adopts a similar approach. See <http://www.odi.org.uk>.