



# The role of governments and humanitarian organisations

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We need a radical overhaul of the way we do business in terms of our readiness for, and response to disasters and crises

Studies and research suggest that the number and types of disasters and crises will increase and their impacts will be more global in nature. Humanitarian crises of the future will be more interactive, one crisis triggering a series of others. As global vulnerability increases, there will be a growing trend towards large-scale simultaneous catastrophes.

The first call for attention happened when H1N1 was declared as a potential pandemic with experts predicting a risk scenario considered disastrous and of global concern. The worst case scenario suggested the possibility of collapsing systems: banking, social welfare, health access; a logistic chain with serious consequences, which affect the economy of countries, social protection, livelihoods and bring an increase risk of violence and conflict.

When H1N1 challenged the readiness capacity of governments and the humanitarian community, several questions surfaced about the real capacities to act locally and globally. This example, provided a very different global picture from what we were used to and suggested that we need a radical overhaul of the way we do business in terms of our readiness for, and response to disasters and crises.

Tufts University's Feinstein International Centre spelled out some of the predicted large driving forces of the humanitarian environment over a ten-year period. It focused on environmental changes, urbanisation, migration and HIV/AIDS. While other studies also addressed these, they have also included other humanitarian trends, mainly related to conflict and its consequences. Amongst these are:

- The speed of population growth will be unprecedented.
- Most population growth will be in the developing world.
- Water-related conflicts will be a growing issue in all regions of the world.
- Unplanned, peri-urban environments will be home to large concentrations of at-risk populations.
- Pandemics will be an issue of regular concern.
- An increase in organised crime and violence as a

coping mechanism will increase and thus conflict with predominant social values.

The humanitarian trend scenarios suggest an increase of population vulnerability to a wide range of social problems: high rates of unemployment or under-employment; public health problems; rising levels of insecurity; social exclusion, discrimination, xenophobia, deepening inequality, more intense disasters affecting large populations, and an increased number of conflicts.

There is little chance that developing governments will be able to extend the required infrastructure, social service delivery and employment opportunities to sustain the population growth. It is highly probable that a large percentage of people will be born into chronic risk. The greatest population increases are now taking place in the poorest countries of the world and in the poorest areas within countries. This will simply mean that many more people will be at risk.

Climate change is a multi-faceted phenomenon that intensifies the hazards that affect human livelihoods, settlements and infrastructure. Climate change is also weakening the resilience of livelihood systems in the face of increasing uncertainty and frequent disasters.

Besides the fact that HIV/AIDS is a disaster in itself, it is also clear that HIV/AIDS is becoming an increasingly active ingredient in contributing to other humanitarian crises. By heightening food insecurity, for example, the burden of HIV/AIDS renders vulnerable people and communities less able to withstand other stresses and shocks. In this way, HIV/AIDS both precipitates crises and exacerbates them once they occur.

Alongside the growing concerns outlined above, conflict and complex political emergencies continue to compound disasters. In the last five years, at least 140 disasters have occurred in countries where complex political emergencies have also been present.

*While the above trends are not new to us the question is how prepared are we to deal with such challenges, and can we remain relevant, credible and financially sustainable?*



Humanitarian organisations will constantly be challenged to develop strategies that will allow them to remain relevant and effective in the future

To complete the picture of the humanitarian trends, there is a need to highlight other elements that are not directly associated with hazards, vulnerability or risks. Non-traditional actors are becoming key players in the response and the characteristics for coordination are different than what they used to be. For example:

- Several European countries and the US have increased their capacity to deploy staff to assess emergency needs and to monitor the work of their implementing partners.
- The humanitarian label is being used by several Western governments to legitimise military intervention.
- The military and paramilitary actors are using “humanitarianism” as a principle of action.
- There is an increasing diversity of international actors working in conflict-related crises. These groups have different mandates and operating principles from those of conventional humanitarian agencies.
- Development and environmental organisations, financial actors, religious groups and NGOs claim to be experts in managing disasters and crisis and have become part of the disaster response teams being deployed to different areas of the world.
- Commercial contractors, both national and international, are becoming major players in humanitarian assistance.
- While corporate philanthropy remains important, companies increasingly appear to seek more direct ways of engaging in humanitarian relief operations. However, there are other interesting findings and trends that will mark the way disaster response will be carried out in the future, which deserve attention.

The 21st century media evolution can be better described as a multi-media revolution. With the extensive reach of the internet, inexpensive audio-visual technology and the widespread use of portable communication devices, communication technology has enabled a faster, more participatory and far-reaching media network that has the traditional print media (newspapers) scrambling for ways to secure their dwindling revenue sources.

There are millions of blogs written everyday, thousands of videos uploaded to the internet every hour and hundreds of editorials sent to online news centres each minute. Mass media satellites systems and networks, alliances and readiness brings news faster than ever and oblige equal or faster capacity to respond to the needs.

Public donations are increasing and the scrutiny of the usage of these funds requires clear strategies for communicating what we do, marketing how we implement, and demonstrate that the selected

organisation is the one to trust. Competition for funding is the rule in today’s world. Marketing strategies are becoming the norm, using the aggressiveness of private sector strategies and the principles of the corporate sector. The purpose is still to bring a helping hand to humanity, but the objective is to raise more funds to the point where the credibility of an organisation is measured by the level of funding received and not necessarily by the quality of their work.

The picture of the future is that humanitarian organisations are and will constantly be challenged to develop strategies that will allow them to remain relevant and effective in the future. It is their commitment to addressing human vulnerability, in all its forms, that will be of prime importance in preventing, preparing for and responding to the types of crises that lie ahead.

## Issues

- Several institutions are regularly dealing with their own survival as institutions, in addition to their own internal challenges to respond to current disasters and crisis. Several remain reactive and more interested in the humanitarian and development challenges of today. If institutions/organisations continue with this trend, they will become less relevant and less influential to the response to future global/regional disasters.
- Several institutions’ willingness to bring different types of professionals on board and to be capable of dealing with future trends require funding capacity, political will and conviction. At the same time they still need to maintain their capacities to prepare and respond to traditional response operations.
- Donor-driven approaches are affecting different institutions’ capacities to increase influence through knowledge, skills, time allocation and funding capacities. The investment we have available to dedicate efforts for preparing for these trends is low globally.
- What would success look like within each organisation, regarding our capacity to respond to disaster and crisis in line with the trends mentioned above? Is business as usual enough or does it require different tools, skills/profiles of our professionals, methodologies and ways of responding?
- Knowledge management, knowledge sharing and research is still weak. The majority of institutions have not considered this as an important element.
- Current trends call for major planning and contingency planning that must involve the communities that find themselves marginalised and at greater risk.



There is a need to invest time and energy to ensure that assessment tools and capacities are linked to advancement in technology

- A great number of humanitarian institutions/organisations are not ready to work with the private sector and won't acknowledge their potential to help alleviate human suffering by donating goods, services and economic and human resources.
- There is sufficient room for measuring predictability in the context of current and future natural phenomena and man-made disasters and crises. How much of this is being taken as an opportunity for development is a question to be asked.
- What are institutions/organisations doing to make different sectors and populations aware of these trends and the need to plan accordingly?

#### Suggested solutions/approaches

One of the biggest challenges to complex issues is to identify simple solutions. In this paper I will try to provide three suggestions that might help to contribute to address a few points:

1. Technology development
2. Exchange programmes with the corporate sector
3. Revision of our tools and disaster response system

#### Technology development

Scientific and technological innovation, if engaged properly, can provide powerful means to prevent, prepare and respond to humanitarian crises. We need to link with existing organisations dealing with this kind information (met-offices for example).

The use of cellphone technology and mobile banking, for example, is real and has been tested in disaster response operations. We need to invest more time and efforts to develop these capacities and to involve decision makers. This is something that proved to be efficient within the Red Cross recently in the disaster response operation in Haiti, where more than 32 millions SMS messages have contributed in reaching people with preventive messages.

Technological innovation may be more predictable than socio-political or economic forecasts and demographic trends may be more certain than climatic trends. As such, institutions/organisations should be encouraged to update their disaster response plans and scenarios for response every year based on these technological scientific advancements.

#### Exchange programmes with the corporate sector

Institutions/organisations must take great advantage of opportunities presented through Corporate Social

Responsibility strategies promoted by several well-known multinational organisations.

This could lead to the development of proposals for the organising of exchange programmes in which both the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (in our case) and the corporate world can benefit from each other. Through sharing knowledge and developing joint initiatives, we can adapt our response systems to the opportunities of today's corporate environment.

Exchange programmes with the corporate sector also serve as an opportunity to recruit a different type of volunteer who can act as agents of change for the modernisation of institutions/organisations. This can be applied to disaster response tools as well. Strategic alliances with the corporate sector will enhance our response systems to be more adaptable to these new emerging trends.

We need to champion these initiatives. They will serve as the example and groundwork for development and modernisation.

#### Revision of our tools and disaster response system to the new trends

In the case of the Red Cross, we have successfully demonstrated the efficiency of our disaster response tools for international disaster response operations; and how our system is capable of operating from local to global levels. In today's disaster response operations we can feel confident that our readiness capacities are very good.

As a first step to revising our tools and systems we need to map the actual size of the institutions'/organisations' capacities and how their networks operate. This process is critical if we are to make better use of their vast resources and the mindset is to think like a system rather than in units. It is important to evaluate what disaster tools we have and how adaptable they are to global trends. We must respond to those trends and map out how many of those tools are dealing with predictability and what is the 'outreach' capacity.

However, regardless of the sophistication of these tools, they will remain of limited value if they are not adapted to local level realities. The lessons we learn from this real-time field testing will, in turn, help us to refine existing, and develop new tools. Finally, there is a need to invest time and energy to ensure that assessment (damage and needs) tools and assessment capacities are linked to advancement in technology in order to facilitate timely decision making and planning. ■