



# REFRESHING HUMANITARIAN ACTION:

Developing and reframing responses to meet new challenges

24-25 February 2016  
Jakarta, Indonesia



## Background



The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) together with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) are organising a series of conferences bringing together policymakers with international and national humanitarian actors. The conferences cover a range of issues, including: what humanitarian models work best, what degree of proximity humanitarian actors need and how those outside the formal system can best influence the debate on the future of humanitarian action. The second conference took place in Jakarta, Indonesia, in February 2016, following a first conference in Beijing, China, in October 2015.

# Introduction

Over the past several decades, humanitarian action in Southeast Asia has undergone a dramatic shift. Whereas in the past humanitarian aid was, to a large extent, dominated by Western donors and international aid agencies, today a diverse range of local, national and regional actors are taking the lead in many forms of humanitarian action, including: disaster response, recovery and preparedness; providing humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected areas; and delivering services to and protecting refugees and victims of trafficking.

These changes have taken place in the context of three interrelated developments:

- 1) a changing and increasingly complex climate of risk in the region and beyond,
- 2) increased connectivity, including movements of people across the region, as a result of advances in technology, infrastructure, urbanisation and socio-economic development
- 3) the increasing strength, confidence and interest among diverse actors in the region - including governments, regional organisations, faith-based organisations, and the private sector - to be engaged in humanitarian action.

To better understand these new challenges and new humanitarian approaches, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI) convened a conference, 'Refreshing humanitarian action: developing and reframing responses to meet new challenges', on 24-25 February 2016 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The conference was one of a series convened by the ICRC and HPG globally to explore the changing face of humanitarianism in the context of a rapidly evolving development cooperation landscape, with significant shifts in power and influence. As such, it brought together a diverse range of stakeholders from across the region to explore the ways in which different actors are responding to a wide range of current humanitarian challenges in different contexts, to examine the common values and particular principles, perspectives and priorities involved in different approaches, and to consider the ways in which these different approaches could better complement each other to maximise the effectiveness of humanitarian action.



## The emergence of a new crisis leadership in Southeast Asia

The conference opened with reflections on the experience of Indonesia in leading recovery and reconstruction efforts in Aceh and Nias following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which killed more than 230,000 people in Indonesia alone. The crisis in Aceh was complex, resulting from a massive disaster occurring in a province which was already suffering from 30-years of armed conflict, with poor infrastructure and weak government. When the tsunami struck, Aceh had been under martial law and civil emergency for 18 months and was the most closed province in Indonesia. The President of Indonesia almost immediately agreed to open Aceh up to thousands of foreign aid workers to bring life-saving assistance to devastated communities after the tsunami hit.

Leadership with a 'crisis mindset' was critical in ensuring access for emergency aid from abroad, as well as for the establishment of institutions within Indonesia to manage a highly complex disaster recovery and reconstruction process over many years. At the time of the tsunami, Indonesia lacked a disaster management institution that was capable of managing such a massive and multifaceted international disaster response effort involving so many sectors, and such a diverse range of stakeholders, at once. The Indonesian government then took a decision to establish a special agency for rehabilitation and reconstruction. Ultimately, Indonesia's leaders had to be willing to take risks and seek 'out of the box' solutions, recognising that the crisis was extraordinary and, therefore, called for extraordinary measures.

The importance of leadership in crisis was a recurring theme during the conference, and such leadership was identified at many levels, including governments, local organisations, affected communities, international organisations, regional organisations, think tanks, the private sector, and even at the level of individuals and private citizens.

Leadership is needed at every step of a disaster recovery process, in: planning, managing and coordinating; identifying and filling gaps; as well as building trust and negotiating for access in situations on conflict and political tension. An example of the latter was the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) role in providing a political bridge and building trust between the Myanmar government and international community in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Other examples given were in the context of peace-building in Maluku and the role played by religious leaders in these efforts.



## Crises in Asia: from large-scale disasters to protracted subnational conflict

While Asia is well-known for being the most disaster-prone region in the world and, increasingly, for its effective leadership in disaster management, the conference also highlighted the fact that humanitarian crises in Southeast Asia came in many guises other than that of 'natural' disasters. The less visible forms of crises in the region include some of the world's longest-running civil wars and subnational conflicts, ethnic and communal tensions, protracted displacement, refugee crises and human trafficking, such as in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

While conflict in Asia may not always occur at a national scale as in some countries in other regions such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia's particular experience of working with difficult, intractable, ethnic and communal conflict has generated important peace-building practices, expertise, humanitarian diplomacy skills, and crisis management experiences that ought to be documented and shared within the region and with other regions affected by such forms of conflict. This was particularly important since natural disasters frequently occur in areas affected by conflict, or in divided communities where communal tension is high.

It was recognised that all stakeholders have particular sensitivities and principles, and that the challenge was to find a way to acknowledge, channel and coordinate diverse sensitivities and principles to work together in the interest of supporting those affected by conflicts and natural disasters, whether within the immediate region or beyond.

## 'Non-traditional' or 'traditional'? Renewed humanitarian traditions in Asia

The conference highlighted how in Asia so-called 'non-traditional' actors are, in fact, 'traditional' institutions and practices with a long history of humanitarianism. These include religious organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Buddha Tzu Chi, both of whom have been involved in numerous humanitarian operations in Indonesia and the wider region, and traditional customary institutions like the fishermen's association of Aceh 'Panglima Laot', who in May 2015 used customary law as a foundation for rescuing thousands of refugees and migrants who had been abandoned in the Andaman Sea.

While these institutions are not 'new', what is innovative is the way in which these 'traditional' institutions have evolved into modern mass organisations that support humanitarian action and how unwritten 'traditions' are being connected to formal legal and policy-making processes as well as social media and public activism.

In the view of some participants, the rising importance of traditional systems and structures, including religious traditions, ethics and identities, goes hand in hand with the strengthening of local communities and either a weakening of the state or reduced dependence on it. At times of disaster, tradition – including faith traditions – offer comfort, courage, solidarity, hope and spiritual resilience, which is another reason why communities must be engaged and empowered rather than imposed upon by outsiders.

In terms of funding, the growing number of humanitarian actors in the region were becoming less dependent on donor resources, but increasingly so on public donations. Indeed, some of these resource mobilisation mechanisms, such as 'zakat', 'sadaqah' and mass volunteerism, could also be called 'traditional'. Some of these organisations are also advancing innovation of these traditional mechanisms through the use of new technologies and platforms, including social media and crowdfunding.

At the same time, a growing number of Southeast Asians are responding to humanitarian crises outside their region. Examples include the

deployment of a number of organisations to Syria and the joint response of Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, an Indonesian umbrella organization, and the Indonesian government to support relief efforts following the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

The conference also allowed a better understanding of who is involved in humanitarian action in the region. In this regard, an important trend regarding humanitarian actors in Southeast Asia is the prominent role that youth are playing in often highly innovative humanitarian efforts both within and outside the region, whether as volunteers, staff, or even as individuals.

## The role of the state

While Asia is witnessing a rise in non-governmental actors, including faith-based organisations, it is also true that governments in Asia are only growing stronger and having an increasingly important role in managing and overseeing responses to humanitarian crises, as well as in preparedness and regional cooperation for disaster management and other forms of humanitarian action.

The role of governments is not, however, always benign, particularly in contexts of conflict where the state is an active belligerent and may be responsible for violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Several speakers and participants spoke of a new era of 'state assertiveness', or even 'state aggressiveness', and the challenges in securing humanitarian space and ensuring respect for humanitarian principles in such contexts.



## Law, principles and ethics at international, national and local levels

While peace negotiations are ongoing in several sub-national conflicts across Southeast Asia, the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict continues to be severely challenged, and participants shared experiences of violations of IHL. In these areas, civilians continue to be caught up in armed conflict and those who fall victim to it may have little recourse to accountability or justice. In these areas, civilians are regularly displaced from their homes for extended periods of time while access to humanitarian assistance is often blocked or severely limited. Local organisations who are able to gain more access to affected communities are sometimes viewed with suspicion and even hostility by security forces and lack adequate protection when working in non-ceasefire areas where military operations continue.

While respect for IHL and humanitarian principles remains weak in some parts of Southeast Asia, and civilian and refugee protection are still not enshrined in national law and regional frameworks, significant progress has, nonetheless, been made in the area of disaster law in many countries.



## Facilitating increased cooperation in disaster management

Disaster management has also received serious attention at the regional level, with all ASEAN Member States signing and ratifying the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response

(AADMER), the fastest negotiated agreement in ASEAN's history. AADMER is the world's first legally-binding agreement based around the Hyogo Framework of Action.

ASEAN also established the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) to facilitate cooperation and coordination among ASEAN Member States, including national militaries, as well as with the United Nations and international organisations for disaster management and emergency response in the region. Looking to ASEAN's success in building commitment to a strong disaster policy and to building the capacity of the region's governments in disaster management, participants voiced their hopes that ASEAN would start focusing on the multidimensionality of vulnerability and the drivers and humanitarian consequences of various types of crises beyond natural disasters, including climate change, conflict and forced displacement.

Good practices also exist at the sub-national level, as demonstrated by the Municipal Government of Langsa's humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee and Bangladeshi migrant crises in the Andaman Sea in May 2015. The initial emergency response and provision of services was followed by efforts to integrate the refugees into Acehese society through education, resettlement and cultural activities. The response eventually culminated in the development of standard operating procedures and a code of ethics on humanitarian assistance to refugees. Such initiatives, however, often happen in the absence of political will to mobilise national and regional frameworks, and participants noted the importance of documenting such good practice, so as to influence policy thinking at national and regional levels.

While written policies and frameworks were seen to be extremely important, a strong theme that emerged during the conference was that of culture, principles and ethics, often rooted in indigenous customary traditions, local wisdom as well as in religious concepts and teachings. These included, for example, religious concepts of gratitude, service and selflessness to others, and obligations in customary traditions to respect and protect all life. This approach allows local community-based and faith-based organisations to receive a high level of acceptance in affected communities. Meanwhile, interfaith initiatives contributed to peacebuilding efforts and facilitated humanitarian action in divided communities.

## Linking to sustainability and global processes

For the diverse actors who inhabit Southeast Asia's humanitarian landscape, all share a recognition of the linkages between humanitarian concerns and development issues, whether in contexts of disaster, conflict, or climate change. In the context of post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, governments stressed that humanitarian actors must consider the long-term implications of humanitarian interventions and approaches, which can sometimes be negative if not carefully developed based on an understanding of the context. For example, in a complex situation where a disaster occurs in a conflict-affected community, providing aid to only disaster-affected communities could risk generating social jealousies at a community level which could, in turn, undermine efforts to support a transition away from violence. Governments were also concerned about the lack of sustainability of aid efforts and the critical need to strengthen preparedness of their own government systems and institutions to cope with the disasters of the future.

The issue of sustainability – both in terms of humanitarian capacities and of the link between crisis prevention, recovery and sustainable development – was raised by diverse actors, from civil society to the private sector. All participants agreed that the most critical ingredient in building sustainability was the need to engage with the community and a wide range of stakeholders to work together on the basis of a shared vision and common goal.

Private sector participants gave examples of how working to reduce environmental footprints and to move towards sustainable sources of raw materials went beyond simple Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and were part of a more fundamental change in business approach. At the same time, civil society was increasingly engaging with a wide range of actors, including government and the private sector, to build innovative partnerships.

These partnerships and platforms for sharing were happening not only at the national level, but also transnationally. Such collaboration reveals increasing interconnectedness as well as a new connectivity made possible by new technologies and freedoms, the latter of

which stem from a growing respect for the role of civil society in humanitarian assistance, development and the protection of rights.

While there was already much horizontal and transnational coordination, vertical coordination between local and national organisations, many of them key players, and established governmental and humanitarian forums needed to be improved. There was a clear need to build trust and accountability between diverse humanitarian actors, particularly between the government, humanitarian and private sectors.

Issues at the local and regional levels were also linked by participants to global processes, including the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the World Humanitarian Summit, and some organisations were concerned that efforts to impose a global framework aligning civil and military authorities with humanitarian actors might undermine a complementarity of different approaches. But while it was apparent that diverse humanitarian actors in Asia saw their efforts as being linked to these global agendas, the role of the international community, including the United Nations, in the region was sometimes less than central.

The picture that emerged was one of a dynamic region where local, national and regional actors are coming into their own, gaining confidence to be not only participants but shapers of their own solutions and approaches; a region increasingly less dependent on international actors and increasingly keen to take the lead in various forms of humanitarian and development commitments. In such a context, a rethinking of the role that international agencies should play in Asia is much needed, and global processes such as the WHS would do well to be informed by these regional realities.





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