

Humanitarian Challenges:

Perspectives from the South and Islamic Countries

Atta Al-Mannan Bakhit
*Former Assistant Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs
Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC)*

Annual WFP Partnership Consultation
29-30 October 2014: Rome, Italy

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1. Humanitarian issues and current perspectives	3
a. <i>The changing geopolitical landscape</i>	4
b. <i>Urbanization: the rise of the youth population and social discontent</i>	4
c. <i>Climate change, environmental degradation and fragility</i>	5
d. <i>The threat of old and new pandemic diseases</i>	5
2. The Humanitarian Evolution: the desire for transformation	5
a. <i>New forms of Humanitarian corporation and engagement</i>	5
b. <i>Inclusive humanitarian principles and values</i>	6
c. <i>The new dimensions of humanitarian access</i>	7
d. <i>Resources for humanitarian action</i>	7
3. Preparing for the future: embracing change	8
a. <i>Clarify the limits of humanitarian action</i>	8
b. <i>Coordination: narrowing the divide between humanitarian organisations</i>	8
c. <i>Enhanced warning and risk management systems</i>	9
d. <i>Humanitarian system should be complimentary to national and local efforts</i>	9
e. <i>New and inclusive humanitarian governance</i>	10
Conclusion	10

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Getachew Diriba (*Senior Regional Programme Advisor*) and Mr. Mohamed Diab, (*Regional Director*) from WFP's Regional Bureau for North Africa, Middle East, Central Asia & Eastern Europe in Cairo, for their support and guidance in the preparation of this paper.

Introduction

This paper highlights some of the current and future challenges facing the humanitarian community and provides a perspective from the South and Islamic countries. It starts by outlining some of the contextual factors at the global level that are increasing the scale and complexity of humanitarian needs. Section 2 looks at how some of the tensions arising between different humanitarian actors: national and international; established and emerging; religious and secular can be diffused by forging a new form of cooperation; and how the emergence of new actors from the South, both as donors and humanitarian operators, are providing opportunities to address access challenges and contribute to the sustainability of humanitarian action. As we prepare for the future, the last section outlines some of the key areas for discussion amongst all stakeholders: i) clarifying the limits of humanitarian action; ii) coordinating to narrow the divide; iii) linking our efforts to national priorities, building capacity and ensuring sustainability; and iv) continuing our efforts to establish an inclusive humanitarian governance system.

1. Humanitarian Issues and Current Perspectives

We have entered an unprecedented humanitarian era. On the one hand, international humanitarian principles have been severely undermined; in some instances curtailing access to crisis affected populations. Direct attacks on humanitarian workers are also on the rise. Natural disasters have become more frequent and intense, while conflicts have become increasingly complex with grave consequences on communities and countries. On the other hand, the conditions for delivering humanitarian aid and reaching out to populations in need of assistance have dramatically improved thanks to advances in technologies used for early warning, risk analysis and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. This includes electronic aid deliveries, which have made humanitarian aid more timely and appropriate. Lessons learned are being shared from previous crises, and humanitarian actors are continually modifying and improving the way they operate. In addition, continued dialogue and better coordination among national governments, donors, UN, NGOs and civil society organisations is leading to increased efficiency and effectiveness.

New humanitarian donors and actors are entering the humanitarian arena. New regional, national and local actors have emerged both as donors as well as humanitarian operators on the ground. The emergence of the new players means a new form of engagement and accommodation; adjusting the rules of engagement has become the necessity of our times. While the new entrants are catching up with the evolving institutional, policy and operational humanitarian landscape, they are occupying important space in the humanitarian arena.

In spite of diverse views and expectations of humanitarianism, there is a consensus among scholars, policymakers and practitioners that the new dimensions of disasters requires the old and new frontiers of humanitarian actors to engage in coordination and partnership in order to ensure the timely and effective delivery of life saving assistance and to improve cost efficiency and effectiveness.

These issues are raised to engage all of us in a deeper search for pluralistic views in order to better understand the needs of the affected population, as we continue to search for a better humanity:

- *Is the nature of disasters changing, are they getting more frequent and acute with devastating impacts? Are mega-disasters and concurrent emergencies the new norm which stretch our capacities? Are humanitarian systems ready for the future?*
- *Are global resource allocations for humanitarian action matching the magnitude of current humanitarian challenges?*
- *How will emergencies impact the developed and emerging economies? Can we assume that disaster will have a disproportionate effect on developing economies?*

- *Should we redefine a humanitarian system that is more inclusive of the old and new players that takes into account the new forms of relationships and dynamics among local and international humanitarian actors, national governments and affected populations?*

The response to these questions are not simple and straight forward as they are mediated by different perspectives, both from the “traditional North” and the “emerging South” and other actors. To an extent, I will bring in the voices from the South, including Islamic countries.

There is a consensus amongst all actors that humanitarian challenges cannot be addressed by a single country or single entity, however strong or big it might be. More than ever before, a unified, coordinated, synergistic and diverse humanitarian response that puts national governments and affected populations at the centre is imperative. We should endeavour to achieve a resilient, effective and complementary humanitarian system that strives to ease human suffering.

Humanitarian organisations are created for and shaped by crises. For many decades, Arab countries were insulated from the many recurrent humanitarian crises that have ravaged other regions of the world. Today, the Arab region hosts one of the most complex and unprecedented humanitarian crisis of our time. The collapse of old regimes, ensuing conflicts with resulting humanitarian crises in the Arab region has displaced millions of citizens, producing a very large refugee population at the door steps of Europe, threatening the stability of the world economy.

There is increasing evidence that our understanding of the underlying causes of humanitarian crises needs to consider a new set of factors and realities such as: the changing dynamics in geo-political relationships; the unmet expectations and increasing discontentment of the youth population in developing countries, including the Arab region; mounting problems of climate change; and the resurgent threat of pandemic diseases. These underlying global trends have a number of implications for the humanitarian and development communities and systems, which can be grouped into four broad challenges.

a. The changing geo-political and economic relationships

In the last decade, new emerging economies have come on the world scene, for example, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China, South Africa) and many other economies. We are witnessing the increasing prominence of the G20 instead of just the G8. The voices of the South including Islamic countries has gained prominence over the recent years. It is certain that diffused centre of power has emerged as a new phenomenon. The question is, how will this impact the work of humanitarians? Will the proliferation of new actors that may not be governed by the old rules of humanitarian engagement, lead to a fragmentation of the humanitarian system and undermine the neutrality and universality of humanitarian values? It is crucially important to discuss these issues at a greater depth with the commitment to finding commonly agreed solutions.

b. Urbanisation, the rise of the youth population and social discontent

Policy and decision makers, practitioners as well as scholars agree that the future will see increased conflicts that tear apart societies, that will become even more difficult to resolve because of population pressures and the very fragile land and ecosystem in which they take place. What will make such conflicts particularly difficult is the rapid urbanization and the rise of young populations in developing countries. In such contexts, the urban area brings the extra danger of ‘anonymity’, which breaks the social fabric that sometimes – in smaller communities – helps people stay together, especially in times of conflict. Then, on top of that, we have climate change, which is making the whole world – the poor and the rich world alike – more fragile. As we have witnessed in the recent ‘the Arab Spring’, economic inequalities, unemployment, and the demand for better opportunities are putting mounting pressures on the established system and increasing public disobedience.

The memories of the 2007/2008 high price food crisis is still lingering, and prices have remained very high for many people around the world, especially with rising unemployment. Significant risks and vulnerabilities remain due to high food prices, population pressure and economic and social inequalities; combined with state failures or weakened governance; with resulting radicalism and a rising network of terrorist activities in some regions. The humanitarian system is often pulled in, to respond to the

resulting aftermath of state failure and the collapse of formal institutions. This is increasing the demand for humanitarian assistance, for example in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. .

Is the humanitarian system prepared for these types of complexities? What role should the humanitarian system play to change the status quo?

c. Climate change, environmental degradation and fragility

Climate change results in more frequent and extreme-weather events, such as floods, tropical storms, and droughts with devastating impacts in areas with an already fragile ecological system and large population concentrations, and are further complicated by poor economic conditions and infrastructures. Together with population pressure, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation will worsen deforestation and desertification and aggravate the stress on vital resources like water and food. There is already a clear overlap between where conflicts take place; where natural resources are scarce; and where the ecological environment is fragile and frequent.

d. The threat of the old and the new pandemic disease

The threat of regional and global pandemic diseases such as the bird flu and Asian flu have re-emerged over the past decade; and concerted international efforts have managed to contain these virus. The Ebola virus currently ravaging the West Africa region – with a long-term economic, social consequences; that could spread to other regions unless concerted international efforts are expedited to control it. These diseases are trans-boundary in nature and present a unique dimensions to humanitarian response, as the humanitarian workers themselves are the subject of infection.

2. The humanitarian evolution: the desire for transformation

There are several points of tensions in the conduct of humanitarian response:

- There is a growing discontent and tension between assertive national states and the expanding ambitions of humanitarian agencies to do their business with less, and sometimes, no state involvement. Reconciling the philosophy of the Right to Protect with sovereign responsibility will bring humanitarian values in direct collusion with state sovereignty.
- Tensions between the traditional humanitarian agencies and the emerging humanitarian institutions with differing identities and codes of humanitarian conduct; for example, Islamic NGOs with a religious-based humanitarian ideology versus the traditional humanitarian principles of universality and neutrality
- Tension over resource allocation modalities and accountabilities of humanitarian agencies

a. The new form of humanitarian cooperation and engagement

We assume that the underlying value of humanitarian organisations is to ease and/or eliminate human suffering. To achieve this goal, the humanitarian system often tends to avoid state systems or engage with it in a very limited manner. This negates the fundamental recognition that no single humanitarian actor or group will be able to meet the humanitarian challenges alone without the cooperation and partnership of national authorities, which should be central to meeting the humanitarian ideals of saving lives and livelihoods. Human suffering and humanitarian needs are complex and are much higher where national systems are weakened or collapsed.

Typically, humanitarian assistance is short-lived, providing assistance for a short-term relief following emergencies. Some describe humanitarian assistance as *“the Band-Aid applied to an open wound with a minimum follow-up to ensure it does not infect”*. So, there is no cure.

In looking into the future and for a sustained ending of human suffering, the humanitarian system should commonly aspire towards a capable national system that responds to unfolding crises, mitigates risk,

and creates resilient national and local capacities to sustainably end the underlying conditions that create humanitarian crises. As humanitarians, we should work together to support communities and individuals within the national system that has the fundamental responsibility to create an inclusive economic and social environment to eliminate human suffering. This is also consistent with the aspirations of the South.

The South continues to voice that humanitarian assistance should transcend the concept of relief and be linked with national priorities. Humanitarian assistance should be provided within a holistic approach, understanding that such assistance should contribute to rebuilding the social fabric of affected populations while contributing to the development of economic structures and ensuring its sustainability after the emergency.

b. Inclusive Humanitarian Principles and values

There has continued to be competing interpretations of international humanitarian law. All actors make reference to the international humanitarian law of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution, GA Res 46/182 of 19 December 1991, as the founding resolution of the framework for the provision of UN humanitarian assistance. The resolution's key features include:

- Humanitarian assistance is of cardinal importance for the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies.
- Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.
- The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. In this context, humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country.
- Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Hence, the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.

Adherence and enforcement of International Humanitarian Law and the core principles of humanitarian action requires the *Responsibility to Protect*¹ the human rights of the affected people. The Right to Protect, which is often misinterpreted, does not call for delivering humanitarian assistance outside of national programmes or contrary to sovereign authority.

National governments have increasingly flexed their muscles controlling the nature and the type of NGO activities by putting in place civil society laws, in part to bring some order to what appears to be a chaotic, uncoordinated and unregulated rise of NGOs. At the same time, unless further discussed, it can lead to unintended severe restriction of humanitarian work which undermines access to populations in need.

¹ **Prevention requires apportioning responsibility to and promoting collaboration between concerned States and the international community.** The duty to prevent and halt genocide and mass atrocities lies first and foremost with the State, but the international community has a role that cannot be blocked by the invocation of sovereignty. Sovereignty no longer exclusively protects States from foreign interference; it is a charge of responsibility where States are accountable for the welfare of their people. This principle is enshrined in article 1 of the Genocide Convention and embodied in the principle of "sovereignty as responsibility" and in the concept of the Responsibility to Protect. The three pillars of the responsibility to protect, as stipulated in the Outcome Document of the 2005 United Nations World Summit ([A/RES/60/1, para. 138-140](#)) and formulated in the [Secretary-General's 2009 Report \(A/63/677\) on Implementing the Responsibility to Protect](#) are: (i) The State carries the primary responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and their incitement; (ii) The international community has a responsibility to encourage and assist States in fulfilling this responsibility; (iii) The international community has a responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect populations from these crimes. If a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

In recent years, in the post September 11 reality, Islamic humanitarian actors face difficulties in carrying out their tasks. For example, Islamic NGOs assert a need to review many of the laws and regulations that hinder smooth the implementation of humanitarian responses.

c. The new dimensions of humanitarian access

Humanitarian access to affected populations is one of the main challenges, further complicated by a deliberate targeting and killing of humanitarian workers. The movement of humanitarian workers and humanitarian cargo in conflict situations has been constrained by both parties to the conflict. To this can be added to the absence of trust between different entities, the lack of information and credibility, and a heavy bureaucracy. Thus the importance of coordinating and partnering at local and national levels is crucial in order to reach affected populations, especially women and children.

Often local NGOs overcome the barriers of access to conflict affected populations. Somalia is an example of the complexity of humanitarian access, The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) opened a coordination office and created an alliance of 27 organizations that operate across the country, including areas in the south controlled by *Al-Shabab*. This represents a new form of local access to affected populations, a system that needs further integration into international and regional humanitarian coordination framework to access crisis affected populations. Lessons should be extracted from this arrangement and experience in other contexts.

The challenge of emerging situation-specific access arrangements comes with a number of issues that require improvements in the way we carry out our work. Recent observations point out that coordination has not always been a priority, as charitable giving is a requirement in Islam, and often people want to give their zakat to something tangible – such as the construction of a hospital or the delivery of medicine, without coordination and looking at the implications of these charitable acts. There is an urgent call for coordination and applying internationally established humanitarian standards by all actors.

Also, local NGOs lack the capacity and experience to conduct their duties which calls for appropriate development of capacity. This should involve lessons learned, exchange of best practice and the development of staff training programmes.

d. Resources for humanitarian action

The international system, including both traditional and new donors, have been very generous in providing assistance to crises affected populations. There are currently five mega emergencies (L3) concurrently going on. The Syria emergency response alone has surpassed \$6 billion. Can this level of funding be sustained?

Many of the crises of recent years have affected Muslim people, including the Bam earthquake in Iran in 2003, the Southeast Asian tsunami of 2004, the Pakistan earthquake of 2005, the attack on Gaza in late 2008, and the flooding in Pakistan in 2010. In all of these crises, Muslim and Arab donors contributed significantly. There is still a lack of in-depth knowledge and understanding about the culture of emerging donors towards giving. Muslim organizations are reluctant to broadcast their actions as charity is considered something private. A more generous humanitarian assistance has been channelled to Somalia and recently into the Syria and Iraq crises. These situations appear to have changed the nature of humanitarian aid flows. Several Middle Eastern countries have provided an increased level of assistance, but contributions to the multilateral system have been limited.

Nevertheless, we are witnessing a gradual but steadily increasing engagement by Middle Eastern countries in international humanitarian action, both as donors and as policy supporters. In a shifting aid landscape that increasingly features non-western States such as Brazil and India, a collection of Arab donors (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman), that account for sizeable contributions by countries not included in the Organization for Economic Cooperation.

3. Preparing for the future – embracing change

As indicated earlier, there is a consensus that multiple pressures exacerbate vulnerabilities of countries and populations, including: demographic, economic and climatic factors, coupled with conflicts. Humanitarian organizations are likely to be increasingly faced with a realisation that the traditional quick humanitarian relief alone will not meet the requirements arising from these vulnerabilities. For this reason, I offer a five-point agenda for consideration and discussion to advance the future humanitarian action:

- (i) Clarify the limits of humanitarian action
- (ii) Effective coordination to narrow the divide
- (iii) Enhanced warning and risk management system
- (iv) Humanitarian systems that are complementary to national and local efforts
- (v) New and inclusive humanitarian governance

a. Clarify the limits of humanitarian action

A recent dialogue between ECHO and ICRC raised a question that I would like to repeat here: what are humanitarian organisations' understanding of their role? - Is humanitarian action only emergency action, or emergency action and early recovery, or even activities that embrace development and social work? Such clarity of purpose might bring more consistency by easing some of the current tensions—especially those linked to the humanitarian principles. Humanitarian actors will have to make the hard choice between a global, holistic approach and a more limited, but still critically needed, form of humanitarian response.

b. Coordination: narrowing the divide between humanitarian organisations

Balancing the often competing and conflicting priorities as well as divergent expectations among the humanitarian actors will be a new norm as we move ahead. Humanitarian actors will unlikely remain passive or simply an uninterested neutral. Any hope for a meaningful basis for coordination must recognise the variances of armed conflict, natural disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies to other scenarios. We see it as an opportunity and that there is room for improvement for all the parties involved in the common goal of having effective collaboration between the different United Nations actors and national authorities, because such actions result in a better response, attention, and efficient coverage without duplication of efforts.

Practical and concrete field-related co-ordination is needed as we have learned from Somalia and Syria that adds value to humanitarian access. Humanitarian organisations within a conflict settings and as we have seen from Somalia and current situation of Syria and Iraq, must be transparent and precise on their capacities and their human resources; recognise limitations imposed on some but not other humanitarian organisations by parties to the conflict, on where they have access, where they do not have access; on whether they are carrying out the actions themselves or delegating it to implementing agencies. It is indispensable to improve co-ordination but not really in the way it is often done, avoiding costly bureaucracy, sharing transparent information on the relevant issues between agencies which have the capacity to act.

Such practical coordination provides the basis for easing tensions between Islamic NGOs and international NGOs. We need to establish a new alliance between national and international NGOs and recognise local diversities and aspirations of citizens. We need to clarify and improve coordination; sharing information and facilitating the understanding of who does what, with shared responsibilities and establish formal rules of engagement for timely and effectively reaching affected populations.

Over the past years, collective efforts are underway for effective coordination among the UN, EU, and OIC. Ensuing regional meetings among the LAS, OIC, the UN, EU and donors recognised the scale and complexity of the conflicts in the Arab region and profound challenges for humanitarian actors. The meetings have highlighted protection concerns and restricted humanitarian access to those in need. Affected states are sometimes unwilling or do not have the capacity to meet the needs of the affected

populations and refugees. Regional humanitarian actors also need to further increase their capacity to respond effectively to the different humanitarian situations. The dimension of the conflict calls for a greater coordination platform that promotes cooperation among Arab countries and humanitarian organizations, to facilitate and develop common visions and strategies and unify efforts between humanitarian organizations and agencies at all levels.

The Cairo 2014 consensus concluded to advance humanitarian effectiveness in the Arab Region including:

- (i) to establish an Arab coordination mechanism for relief and humanitarian affairs, consisting of focal points assigned by LAS Member States, a representative of the Arab Federation for the Red Crescent and the Red Cross, a Technical Secretariat and Non-governmental organizations;
- (ii) the mechanism should operate under an agreed framework that is based on international humanitarian principles and the values and traditions of Arab cultural heritage and guided by transparency and effectiveness;
- (iii) Prepares an Arab humanitarian strategy ensuring strategic issues of coordination, partnerships, promotion of the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, and mapping out crisis management.

c. Enhanced warning and risk management systems

Risk management and early warning should make good use of technological advances and deploy publicly sourced risk analysis, disaster warning systems, digital transmissions and broadcast best practices on a global scale for learning and scaling to local to national contexts;

In order to prepare well for the future, humanitarian organizations together with host governments must invest in the creation of preparedness measures for natural disasters and technological disasters, whereas making distinction of preparedness for armed conflicts and other situations of violence. The question that arises is developing rapid deployment capacities and widening the network of local and regional interlocutors.

d. Humanitarian system should be complementary to national and local efforts

Supporting and advocating for strong national institutions, effective educational and health system are proving to be effective tools and approaches for today, and for the future. Generally, the South and Islamic countries expect the humanitarian system to build on existing national systems, and take recognition of the progress made and draw lessons and new modalities for the future by working together and sharing best practices and experiences. Nations feel and assert their strong commitment to the humanitarian principles and have fully embraced primary and foremost responsibility towards their populations. This approach creates trust and mutual respect, and creates lasting and enduring economic and social opportunities to lift millions out of hunger and poverty, as many countries have shown.

The South highlights the need for strengthening preparedness and resilience at national, local and regional levels. Building resilience is a long-term development process, which requires investment in preparedness by addressing underlying risks in order to prevent and mitigate damage. To assist in reducing the impact of disasters, it is necessary to provide more predictable and effective delivery of assistance and relief. The necessity for evidence-based humanitarian decision making from reliable data, and emphasis on the importance of information sharing among national governments, development and humanitarian partners will continue to be the pillars of effective humanitarian response in the future. Against this backdrop, the UN and humanitarian and development organizations should ensure that sharing data on risks that can lead to effective humanitarian response and should also incorporate the need for building capacities of developing countries to undertake such measures.

e. New and inclusive humanitarian governance

Recent engagements of the high level meetings among donors, UN and OIC and LAS indicates that there is an emerging consensus to change present humanitarian governance in order to avoid fragmentation and division between traditional donors and new donors, between national, international, and Islamic NGOs. New donors tend to act outside the multilateral frameworks often dominated by Western countries. This creates an unhealthy perception of a divide in the international community, with competing systems of norms and practices in humanitarian assistance. As we have started, continuing regular high-level platforms for such dialogue would give greater legitimacy and effectiveness to the humanitarian system. And it would bring about a better shared understanding and commitment to the fundamental goals and principles that underpin humanitarian action.

4. Conclusion

As humanitarian challenges continue to grow in scale and complexity, the concerted efforts of all actors will be required to address the needs. Actors from the South and Islamic countries are providing new perspectives, opportunities and resources; some of them conflicting with the values and modalities of the established humanitarian system. However, rather than create a fragmented system or systems, we must continue to work together, and support communities and national actors in rebuilding the social fabric after a conflict or disaster and establishing sustainable solutions.