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Humanitarian futures
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In brief

• This paper is about the future, and about how agencies can adapt to meet it. The humanitarian environment of tomorrow may well not look much like the humanitarian environment of today.

• This paper argues that many of the changes that are occurring now are likely to impinge in some way on the humanitarian community. In the foreseeable future, we may face new types of humanitarian crisis, with new tools at our disposal to reduce their impact.

• Many of the assumptions upon which humanitarian organisations base their work may be becoming increasingly less relevant. The question – and the central issue addressed here – is whether and how humanitarian organisations can deal with the dynamics of change, and its consequences. What strategies do they need to develop, and how should such strategies be linked to policies and practice on the ground?

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Introduction

This paper is about the future, and about how agencies can adapt to meet it. The humanitarian environment of tomorrow may well not look much like the humanitarian environment of today. Many of the changes that are occurring now – scientifically and technologically, economically and environmentally, in terms of security and demography – are likely to impinge in some way on the humanitarian community. In the foreseeable future, we may face new types of humanitarian crisis, with new tools at our disposal to reduce their impact. In turn, many of the assumptions upon which humanitarian organisations base their work may be becoming increasingly less relevant. The question – and the central issue addressed here – is whether and how humanitarian organisations can deal with the dynamics of change, and its consequences. What strategies do they need to develop, and how should such strategies be linked to policies and practice on the ground?

As a rule, humanitarians distrust strategy-making, and seem to have little confidence in its practical value. 'The problem with our strategy,' according to the international director of a leading British NGO, 'is that it makes us smug and inward looking. I'm not convinced that it really relates to what we do and the ways that we do things.'[1] The relationship between strategy, policy and decision in most organisations is often difficult to discern, and an organisation's overall strategy is frequently disconnected from its practical policy planning and decision-making. A strategic commitment to 'rights', for instance, may be temporarily set aside in the field as agencies negotiate for access with local authorities guilty of abuse. 'Ownership' and 'empowerment' are valuable strategic goals, but the pressure to deliver assistance amid crisis may make them neither practical nor possible. These kinds of compromises are an inherent part of the operational universe that

Box 1

Strategy-making in practice: Save the Children and a strategy for the newborn child

Save the Children's strategy for newborn children's health – *The State of the World's Newborns* of 2001 – provides some useful insights into the pitfalls and prospects facing humanitarian strategists. An estimated four million babies die each year before they reach one month old, and four million more are stillborn.[2] Yet these statistics, and their causes and consequences, escaped the attention of most organisations responsible for maternal/child health care for decades.[3] It was only when mortality rates began to drop in the conventional under-five category that aid workers really began to uncover the fact that 40% of child mortality had been taking place during the first months of life.

The reasons for this failure are revealing. First, it was due to the difficulties faced by aid workers in dealing with the complex social structures in which such high mortality rates were taking place. In many parts of Africa and Asia, newborn children during their first four to six weeks are not regarded as a full person. In many instances, they are not formally named until that period is over, and at the village level in many parts of Asia mothers are required to stay in separate accommodation with their newborn children. This isolation purportedly prevented aid workers from appreciating the extent of the problem, even those who worked for agencies that prided themselves on the community-based nature of their work.

Second, the problem of newborn mortality was not easily amenable to the kind of technical solutions with which aid agencies are most comfortable. Instead, it called for behavioural change in hygiene and nutritional habits, and in attitudes to the relationship between child and maternal health. It was much easier to deal with 'the child as patient' than to try to get communities to change.

Third, this tendency to develop strategies around the technical rather than the behavioural was reinforced by the inclinations of donors to fund assistance that was tangible and visible. To that extent, relevant strategies were linked to the supply-driven nature of donor contributions. Hence, the means determined the ends, and in this instance strategies for dealing with protecting children were significantly influenced by what those involved in designing such programmes felt it would be possible to do, given the availability of certain types of resources.

The *Saving Newborn Lives* initiative has clearly identified an area of significant concern. The strategies developed to assist millions of newborn and potentially stillborn children have adopted a far more sensitive approach to the complex social and cultural factors affecting maternal health and child well-being – based far more on changing behaviour than on medical intervention.[4]

humanitarian organisations inhabit. They are understandable, if not always inevitable, and they will remain a feature of humanitarian action in the future. Yet they are also indicative of a more fundamental problem – one that goes to the core of the humanitarian community's capacity to adapt effectively to change. After more than two decades' involvement in disaster and emergency response for the UN and NGOs, I am struck by the frequency with which those responsible for humanitarian affairs seem to miss the big trends. It is only when momentous changes stare us in the face – the emergence of so-called 'complex emergencies' or 'the internally displaced', for instance – that we seem to begin to focus on major transitions creating new types and dimensions of vulnerability. Given the talent within the sector and its apparently ever-increasing resources, why are we not more sensitive to wider patterns of change?

This concern informs the three themes that guide this paper. The first is that strategic analysis – analysis that is sensitive to the environment and adaptive – will become an increasingly important feature of an effective organisation. Second, this will need to be linked to policy planning and ultimately to decision-making. Third, most humanitarian organisations find it very difficult to stray too far from the ways that they traditionally interpret the world around them, define their objectives and do their work. In that sense, they are averse not only to risk, but also to creativity. Sensitivity to a more complex environment is sacrificed for the security of precedents and historical analogues. While these organisations are not blind to complexity, they appear reluctant to invest in the sorts of changes that would enhance their planning and policy formulation processes to deal with complexity's consequences.

Many organisations devote considerable energy to formulating strategies and planning policies. Large chunks of time are earmarked for retreats, workshops and brainstorming sessions designed to help people think 'outside the box', to enable the development of strategies and policies that relate to 'the big picture'. Yet for all that, these initiatives frequently confirm, rather than challenge or change, the ways that humanitarian organisations do their work. When adjustments are made to strategies and plans, these often do little more than tinker at the margins, and rarely reflect efforts to question, let alone test, the validity of the assumptions upon which strategies and plans are based. Even where innovative strategies and plans do foretell change, such as the 1999 World Bank–UNHCR strategy for bridging the gap between relief and development, they seem to have little consistent impact on the actual decisions an organisation makes about its programmes, projects and operational plans.

Day-to-day pressures force one to compromise good intentions in order to ensure the survival not merely of the crisis-affected, but also of the implementing institution itself. This 'operational realism' does not, however, adequately explain why innovative strategies and policies seem to hold little sway over decisions and actions. There seems to be something far more fundamental at work, something in the very nature of organisational behaviour, that makes organisations shy away from bringing strategies, policies and decision-making together in a more coherent way. We have devalued speculation and reflection as somehow an academic luxury whose pursuit must necessarily be at the expense of our proper focus on what is *immediate*, what is *practical* and what is *solution-driven*. This is leaving us with a blinkered view of developments in the larger world outside, and constraining our ability to understand and respond effectively to the complex factors and forces that will affect human vulnerability – both positively and negatively – in the immediate and longer term.

These are the concerns that animate this paper. One of the greatest challenges that organisations will have to face in the foreseeable future is dealing with an environment in which technological and scientific innovation add to the intensity with which economies, societies and political structures are being transformed. To be more sensitive to such transformations and to have such sensitivity reflected in action will require fundamental changes in the ways that organisations

Box 2

A simple test: how prepared are you for the future?

- When is the last time you reviewed the objectives of your organisation?
- What assumptions do you think make those objectives more or less relevant?
- Can you describe how decisions are made in your organisation?
- Do you have an overall policy planning unit in your organisation, and how does it relate to the overall organisational objectives?
- If the answer to the previous question is no, who sets policy in your organisation, and how?
- Does your organisation attempt to anticipate humanitarian crises, and if so, how?
- To what extent does your organisation collaborate with others about medium- and longer-term planning? Who are those 'others'?
- What do you foresee as the five main factors that will *increase* disaster and emergency vulnerabilities in ten years' time?
- What do you foresee as the five main factors that will *reduce* disaster and emergency vulnerabilities in ten years' time?
- What are the five key factors that will determine the direction and objectives of your organisation in ten years' time?

interact with their external environment, as well as in the ways that they organise their internal systems and procedures. This will require innovative thinking and a willingness to challenge and test some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin organisational strategies and plans. However esoteric these questions may appear, they are, in fact, wholly practical, and will become increasingly important and relevant. At their core, they are about the capacity of humanitarian organisations to keep pace with an increasingly complex environment prone to rapid change. They are about tying strategy and policy formulation more closely to decision-making – a move that will enable humanitarian organisations to be more responsive and adaptive to the sorts of vulnerabilities that may be emerging now, and that may emerge in the future.

Chapter 2
Strategy, decision-making and uncertainty

Many humanitarian organisations make considerable efforts to think 'outside the box', establishing units to focus on policy planning, strategic analysis or 'blue-sky thinking'. Yet the products of such efforts rarely influence decision-making and institutional responses, and relatively few humanitarian organisations base their activities on well-developed strategies. Some refer to 'humanitarian strategies', but these are often an amalgam of operational tactics, road maps for organisational restructuring and budgeting devices. They are rarely strategies in the more formal sense, and even more rarely are they *strategic* in intent. Strategies are long-term planning devices, based upon broad goals and the measures needed to attain them. Fundamental to any strategy are the ways that it takes into account the external environment in which such defined goals are pursued. In other words, strategies have to anticipate pressures and counter-pressures that may foil or promote their goals. This does not describe the ways that humanitarian activities are developed and implemented. Whether bilateral, multilateral or non-governmental, those responsible for anticipating and responding to humanitarian crises have normally been far more reactive than proactive and strategic in their efforts. This chapter looks at some of the reasons why humanitarian organisations find effective strategic thinking so apparently hard. Some of these explanations are intrinsic to the humanitarian enterprise; others relate to wider issues to do with the ways in which organisations and the individuals within them behave.

Interviews with representatives from bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental organisations involved in humanitarian assistance indicate a number of reasons for the lack of effective, long-term humanitarian strategies. The first explanation is to do with the presumption, within organisations and externally, that humanitarian activities are essentially reactive. At the operational level, this feeds a belief that policy or strategy are the stuff of headquarters, and are somehow irrelevant to field concerns. A disaster or emergency requires a response to the plight of the affected, and forward planning in that sense is operational and not speculative. Long-term strategy is seen to be in the realm of development and economic growth. Despite reams of papers that argue to the contrary and various 'early warning' initiatives, the underlying assumption that humanitarian response is essentially reactive inhibits long-term strategic analysis and planning.

The second explanation given for the lack of attention to strategy is under-investment in capacity-building within institutions. An official principally responsible for emergencies in one large US-based NGO noted that, despite the 56% growth in the organisation's operating resources over the past two years, not a penny had been allotted for a 'knowledge-base' that would enable the agency to think more strategically.

The third explanation revolves around an issue that arises in various ways and various forms throughout this paper, namely organisational dynamics. Strategy formulation requires at a minimum the involvement of all the main components within the organisation – in other words, an unusual degree of *intra*-organisational cooperation among those responsible for emergencies, policies, development, budgets and the rest. This sort of process may well require substantial *inter*-organisational collaboration as well. There is currently little enthusiasm for this kind of collaborative approach, and in some cases basic constraints may make it effectively impossible. As one NGO member put it: 'We have one vice-president who deals with policy, another who deals with emergencies, and there is little inclination to have much cross-over.' The synergy needed for such a broad conception of the context and purpose of humanitarian intervention is undermined by the isolation in which emergency units often operate.

Barriers to innovation

Most organisations – be they a humanitarian agency or a car-maker – share certain common characteristics. They have to deal with complex environments over which they have relatively little control, and they have to make sense of a flow of information that may or may not be relevant to their objectives. They have to accommodate contending pressures both within the organisation and without, and they have to make plans that satisfy the organisation's overall purpose, as well as ensuring its survival. In one way or another, they do this through mechanisms, assumptions and frames of reference that structure and order information, and that fit that information into pre-programmed responses or standard operating procedures (SOPs) that maximise consistency and predictability and minimise risk and disruption; and by focusing primarily upon information and analysis that is immediate and useful, above that which is ambiguous or contradictory. Other barriers to innovation and adaptation stem from the way that organisations work, the way that they are structured internally, and the way that they maintain their external relationships within the broader aid community. All of these characteristics influence how an organisation interprets its environment, and how well it will plan for, and respond to, future challenges.

Fundamental assumptions and frames of reference

How an organisation defines a problem invariably begins with a set of assumptions that frame the matter at hand.

These frames of reference determine the sorts of information that are used to interpret contexts and events. These assumptions and frames of reference are rarely challenged, and so may inhibit an organisation's capacity to respond to external change.

The humanitarian community has several fundamental assumptions, about the relief–development continuum, for example, or the role of women in household food management. For the most part, practitioners remain content to accept a division between 'natural' and 'man-made' disasters, thereby downplaying the role of the state in perpetuating or mitigating a crisis by virtue of its decisions about resource allocation, or about building codes, or about where and in what conditions a particular segment of the population should live. Beneficiaries are still treated as somehow hapless and helpless in the face of crisis, despite overwhelming evidence that, as far as they are able, disaster victims are the primary agents of their own survival and recovery. Humanitarians persist in the belief that their profession is somehow uniquely equipped – ethically and technically – to do relief work, when the compelling evidence is that this is not categorically the case. Nor is humanitarianism, as is often assumed, a Western preserve: solidarity with the victims of conflict is a principal tenet of Islam, for example, and the Islamic world possesses some very ancient and effective mechanisms of support for the less fortunate. Because non-Western resource flows to sites of conflict or disaster go largely unexamined, the tendency is to assume that they do not exist, whereas what anecdotal evidence is available, for example on the role of diaspora remittances in the Somali economy, suggests that these resources may be significant.

Assumptions like these reinforce humanitarianism's resistance to adapting strategically and sensitively to changes in the external environment. There may well be vested interests at stake in this: casting beneficiaries as hapless victims reinforces appeals for funds, while the contention of a unique humanitarianism is one weapon in the defence of the humanitarian enterprise against interlopers from the world of the military or the private sector. Assumptions about the outside world also have a cognitive and interpretive value within pressured organisations besieged by information, some of it germane, some of it not. They help the organisation to structure and order these inputs; without them, organisations would be paralysed or would succumb to bedlam. Hence, the issue for organisations is to balance the benefits of these fundamental assumptions and frames of reference with the risks they pose to their adaptive capacity. As one tries to make strategic planning more sensitive and relevant for decision-makers, the challenge is to find ways to explore and test the validity of frames of reference without at the same time leaving the organisation without an effective means for absorbing, screening and ordering information.

Box 3

Project versus programme

The UN's demining programme was an important part of the organisation's work in Somaliland in 1998. It was linked to economic recovery initiatives, indirectly to aspects of governance and more immediately to the safety and security of local people. The programme included an unexploded ordnance removal project, which had to be spent within six months. The programme officer wanted Somali counterparts to approve the programme and its sub-components. Following Somali tradition, considerable time was taken up on consensus-building and bargaining. Faced with the prospect of the donor withdrawing the funds, the programme officer signed the project document himself, without concluding discussions with his Somali counterparts. While his reasons were understandable, local interest in the programme as a whole rapidly waned, and the project – eventually implemented – never had the ownership or broad impact that had been intended.

Perceived expertise and questions of interpretation

Humanitarian organisations often define the response to crisis situations in terms of what they individually can do best. This means that the response frequently reflects not what the crisis itself may require, but rather the way that the organisation interprets the crisis. What is inside the organisation's response kit might be all that it has: the organisation knows what it can do, and will seek to mould that crisis so that the response to it is in line with the available expertise. The World Food Programme (WFP), for example, has sometimes been criticised for the consistency with which its assessments of crises lead to the conclusion that food aid is the most appropriate response.

Risk aversion and fear of the unknown

No matter how innovative and creative organisations may feel they are, for the most part they are inherently risk averse.[5] According to one analyst in this area, organisations are most comfortable in a world that is analogous to a machine, 'with clockwork precision through a code of rules and consequences … a predictable world, occasionally shaken by the hand of fate only to return to its meticulous order'. In such an environment, there is no room for chance. This applies to all parts of the organisation, be it the department responsible for planning or that concerned with implementation.[6] Venturing into the unknown normally means that the organisation's standard operating

procedures can no longer deal with the types of information it is receiving, and are no longer suitable. Such departures occur when the organisation is on the brink of collapse or is being forced – by means no longer in its control – to change its procedures fundamentally. It often takes a long time for an organisation to realise that it has hit the point where there is no alternative to change; often, that point comes too late to save the organisation from collapse.

A food aid distribution in Ethiopia. Food aid is a standard response to famine, but its effects may often not be fully considered

New types of information or alternative perspectives pose hazards and present potentially costly diversions. They threaten to disrupt or dismantle two essential pillars of organisational behaviour – consistency and predictability – without which those within and outside the organisation would not know how to operate. One experienced observer and practitioner from the world of NGOs, John Seaman, has noted that 'whatever the crisis, one could always tell who was going to do what, when and how'.[7] This is not to suggest that organisations are too insensitive ever to adapt to their environment. Nor does it imply that predictability and consistency do not have merits of their own. Rather, such responses often have less to do with a rational assessment and analysis of the operating environment, and more to do with what is least disruptive to an organisation's norms and most consistent with predetermined procedures. Institutionally speaking, organisations seek the least dissonance and the least disruption.

Organisations will go to great lengths to avoid departing from pre-programmed standard operating procedures. In 2001, in the midst of a purportedly large-scale famine in south-east Ethiopia, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and others delivered hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food into areas of presumed need. Across the border in Somalia, meanwhile, farmers were enjoying one of the best harvests since 1994. The consequence of the relief effort was to drive down the price of Somali agricultural produce, and thus deny Somali farmers the dividends with which to pay wages and purchase tools and fertilisers. Additionally, people left the stable areas of south-west Somalia to take advantage of the handouts in Ethiopia. USAID defended its response on the grounds that, in such situations, it was normal. There appeared to be little appreciation of the immediate or broader effects.[9] The fact that food donors – should the Ethiopian intervention undermine Somali agriculture – would then have to increase their assistance to Somalia did not seem to be taken into account. Similarly, a 2001 study of food distribution systems in Somalia, initiated by WFP, showed that the organisation's procedures were not suited to Somali clan structure; in fact, they worsened the impact of 'warlordism' in the country. While WFP accepted that there were more effective and sensitive ways to distribute food in Somalia, the agency's procedures seemingly did not allow for an adjustment in methodology.[10]

Box 4

The US and the Rwanda genocide

US reactions to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 are a good example of the tendency of organisations to seek the least dissonance and disruption. Within the State Department, the violence was viewed as another bout of the kind of 'tribal warfare' thought endemic throughout much of Africa.[8] This was a politically expedient analysis for an administration still reeling from the deaths of US soldiers in Mogadishu and reluctant to contemplate further overseas intervention. An analysis of the situation less encumbered with institutionally-derived perceptions and convenient stereotypes might have reached a more realistic appreciation of the horrors being perpetrated by the *Interahamwe*.

Individuals within an organisation tend to prefer harmony to conflict, and so try to avoid issues that would lead to dissent. This kind of behaviour is called 'group think syndrome', and humanitarian organisations are no more immune from its effects than any other group.[11] Within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), for example, the need to coordinate and the need for internal cohesion have merged, and members often avoid confrontation at the expense of clearer and more effective decision-making. Bruce Jones and Abby Stoddard allude to this in their review of the IASC:

> *All organizations face a tension between the need to build a sense of morale and ownership through consultative processes and a need for the capacity to be able to take decisions and act decisively. Organizations that emphasize decisiveness and top-down decision making risk losing staff/member buy-in to their core objectives. Organizations that always work through consultative mechanisms risk missing opportunities or being too slow to respond to breaking demands. Successful organizations balance this tension through leadership: leadership that recognizes when (a) the requirement for speed and decisiveness outweighs the need for inclusion, or (b) when the nature of issues and time requirements enable a consultative process, or (c) when – irrespective of time constraints – the importance of an issue requires full buy-in from all those who will be implicated in a decision. The IASC faces precisely this challenge.* [12]

This does not preclude the existence of a dissenting voice, and humanitarians are perhaps more cantankerous than many. But the greater the pressure faced by the group or organisation, the more willing the dissenter will be to concede to the majority view once they have made their opinion known. The 'domesticated dissenter' will rarely press their views in ways that will disrupt the group or organisation, and the group, by listening to the dissenter, will feel that it has been open to all views. In fact, the dissenter will be tolerated as long as he or she does not really press the challenge, and the group will never feel compelled to address itself to these dissenting and potentially disruptive views.

How organisations know what they know: linear and non-linear thinking

Terms such as 'linear' and 'non-linear' analysis have become commonplace in the world of organisational analysis and social science research. Essentially, linear analysis implies that efforts to understand the present and future are based upon the patterns of the past. The future, from a linear perspective, is merely a continuation of the past.

Traditionally, strategy formulation and strategic thinking have depended upon fact-based forecasts, and have assumed that past trends will provide a direct guide to the future. This form of analysis might have been acceptable in circumstances where one was dealing with, or seemed to be dealing with, relatively few variables. These relatively few variables appeared to be less dependent upon a much wider and more uncertain set of factors. They did not seem so prone to rapid change, and their consequences at least appeared to be more predictable.

Those responsible for strategy formulation and strategic thinking in the future, however, will not have the luxury of this linear perspective. They will have to adopt approaches that are far more *non-linear*. They will have to accept that the past is not necessarily a signpost to the future, and that greater attention will have to be paid to connections and causations that are anything but obvious or historically-based. In other words, they will have to embrace uncertainty, and will have to sensitise decision-makers to the range of options and consequences that might ensue. Humanitarian strategies of the future will depend as much on the adaptive capacities of humanitarian organisations themselves as on their ability to anticipate the future.

According to one analyst, some of our very basic understandings – things we believe we know – are based upon linear sets of assumptions. Take, for example, global population projections. According to the UN's medium-term projections, the global population will increase from its present 6.2 billion to approximately nine billion by 2050, when all countries will reach 'replacement rate fertility'. In other words, population increases will be offset by mortality rates. However, these projections are based on the assumption that trends in fertility rates in the future will resemble trends in the past; 'the extent to which the future will be similar to the past is of course much more difficult to assess'.[13] Thinking beyond this past-to-future trajectory is organisationally difficult.

Questions of relevance and utility

Organisational behaviour can distort and screen out information about externally generated change and complexity. This does not, however, mean that organisations are necessarily oblivious to the wider context in which they operate, and many make considerable efforts to think 'outside the box'. Yet the products of these efforts often fail to influence decision-making and institutional responses because they are not seen as either relevant or useful. The more a matter is seen to offer an immediate and direct solution to problems at hand, the more it catches the attention of those who determine policies and make decisions. Conversely, the more ambiguous and less immediate the information, the greater the divide between the strategist, the planner and the decision-maker. Thus, fundamental assumptions may be perpetuated by an organisation *despite* what its own analysis may be telling it.

This is partly a problem of translation: in most organisations, translating what experts say into language policy-makers can understand and accept poses a formidable

problem. In one major British NGO, for example, there is growing disquiet among food policy experts over the organisation's stance on the social impact of HIV/AIDS, which is thought to be insensitive to the more complex longer-term implications of HIV/AIDS on affected communities. The message among experts is compelling, but would require from decision-makers an adjustment of policy that is risky in terms of the organisation's commitment to a particular line of advocacy, and too psychologically costly in terms of decision-makers' attitudes. The interaction between expert and decision-maker may in this instance result in no organisational adjustments. The problematic link between expert and decision-maker confronts all organisations in one way or another. Even private sector corporations that depend upon technological innovation find it difficult to integrate their research and development strategies successfully within their overall business strategy.[14]

Intra-organisational divisions

The fissure between policy planning and decision-making may also be a function of the organisational tendency to 'decompose' complex problems into more manageable sub-components. The more complex the task, the greater the tendency to compartmentalise and departmentalise. The assumption is that each specialist department within an organisation should be able to deal with the specific problem which it has been designed to handle. This assumes that problems and solutions can be consigned to a single set of specialists, and do not require a broader, more integrated response.

The way that humanitarian organisations deal with 'lessons-learned' documents, evaluations and studies is a good example of this kind of behaviour. Reports that relate to technical aspects of an organisation's work have a reasonable chance of achieving change if they affect a relatively small number of departments, and if these changes are handled by 'experts'. Reports that deal with organisation-wide issues – how resources are allocated, or an agency's public image, for example – will only effect change if the organisation feels threatened. Broader-based reports dealing with the way a humanitarian organisation fulfils its mandate or responded to a particular emergency or disaster will generate far less change if this requires broad-based organisational adjustments to the ways, for example, it deals with and responds to information.

Strategy formulation requires at a minimum the involvement of all the main components within the organisation – in other words, an unusual degree of *intra*-organisational cooperation among those responsible for emergencies, policies, development and budgeting. There is currently little enthusiasm for this kind of collaborative approach, and in some cases basic constraints may make it effectively impossible. Collaboration inevitably means adjustments to behaviour patterns and compromises over procedure and substantive roles. All these threaten the sub-components within an organisation that perform their individual specialised tasks. If one looks into the structures of most humanitarian organisations, one is struck by the lack of cross-over and integration between departments. The synergy needed for a broad understanding of the context and purpose of humanitarian intervention is undermined by the isolation in which emergency units often operate.

Inter-organisational competition

Humanitarian agencies are no stranger to competition and the demands of institutional survival. Organisations are prone to assess relief needs in terms of the resources available, rather than the actual requirements of the victims, and to follow the scent of donor funding at the expense of their humanitarian instincts – all to ensure the well-being of the organisation.[15] To the extent that organisations naturally want to ensure that they survive, and hence continue to do humanitarian work, this is an inevitable impulse. But it is also another factor affecting an organisation's ability to respond to change.

The humanitarian aid environment is harsh, perhaps even dysfunctional. Although the level of humanitarian financing has supposedly increased relatively steadily over the past decade, it is clear that those who provide the bulk of resources for humanitarian crises do so in ways that are often unpredictable, and tied to political interests and priorities that have little to do with prioritised humanitarian need.[16] Humanitarian organisations are willing to adjust their own priorities to mesh with those of donors, and are reluctant to behave in ways that are deemed unacceptable by their funding constituency. In fact, agencies themselves admit that they have to accommodate donor concerns if they are to survive.[17] Key mechanisms like the Consolidated Appeals Process are perceived as instruments to promote the projects and programmes of particular agencies, in this case the United Nations, and hence their institutional well-being. These examples are part of a well-documented body of literature on the baleful consequences of inter-organisational competition, whatever the organisation. It makes organisations less receptive to new information, distorts their interpretation of incoming information, and eliminates alternatives that do not seem to have an immediate impact upon institutional health. To that extent, it is another factor inhibiting the development of a more sensitive approach to strategic planning, policy formulation and decision-making.

Chapter 3
Humanitarianism and the future

Relatively few radical shifts have taken place in the humanitarian world over the past three decades. The 1970s saw a general rejection of the 'acts of God' interpretation of disasters, and accepted that some events at least were principally man-made. The Geldof phenomenon, in the wake of the famine in Ethiopia in 1984–85, dramatically changed the way that governments and international organisations regarded the relationship between politics and humanitarian response. In the 1990s, so-called 'complex emergencies' began to challenge assumptions about the capacities and intentions of 'vulnerable states'. These shifts on the whole were not anticipated, nor did they trigger significant changes when they initially occurred. Humanitarian organisations adjusted relatively slowly, often incrementally and rarely with significant alterations in their basic behaviour. These relatively consistent behaviour patterns were rewarded by resources from donors who also worked within accepted limits.

©Reuters/Luc Gnago, courtesy www.alertnet.org

A Liberian government soldier poses with a machine gun, Monrovia, June 2003. During the 1990s 'complex emergencies' began to challenge assumptions about 'vulnerable states'

Rapid change and complexity may well be the hallmarks of the first part of the twenty-first century. Some of this putative change will no doubt pass the humanitarian enterprise by: nano-technology, advances in transplant medicine or genetic engineering, for example, are unlikely to have much consequence in Goma, Afghanistan or Sudan. Other foreseeable changes – a cure for AIDS, advances in computing and communications technology, or changes in the regulation of global trade – may well affect the communities and countries of humanitarian concern. Still others – perhaps the continued politicisation or commercialisation of humanitarianism, the emergence of 'new' donors, fundamental changes in the way donors allocate and manage their relief funding, architectural developments within the UN or the Bretton Woods institutions – all would have direct impacts on the humanitarian enterprise itself, perhaps good, perhaps bad.

Geopolitical change, say a fresh commitment to peacekeeping or a new alignment among states, may bring neglected, crisis-ridden corners of the world back into the purview of the West, or may shunt these states further into the shadows. Europe may emerge as a genuine alternative to US predominance, with consequences that would, in some shape or form, affect how humanitarian action is funded, and where it is done. Advances in remote sensing technology may make earthquakes, hurricanes or other natural disasters easier to predict, and developments in mitigation or prevention techniques may make their consequences easier to manage. The humanitarian profession itself may evolve and professionalise further: the community may well agree to shared standards of practice and behaviour; academic investigation of the nature and purpose of the enterprise may well expand and deepen; current divisions, between faith-based and secular, anglophone and francophone, North and South, may well disappear. And, of course, familiar challenges will remain: wars will still happen, and people will still get sick and die.

Humanitarian challenges in the future: towards an agenda

These are all more-or-less plausible scenarios for the future. Some may be real, others not; some represent new departures, others extrapolations from current trends. The point here is not to predict the future, but to highlight the fact of change, and rapid and complex change at that. The core question this paper asks is whether the humanitarian community can continue to respond reactively and incrementally to such change. How, perhaps in the not-so-distant future, would a typical humanitarian organisation deal with some of the developments suggested above? How would the organisation, its mandate and respons-

ibilities, be affected? What sort of organisational structure would need to be in place to deal with such questions? This paper has suggested that organisational capacities to respond to rapid change and complexity are often lacking – lacking in the ability to strategise effectively and to link such strategies to decision-making processes. This chapter focuses on the sorts of innovations and structural and procedural adjustments that humanitarian organisations might consider in their efforts to be more responsive to the future.

An agenda that will help organisations to prepare for the humanitarian challenges of the future will have at least four basic components:

- a paradigm shift that repositions the causes of humanitarian crises away from the periphery to the centre of human activity;
- more flexible and creative institutional systems and procedures to anticipate and respond to sources of human vulnerability;
- creative tools to sensitise planners and decision-makers to the prospects and consequences of change; and
- simple institutional adjustments to facilitate linkages between strategists, policy planners and decision-makers.

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The Taiwan earthquake of 1999 disrupted economies as far afield as California

A humanitarian paradigm shift

In the future, we will need a humanitarian paradigm shift that understands disasters and emergencies not as unfortunate occurrences that take place at the margins of human existence, but as reflections of the ways that human beings live their 'normal lives', and hence the ways that they structure their societies and allocate their resources. This paradigm shift will challenge some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin the humanitarian project as currently conceived.

International humanitarian organisations often see the world as divided between the disaster-prone zones in which they principally work, and the developed world from which they come, in which they are based, and to which they appeal for funds. There are obvious historical and practical reasons for this, and there will always be humanitarian crises that affect one portion of the globe more than others. Yet the assumption that the causes and effects of emergencies are primarily located in zones on the periphery of Western geopolitics may become increasingly tenuous. It is possible that the sources of disasters and emergencies may be increasingly global, rather than local to the disaster zone. The effects of disasters may also increasingly be interactive across continents, and in some instances potentially global in impact. Take, for example, the earthquake in Taiwan in 1999. In this instance, the disaster was not only costly in terms of life and property in Taiwan, but it also disrupted economies as distant as California, where electronics industries ground to a halt due to a lack of essential components normally supplied by Taiwanese companies. Trans-global disaster agents like SARS are difficult to isolate, and require concerted action to prevent their spread. While SARS was successfully contained, due in some degree to internationally coordinated action, containing other such potential hazards will be extremely difficult. According to Thomas Homer Dixon, Director for the Study of Peace and Conflict at the University of Toronto:

> *Never before have we been able to disrupt the fundamental processes of Earth's ecology; and never before have we created social, economic, and technological systems – from continent-wide industrial agriculture to the international financial system – with today's enormous complexity, connectedness, and speed of operation. Whether the issue is drug-resistant diseases or shiploads of migrants dumped on our shores, our problems spill across geographical and intellectual boundaries, their complexity often exceeds our wildest imaginations, and they converge and intertwine in totally unexpected ways.*[18]

Other fundamental assumptions may also need to be modified. The rural bias of much relief programming, for example, will probably have to change: in the next 15 years, cities will absorb almost 54% of the world's people, and ghettos of impoverished people will account for between 30–60% of urban populations. Urban ghettos will, in other words, become the main catchment areas of the displaced. Humanitarian assistance to peoples of the ghetto will become one of the great political as well as

relief challenges over the coming decades. Similarly, the artificial distinction between natural and man-made disaster and emergency events will also have to be discarded. While considerable progress has been made over the past decade to dispel the myth of this humanitarian bifurcation, the full and persistent interaction between man-made and natural crises will be a core precept of the new humanitarian paradigm.

A humanitarian agenda that brought the sources of vulnerability to the centre of global concerns would see field-based activities reflect a closer inter-relationship between emergencies and development. Development programmes would contain specific initiatives designed to reduce disaster and emergency agents, and disaster and emergency prevention and preparedness activities would focus amongst other things on ways to protect development. A review of most humanitarian and development activities would not only demonstrate how the two are rarely structured in mutually supportive ways, but also the potential for doing so.

Humanitarian organisations of the future

Whether or not this important conceptual shift occurs, it will nevertheless be essential to foster institutions with the creativity, flexibility and capacity to anticipate and respond to change. '*Ad hocracy*' is one example of a growing number of approaches to making organisations more adaptive:

> *Ad hocracy is an organic structure that relies for coordination on mutual adjustment among its highly trained and specialised experts, which it encourages by extensive use of the liaison devices – integrating managers, standing committees and above all task forces and matrix structures … All the distinctions of conventional structures disappear in the ad hocracy … Ad hocracies are found in environments that are both complex and dynamic, because those are the ones that require sophisticated innovation, the type of innovation that calls for the cooperative efforts of many different kinds of experts.*[19]

In developing an organisational capacity responsive to rapid change and complexity, what the organisation looks like – the organisational structure – is less important than how it works – the organisational dynamic. From that perspective, an effective organisation of the future will have to have at least five essential characteristics.

- *Planning will be a priority*. The planning function is often regarded as secondary to what are perceived to be more implementation-oriented functions. Planning, particularly long-term planning, is frequently – and wrongly – deemed a luxury. Entities designed to think creatively and to innovate within organisations are often the first for the axe when economic times become hard.[20] Yet planning as a central function is vital for organisational adaptation: beware the view that the future is simply an extension of the past, and that success can be assured with small incremental adjustments in existing goals and objectives. This issue is particularly difficult for organisations like humanitarian agencies that see themselves as 'action-oriented', inherently responsive and not proactive. But if the humanitarian organisation of the future is to be effective, then planning has to move to centre stage.

- *The planning time-frame will need to expand*. The problem for many planners is that they assume that a plan must reflect relatively firm and fixed steps for a defined period of time. However, the key for planners in a time of intense uncertainty is to understand that the only way to prepare for the short term is to have some sense of probable future alternatives that set the boundaries for possible change. This requires a planning process that is continuous, and that leads to regularly revised and updated plans. In a practical sense, this sort of perspective can be fostered by regular intra-organisational planning sessions that discuss trends and their possible implications for the organisation. The key to these sessions is that each component of the organisation must bring to the table their respective conception of major long-term (ten-

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An urban slum in Lima, Peru. Urban ghettos will become the main catchment areas of the displaced

year) trends and their implications; that these must be monitored; and that alternative planning scenarios are derived from them. Long-term considerations emerging from these regular sessions have to be measured against existing organisational plans and policies, and possible links between the two explored.

- *Speculation has to become a mainstream activity*. Speculative research or blue-sky thinking tend to be activities relegated to think-tanks or to non-mainstream sections within conventional organisations. Policy planners and decision-makers tend not to do it. Phrases like 'that's a bit academic' or 'let's get practical' are as familiar in the intergovernmental environment of the UN as they are in the corporate world. The implication is frequently that there is little use in pursuing a matter about which one cannot be certain. It is clear that such insistence on certainty reflects a form of mind-closure. Speculation, like planning itself, will have to gain greater respectability if an organisation is to be truly adaptive.

- *Cross-systems organisations will have to be developed*. 'Exploration competencies' or an ability to harvest ideas and expertise from a wide array of sources will be vital to staying on top of innovations and their implications.[21] Yet innovation is often 'internalised', and the external cross-fertilisation necessary to maintain focus and develop ideas is sacrificed to insular institutional interests.[22] Adaptive organisations will need to develop open information and communication linkages with new types of partners, institutionally as well as geographically. They will also need to find ways to institute 'a new kind of go-between' responsible for ensuring the exchange of innovative ideas and their incorporation into planning processes.[23] In this context, humanitarian organisations may wish to look at recent business experiments with knowledge networks (KNs) and communities of practice (COPs). These are based upon recognised needs to share information ('common ground') in order to achieve common goals, purposes and objectives. KNs and COPs are non-hierarchical, fluid, interactive and – as opposed to many aspects of organisational behaviour – non-judgmental.[24] At the same time, they might also begin to consider the sorts of 'communities' that must be developed within the organisation.

- *Inter-disciplinary methodologies should be promoted*. Every humanitarian organisation that provides some form of technical assistance has probably experienced the gulf between its technical experts and its policy-makers and decision-makers. Those small groups of experts that only understand each other are important, but at the same time the conceptual and linguistic distance between them and others in the organisation can prove a serious constraint to broad-based organisational understanding. Every effort at inter-disciplinary analysis faces the challenge of achieving cohesion and clarity without over-simplifying or diluting the contribution of each individual discipline. It is a test rarely satisfied completely, except perhaps in the planning and making of policy on matters that are principally technical in nature. Often, though, even the concept of collaboration poses a difficult initial barrier. A fundamental problem that needs to be confronted in promoting inter-disciplinary methodologies is that of language. This is a well-known issue, yet it continues to hamper the contribution of science to the planning process.[25] The challenge for the pure sciences, social sciences and planners is to break down the language barriers that hinder mutual understanding.

The art of systematic speculation

The third component of the humanitarian futures agenda posited here involves far greater attention to scenario-building. Planners and policy-makers are inhibited in their efforts to plan for the longer term because of their assumption that the future cannot be predicted. This reflects in part the linear thinking that requires a precise understanding of cause and effect. It also reflects an inherent organisational resistance to ambiguity. And yet, as one study of the future consequences of climate change suggests, the only way to develop the means to deal with the possible consequences of such change is to identify 'a sequence of steps, each with associated uncertainties'. The first emissions of greenhouse gases and aerosols need to be specified, but so too does their dependence on *unknown* socio-economic behaviour. These unknowns can be tackled by using scenarios designed to produce indicative, rather than definitive, analysis.[26]

The scenario – both as a concept and as a practical planning device – accepts the value of *relative probabilities*. In other words, one accepts the need to plan based on a set of compelling probabilities, rather than definitive explanations. Scenario planning is one expression of this. It begins by making assumptions, and tracking them through different 'worlds' to give an array of possibilities. At the same time, it is used to provide 'high-level descriptions that help to clarify very long-term strategic direction, threats and opportunities'.[27] The point is to 'challenge our preconceptions about how things will develop – not to predict the future, but to give an array of future worlds that seem to flow from these assumptions'.[28]

Managers normally react against probability-based scenarios: when it comes to assigning probabilities, 'Many managers fall back into their binary view of uncertainty – and throw up their hands'.[29] In a situation of rapid change and complexity, and one in which non-linearity provides the framework for understanding, one can no longer resist anticipating the future simply because the future cannot be definitively 'proven'. Planning for that future will have to begin with the flexibility, receptivity and creativity that come from tools such as probability-based scenarios. Their effective use will in turn be dependent upon organisational dynamics that maintain such on-going planning processes as a central organisational function.

Essential institutional adjustments

None of these adjustments can have overall value unless their consequences feed into an organisation's decision-making processes. This paper has made reference to the divisions between strategic planning, policy formulation and decision-making. Such divisions frequently occur because of the perceived distinction between the immediate and the speculative, and between the practical and the conceptual. These sorts of distinctions – though understandable – create the narrow prisms that this paper suggests dull responsive capacities. There are ways to reduce the negative implications of these sharp structural divides, if incorporated with the three previous proposals.

- *Reduce the impact of unanticipated strategic options*. Those responsible for strategic planning and policy formulation need to communicate regularly with decision-makers to ensure that 'the future' fits into a pattern of events that will not come as a surprise. In a recent review of approaches to strategic planning in post-conflict environments, representatives of the British Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development agreed that one of the difficulties facing decision-makers is that issues and options with which they are not familiar are 'dropped on them' without any frame of reference. In that sense, lack of familiarity relates to what earlier has been described as perceived utility and relevance. Decision-makers working under extreme pressure are inclined to discard issues and options with which they are not familiar. A way around this barrier would be to introduce means by which senior decision-makers were regularly briefed on trends and their implications – in order to enhance their familiarity with them and reduce the potential dissonance created by unanticipated analysis, options and proposals.[30] In turn, it is incumbent on decision-makers to make it clear that *speculation* is a central function in the organisation, and crucial to its survival.

- *Communicating the centrality of speculation*. While in most organisations only a relatively few people will be interested in becoming involved in 'blue sky thinking', an effective organisation in the future will be sure of two things. First, it will be sure that everyone in the organisation knows that long-range strategic analysis and planning are valued by the organisation, and that it is part of the organisation's ethos. Second, it will find ways to foster that ethos, for example by promoting knowledge networks and communities of practice.

- *Eliminating functions that create unnecessary closure*. Organisations require decisions. They function least effectively in environments of ambiguity. Hence, the future as described in this paper will require organisations to be far more adept at handling uncertainty and far more willing to be flexible, both administratively and programmatically. A starting point is to assess the various types and levels of pressure that determine why and when decisions are taken. Unnecessary closure is due to various factors. Inflexible budgeting procedures, disconnections between programme objectives and project targets and 'bottom line'-driven determinants all restrict the organisation's access to information and its willingness to deal with new or discrepant information. The obvious tension is between the need to make decisions, and the need to understand the basis and context for those decisions. And yet there are probably few instances when greater consultation and collaboration, within the organisation and between organisations, would probably have not resulted in better long-term responses. In the world of humanitarian response, this would clearly seem to be the case. More careful analyses of local distribution systems and indigenous coping mechanisms, as well as greater attention to communicating with vulnerable communities, would be likely to lead to more effective and appropriate assistance.

Fiona Terry suggests that the humanitarian community needs to concentrate 'on hard-headed assessments of needs and options' rather than 'accepting the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action to disguise overt political ends or a lack of political interest'.[31] In a related sense, humanitarian organisations need to take a hard-headed look at those factors that restrict their willingness to explore options, or that lead them to precipitous action in the face of unknowns that still need to be explored. The humanitarian futures agenda reflects a fundamental concern that human vulnerability may not receive the attention it requires because of the inability of assistance organisations to adapt to changing circumstances. This agenda is ultimately about the steps that need to be taken to make planners and policy-makers more adaptive to the type of rapid change and complexity that could otherwise leave human-kind more disaster- and emergency-prone.

Notes

1 Personal communication, 29 January 2004.

2 *State of the World's Newborns* (Washington DC: Save the Children, 2001), p. 6.

3 The author is grateful for the views and insights provided by Anne Tinker of Save the Children. The interpretation of the strategic implications of this major child/maternal health programme is, however, the author's.

4 For more on the Healthy Newborn Partnership, contact hnp@dc.savethe children.org.

5 Sanders notes that the 'emerging reality, though, is that the world does not function in a linear fashion, and increasing evidence supports the proposition that the dynamics of all matter is essentially "non-linear". That is to say that "chaos theory" [i.e., "dynamical systems theory"] suggests that most systems rarely settle into a steady state: they are constantly adjusting to new information at various levels. The organisational proclivity to structure its planning and response mechanism in a linear fashion may well go counter to newer understandings about universal dynamics'. See T. I. Sanders, *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity and Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), pp. 50ff.

6 *Ibid*.

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17 Narbeth, *The Targeting of Emergency Food Distribution in Somalia*.

18 Lecture note by T. Homer-Dixon, *The Real Danger of the 21st Century*, as part of a series on Security for a New Century, sponsored by the bipartisan study group for the US Congress, 1 December 2003.

19 H. Mintzberg, 'The Structuring of Organisations', in D. Asch and C. Bowman, *Readings in Strategic Management* (London: Macmillan Education, 1989). A growing number of academic and policy institutes focus on ways to enhance the adaptive capacities of organisations in the private or public sector. One example is IBM's Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity (www-1.ibm.com/services/ cynefin/index.htm). The common thread among many such innovative organisations is that the standard approach – principally concerned with institutional structures – is failing to enhance the responsive capacities needed in organisations of the future.

20 T. Jones, *Innovating at the Edge*, pp. 14ff.

21 R. Leifer et al., *Radical Innovation: How Mature Companies Can Outsmart Upstarts* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

22 J. D. Wolpert, 'Breaking Out of the Innovation Box', *Harvard Business Review*, Special Innovation Edition, vol. 80, no. 8, August 2002, p. 78.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 81ff.

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