

Part I: Introduction and Background

Chapter 1

Emergency Response and Preparedness as a Common Challenge for the EU and the U.S.

*Julia Steets*¹

Fighting in Sri Lanka and Gaza, ongoing conflicts in Sudan, renewed hostilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Hurricane Gustav, floods in India and China, the earthquake in Sichuan, and Cyclones Nargis and Sidr—these are only some of the better known events in recent memory that have wreaked havoc. The world has to deal with increasingly complex emergencies, a continuously high number of armed conflicts, as well as a rapidly increasing incidence of natural disasters in the wake of climate change. While the numbers fluctuate, an average of around 30 armed wars or internal conflicts has been counted each year since the end of World War II.² At the same time, the annual number of recorded natural and technological disasters has risen from around 30–40 after World War II to an average of well over 400 today, though some of this increase is due to improved reporting practices.³ Due to population growth, these crises are affecting ever more people.

Donors and relief agencies are struggling to prepare for and respond to these increasing numbers of emergencies. The European Union (EU) and the United States of America (U.S.) recognize that effective emergency relief and preparedness policies are crucial not only for protecting their own populations against hazards, but also for enhancing their images abroad, strengthening stability and security, and controlling migration. The transatlantic partners play a critical role in the current system of humanitarian assistance. Together, they provide almost two thirds of global humanitarian funding. Through their participation in and influence on multilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives, they help to shape the norms and practices of the global humanitarian system. Moreover, they have an extensive field presence in countries repeatedly affected by crises, which enables them to have a direct impact on humanitarian activities on the ground.

¹ The author is grateful for the research inputs to this and the next chapter by Claire Clement.

² Armed conflict is defined as a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. Based on this definition, the yearly average of armed conflicts was only 18 in the decades immediately following World War II. After the end of the Cold War, conflicts increased significantly to around 45 per year. Within the last decade, this number has come down again to 34.5, thus approaching the post-World War II average of 31. See Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg & Håvard Strand, “Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset.” *Journal of Peace Research* 39(5): 615–637 (2002); and www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets (last accessed February 23, 2009).

³ See EM_DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, available at www.emdat.be (last accessed February 23, 2009). The data base includes events that fulfil at least one of the following criteria: 10 or more people reported killed; 100 people affected; declaration of a state of emergency; call for international assistance. The trend is not only apparent in developing countries and emerging markets, but also in industrialized countries. For the US, for example, FEMA records an average of 55 declared emergencies over the last decade. In the 1950s and 1960s, an average of only 16 or 17 disasters were declared each year. See http://www.fema.gov/news/disaster_totals_annual.fema (last accessed February 23, 2009).

The EU and the U.S. are close partners in responding to emergencies on the ground. Yet, their approaches to humanitarian assistance differ, with the EU adopting a more principled and the U.S. a more pragmatic stance. Transatlantic cooperation in the field of humanitarian assistance is further hampered by political differences concerning issues such as food aid; a lack of transparency and mutual understanding with respect to the roles and responsibilities of the multiple agencies involved in humanitarian assistance; and the limited nature of current strategic dialogues between the two partners.

By working more closely together, the EU and the U.S. could learn from each other's experiences and improve their humanitarian policies and practices. Enhanced cooperation would also allow them to adopt more coherent policies and define a better division of labor, thus avoiding unnecessary duplication, as well as mutually counterproductive activities. Together, they would exert greater influence over the humanitarian system as a whole and could provide a valuable impetus for learning and reform.

The transatlantic partners currently have a window of opportunity for enhancing their cooperation in emergency relief and preparedness and for helping to improve the humanitarian system. This chapter argues that they should seize that opportunity, while the remainder of the book examines how and in which areas they can do so.

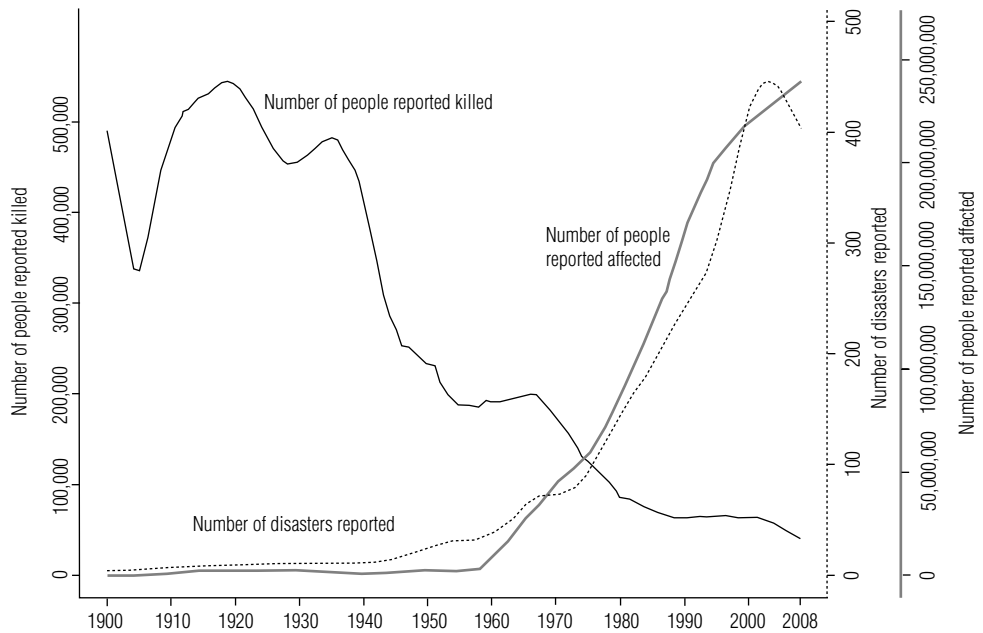
Achievements of the Humanitarian System

With growing need, changes on the world political stage, and an enhanced recognition of the strategic importance of humanitarian policy, humanitarian assistance has moved from the fringes to the center of political attention.⁴ A flurry of actors now populates what used to be the preserve of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Most major donor governments now have institutions or departments, as well as policies for humanitarian assistance. Multilateral agencies and NGOs are joined by the military and business organizations in delivering humanitarian assistance. To deal with this growing institutional diversity, mechanisms aimed at assisting coordination have been created, most notably the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). The humanitarian system now commands an impressive amount of resources. For 2006, total humanitarian assistance was estimated at \$14.2 billion. Governments contributed \$9.2 billion, up from around \$500 million per year in the late 1970s, \$1 billion in the mid 1980s and \$2 billion in the early 1990s.⁵

These developments, coupled with slowly increasing professionalism among humanitarian agencies, have led to striking results. As the graph illustrates, the number of natural disasters

⁴ This and the following paragraphs draw heavily on Peter Walker and Daniel Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2009), esp. pp. 136-153. See also Antonio Donini, et al, *The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise* (Medford and Addis Ababa: Feinstein International Center, 2008).

⁵ See Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2007/2008* (Somerset: 2008). For 2006, government contributions to humanitarian assistance amounted to roughly 9% of total foreign assistance budgets. The Financial Tracking System on OCHA records contributions reported by governments and recipient agencies. It contains lower figures and reports \$7.6 billion in 2006, \$7.8 billion in 2007, and \$11.9 billion in 2008. Available at <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts> (last accessed June 2009).

Figure 1. Trends in Natural Disasters (1900–2008)

(many of which are caused or triggered by humans), as well as the number of people affected by disasters, has been growing exponentially since the 1960s. Due to improvements in domestic and international emergency relief and preparedness systems, the number of people reported killed by these disasters has at the same time decreased significantly.

Challenges for Humanitarian Assistance

Despite these impressive achievements, humanitarian actors are confronted with important challenges. They need to step up their efforts and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their activities to be able to assist the rapidly growing number of people affected by emergencies. Humanitarian donors and implementing agencies are, however, currently undergoing an identity crisis that undermines their ability to effectively address these challenges. This identity crisis results from developments that put humanitarian principles under pressure and reduce humanitarian space.

The humanitarian enterprise is built around a set of principles that enjoy almost universal support around the globe.⁶ These principles are:⁷

⁶ Donini, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁷ The following definition of the humanitarian principles draws on the principles of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative.

- Humanity: Saving lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found.
- Impartiality: Implementing actions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations.
- Neutrality: Not favoring any side in an armed conflict or other dispute where humanitarian action is carried out.
- Independence: Safeguarding the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

They are reflected in international humanitarian law, based on the Geneva Conventions, and have been confirmed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991),⁸ the principles of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (2003), the European Consensus on Humanitarian Assistance (2007), and key humanitarian policy documents on both sides of the Atlantic. The principles have also been explicitly endorsed by the Group of 77 and China.⁹

While these principles are seen as constitutive by many humanitarian actors, recent developments have undermined them. Many humanitarian actors are struggling to follow the humanitarian imperative and to provide assistance impartially and on the basis of need. This is less due to dilemmas inherent in the principles of humanity and impartiality than to operational difficulties in translating the principles into practice and in delivering assistance in an effective and efficient way. These problems are linked to a learning disability that exists in most policy fields, but is particularly pronounced in humanitarianism. Humanitarian action often takes place in what Weiss and Hoffman have termed “the fog of humanitarianism.”¹⁰ Humanitarian organizations focus on crises and therefore tend to have a short-term orientation. Though increasing over recent years, the action-oriented mindset of humanitarianism traditionally puts a low premium on analysis, evaluation, and critical feedback. Learning is further inhibited by rapid staff turnover and resulting problems of knowledge management. Humanitarian organizations have sought to counter these problems by creating standards.¹¹ While these are beginning to show results, many humanitarian organizations continue to face difficulties when it comes to implementing lessons learned to respond more accurately, effectively, and efficiently to the needs of affected populations.

The notion of neutrality has become problematic in an era dominated by internal, asymmetric conflicts strongly involving and affecting civilian populations. Particularly in conflict situations and complex emergencies, which are primarily man-made, but also involve elements of natural disasters, a strict interpretation of the principle of neutrality prevents humanitarian organizations from addressing the root causes of emergencies and from dealing with issues

⁸ UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991) makes no reference to the principle of independence.

⁹ The Group of 77 and China endorse the principles of neutrality, humanity and impartiality as set out in resolution 46/182. Cf. e.g. Statement by Ambassador Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, Chairman of the Group of 77, before the General Assembly, 11 November 2004.

¹⁰ See T.G. Weiss and P.J. Hoffman, “The Fog of Humanitarianism: Collective Action Problems and Learning-Challenged Organizations,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 47-65 (2007).

¹¹ This includes for example the Sphere Project’s Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response; and ALNAP’s Quality Proforma for humanitarian evaluations.

connected to social inequality, political suppression, or human rights violations. As a result, similar emergencies are recurring time and again, incurring a large human cost. At the same time, the appearance of neutrality has been critical to ensure that all parties respect humanitarian agencies, grant them access to difficult situations, and protect their security. A recent report on the situation of aid workers in insecure environments finds a marked increase in the number of attacks on aid workers in recent years. The report argues that this increase occurred not only because aid workers were perceived to be cooperating with Western political actors, but also because they were seen as part of a Western agenda.¹² Moreover, the rising financial stakes of the humanitarian enterprise have further encouraged taking aid workers hostage.

The principle of independence is also being questioned.¹³ As governments increasingly recognize the importance of soft power—their ability to convince rather than coerce others, which hinges strongly on reputation—and the potential effects of humanitarian activities on international, as well as domestic stability and security, humanitarian assistance has come to enjoy heightened political visibility and relevance. On the one hand, this is one of the factors explaining why the international community is now contributing so many more resources to humanitarian assistance than just a decade or two ago. On the other hand, it means that security and other political and economic concerns are encroaching upon humanitarian space. While humanitarian assistance has always been and should be “political,” this development means that other objectives could come to dominate the humanitarian goals of saving lives and alleviating human suffering. It is only in this sense that a “politicization” of humanitarian assistance undermines the humanitarian principle of independence.

The tensions surrounding the principles of neutrality and independence become apparent in a number of concrete questions that are at the core of current humanitarian debates. One of these issues is the challenge of linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (LRRD). Faced with a large and further increasing number of protracted crises and complex emergencies, many actors are calling for stronger linkages between humanitarian assistance and development. These linkages are necessary to better address root causes, to ensure that humanitarian and development programs do not undermine each other, and to enhance the complementarity or even continuity of assistance programs. At the same time, however, stronger linkages imply a blurring of boundaries between humanitarianism and other policy areas and reduce the autonomy of humanitarian action. LRRD therefore extends possibilities for including other (non-humanitarian) objectives into the assistance equation and may mean that humanitarian actors have to take sides in controversial situations.

Another issue highlighting the dilemmas relating to the principles of neutrality and independence is the role new actors play in humanitarian assistance. Over recent years, not only NGOs and governments have strengthened their involvement in humanitarian assistance, but also business organizations and the military. New actors provide welcome additional resources,

¹² See Stoddard, Harver, DiDomenico, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update*, HPG Policy Brief 34, April 2009 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2009).

¹³ The United Nations, which delivers the lion’s share of humanitarian assistance, traditionally acts as a guardian of humanitarian independence. More recently, however, it has succumbed to the temptation of using humanitarian assistance for ulterior purposes. Thus, for example, the UN office in Somalia has been withholding humanitarian assistance to put pressure on pirates to release international hostages. See Wayne Long, “Gang Up on Pirates,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2009.

capacity, and innovation to the humanitarian enterprise. Yet, their activities are typically guided by other motivations—making a profit in the case of business and security concerns in the case of the military. Moreover, especially the military is rarely regarded as a neutral actor. As a result, strongly involving business and military actors involves a trade-off between mobilizing additional skills and resources and respecting the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence.

The number of people requiring humanitarian assistance has risen dramatically over the last decades and is likely to grow even further as population growth continues and as the effects of climate change manifest themselves. To respond to these needs, humanitarian actors have to expand their engagement and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of their activities. In doing so, they need to address the tensions surrounding the humanitarian principles. This requires making tough choices. Humanitarian actors, including donors and implementing agencies, can either adopt a strict interpretation of the humanitarian principles to protect their credibility and humanitarian space, while accepting the narrow mandate that this implies. A second option is to widen their mandate to be able to address root causes, build local capacity and ownership, and link relief to development. This, however, will further blur the distinction between humanitarian assistance and other policy areas and is likely to exacerbate access and security problems. Humanitarian actors could also claim strict adherence to the humanitarian principles, while expanding activities and mandates in practice. The contradictions inherent in this approach, though, will lead to a loss of credibility, as well as to operational problems.

The Need for a Transatlantic Response

The EU and the U.S. should jointly spearhead this effort. For better or worse, the EU and the U.S. currently dominate the humanitarian system. They are the largest donors of humanitarian assistance, with the U.S. making the single largest contribution, followed by the European Commission and several EU member states. Together, they account for almost two thirds of total humanitarian assistance. Moreover, the transatlantic partners and their allies wield significant influence over multilateral institutions and multi-stakeholder initiatives—ranging from the United Nations system to the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHDI) and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)—and thus contribute to shaping the norms and practices of the humanitarian system as a whole. Finally, both the U.S. and the European Commission have a significant presence in the field, which allows them to draw on operational experience when formulating policies and to directly shape field practice through them.

In short, significant changes to the humanitarian system need active involvement and support from the U.S. and the EU. Failure by these two parties to enhance their cooperation and improve their humanitarian policies, in turn, would have negative consequences. It would result in additional, yet avoidable, human death and suffering, damage the global reputation of the transatlantic partners, and could lead to increased insecurity and instability across the globe, threatening U.S. and EU strategic interests.

Currently, the EU and the U.S. face an important opportunity for tackling global challenges in a cooperative way. Over the past few years, the transatlantic partners struggled with political differences on key issues in humanitarian assistance, including for example on whether or not humanitarian activities should be linked to security, foreign policy and economic goals; how to engage with the business community and the military; and how to provide assistance such as food aid most effectively. Pragmatic cooperation continued on the ground, but it was overshadowed by those larger issues, which undermined the will of a number of officials to cooperate and severed many working-level contacts. Now, political leadership on both sides is changing. A strong impetus for renewed and enhanced cooperation is emanating from the new U.S. Administration under the leadership of President Barack Obama. In 2009, a newly elected European Parliament and newly constituted European Commission will begin their terms. With these political changes, both the policies and the institutions for designing and delivering humanitarian assistance are under scrutiny and may be subject to reforms. The two sides have the opportunity to work closely together in carrying out these reforms. This would enable both sides to learn from each other and may in itself lead to greater policy coherence. The reforms also offer the chance to build in strengthened mechanisms for ongoing exchange and cooperation.

This book explores EU-U.S. cooperation in emergency relief and preparedness at this important crossroads for the transatlantic relationship and for the humanitarian system. After an introduction to humanitarian assistance by and between the European Commission and the U.S. Government, it focuses on critical issues confronting the humanitarian community today. How can donors dissipate the fog of humanitarianism to make their assistance more effective and efficient in addressing needs by implementing lessons learned? How can and should relief efforts be better linked to rehabilitation and development, given that development efforts are rarely neutral or independent of other policy objectives? And how should donors deal with new actors in the humanitarian field, notably with business and the military? This book dedicates one part to each of these questions. Each part contains one main chapter outlining key issues and summarizing findings, as well as four relevant case studies discussing these issues in settings ranging from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

