Global welfare: A realistic expectation for the international humanitarian system?

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1.1 Introduction

Expectations of international humanitarian aid have changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Aid budgets and aid organisations have got much bigger. Humanitarian action has come to occupy a more central place in world politics, both in the policy of powerful states and in increasingly powerful transnational movements in global society. The practice of humanitarian action – its values and its technique – is seeking to become more professionalised. The growing adoption of a political theory of rights, rather than charity, to justify humanitarian action has newly politicised humanitarian help in the minds of givers and receivers alike, both of whom increasingly expect aid to be given as an obligation under international law. In many ways, this growth can be interpreted as the emergence of a nascent global welfare system around war and disaster.

If there has been such a dramatic development in the humanitarian system in the last twenty years, what can we expect of the next twenty years? Jan Egeland, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, is clear about what he expects: 'We need a humanitarian system that is able to respond reliably, effectively and efficiently across the full range of emergencies. Now more than ever, humanitarian aid must be the responsibility of all nations for the benefit of all nations' (Egeland, 2006). Egeland's expectation is nothing less than global welfare and many other humanitarians share his view. Humanitarian agencies want to get bigger and better because they want to reach everyone in need and reach them well. Behind many of the efforts to expand and improve the humanitarian system is a desire to see some form of high-quality humanitarian support for everyone affected by war and disaster. Whether people are suffering as a result of mudslides in Central America or vicious displacement in Darfur, the humanitarian system wants to help them. Global wealth suggests that it can and global morality says that it should.

These are ambitious expectations for the humanitarian system and are not without real political, technical and organisational obstacles. Meeting them will inevitably require a focus on two areas – politics and practice. Any overall improvements in the humanitarian system are dependent, above all, on changes in the realm of politics where humanitarian aspirations can be enabled, obstructed or distorted. The realm of humanitarian-agency practice in which humanitarian organisations can professionalise, innovate, coordinate or fail is the second area that determines

improvement. Together, the outer realm of politics and the inner realm of practice are the separate and overlapping fields of humanitarian action.

ALNAP has now been reviewing humanitarian progress for the last five years. As ALNAP and others begin to assess the performance of the system in the next five years, it is surely sensible to step back and ask how realistic such high expectations are within international society or, at least, how we should calibrate our expectations as we move ahead to meet them. Perhaps ALNAP members are right to be judging the system against the highest expectations and the fullest vision of success. Their goals should certainly be informed by an ideal of some kind. Maybe ALNAP should temper such long-term ambition with more modest interim dials and benchmarks on their evaluator's dashboard. Or, perhaps the differences within international society are such that it is unwise ever to expect a functioning global system for anything that involves such massive competing interests as war, disasters and the world's fast-emerging environmental crisis.

In this chapter, I want to complement the detailed analysis of the system which follows in Chapters 2 and 3 with a more general examination of the political and practical assumptions which lie behind the call for global welfare in order to see if this expectation is realistic or misplaced. To do this, I will take a very broad view of the humanitarian system as it currently exists and performs in international society. From this wider view, I will suggest that humanitarian progress is best served by a deliberately strategic approach to very specific mid-range improvements which we can reasonably expect.

The rest of this chapter isdivided into three sections.

- Section 1.2 looks at a range of different possible expectations of the humanitarian system. It discusses various assumptions about the prospects of global humanitarian progress, and shows how each one inevitably leads to different measures of success depending on differing views of what is politically and practically possible.

- Section 1.3 looks at the system we have now. It gives a general description of the formal international humanitarian system, and its current performance problems, and then also describes other less well-recognised but very powerful informal systems of humanitarian action. These informal systems complement

the official system in many people's lives, but do not actively collaborate with it and may have interests in undermining it.

- Finally, Section 1.4 suggests taking a five-year view of what we can reasonably expect as humanitarian progress, and makes some general recommendations about how the system might usefully set, monitor and approach ten keynote objectives for improvement.

But, first, it is important to examine how much improvement in humanitarian action we can reasonably anticipate in the world around us.

1.2 Possible expectations of the humanitarian system

1.2.1 Humanitarian progress

There has long been a discussion in international relations about what exactly we can expect from international society. Is it realistic to judge international society on the same terms as we would a nation-state? Can the world ever be as organised and regulated as a single country? Can common agreements, a single rule of law and an effective form of government be upheld across the globe?

The whole impetus of the United Nations movement and much international NGO work is based upon a belief that such things are possible and that we are rightly, if falteringly, evolving towards a morally responsible form of global order. Many humanitarians naturally feel that, as a key part of this global political evolution, we should expect to see real progress in the fair and efficient provision of humanitarian aid worldwide. But should we? Is it realistic or helpful to have such expectations?

In its current form, the belief in reasonable progress towards a just global order is most obviously a product of the European Enlightenment. Although, of course, it has always had equivalent religious manifestations in some Christian and Islamic hopes for a world order overseen by Church or Caliph. In the Enlightenment and

throughout the modern era, many people have believed in the possibility of just global government and orderly relations between states.

The seventeenth-century Dutch scholar, Hugo Grotius, wrote his *Laws of War and Peace* in 1625. This treatise is widely regarded as the modern starting point for international laws and treaties that have increasingly bound nations into a reciprocal form of mutual respect and obligation. In 1795, the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant wrote his famous essay, *To Perpetual Peace*, which supported the conviction that nations would one day be able to live in an orderly law-abiding world based on common interests and shared values. More recently, in 1919, US President Wilson and others set up the League of Nations in Geneva, with the intent of making peace, prosperity and global order a reality – a vision that was later taken over by the United Nations. Contemporary philosophers like Richard Rorty and Amartya Sen have focused on the ideas of solidarity and rights as the political cement with which to build the necessary global consciousness to develop just international relations.

But these ideals of an orderly and well-governed world have always been challenged by other more realist or pessimistic visions. Many people think it foolish to expect that the world will ever become the global equivalent of one big nation-state with a responsible and effective global government of some kind that is accountable to all its citizens. Instead, they believe that international society will always be the ultimate arena for competition much more than for cooperation. Others think that the most we can expect from international society is a sort of benign international anarchy where states and peoples can make and keep some rules but never really be consistent, well organised or beholden to a single global authority. They might also add that such anarchy is the best way to defend against the possibility of a global government that could become autocratic, unrepresentative and hard to change.

A discussion of international relations is important to any discussion of the performance of the world's humanitarian agencies because international politics is implicit in almost every page of the chapters that follow. How we think the world works, or could work, will govern what we can reasonably expect of global humanitarian action. What we believe about the realistic prospects for global order, international consensus, equitable resource distribution and recognised legal authority determines how we will evaluate the current international system of humanitarian action. In short, how much we think the humanitarian system can be changed and improved depends on what we believe is possible of international society.

1.2.2 Political expectations

Depending on our view of international society, there are three main kinds of political expectations we might have of humanitarian action within the global system. Each of these perspectives is likely to make us judge the current humanitarian system rather differently.

1. An optimistic political view of international society regards the world as now willing and able to deliver impartial and effective humanitarian aid. This view leads to a harsh judgement of current humanitarian action because, as this review and all its predecessors show, it is obviously neither fair nor efficient.

2. A cautiously progressive view of international society sees it as gradually getting closer to a just global order. Anyone holding this view will probably be heartened by the steady if imperfect progress that humanitarian ideals are making in global consciousness, and the practical effect of humanitarian action in the lives of an increasing number of people. All the ALNAP reviews to date have identified serious problems in the politics and practice of humanitarian action but they also talk of progress in several areas.

3. A pessimistic view regards a just global order as unlikely. In this case, we may evaluate current humanitarian action rather favourably. We may be amazed that some governments are prioritising it at all, albeit sometimes distorting its ideals as they do so, and that so many agencies are trying to establish humanitarian work as an essential international obligation and a legitimate profession. We would not expect dramatic results from any project working in these conditions but might praise the almost foolhardy spirit of humanitarians to keep on working and trying to improve.

Reading between the lines of ALNAP's five reviews so far, and listening to statements of humanitarian leaders like Jan Egeland, it is the first of these views which tends to predominate in the humanitarian system's criticism of itself. Such optimists clearly believe that conditions are now riper than ever for achieving dramatic progress in a global humanitarian system. For the optimists, the unprecedented sufficiency of resources, communications, know-how and moral consensus make this a unique moment for realising the ideal of global welfare in war and disasters. Only the stubborn ox of political will seems to be evading the task.

However, with victories on landmines and the International Criminal Court already in their bag, humanitarian optimists think that even this most obstinate beast can be harnessed with sufficient public pressure and the realisation that disasters will be more frequent and much bigger as the environment wears out.

People who take this optimistic view and think that global order and shared international interests are now more realisable than ever must share Tony Vaux's obvious frustration in Chapter 2 and judge the recent performance of the international humanitarian system harshly. Vaux's excellent overview of evaluations from the last five years makes clear that current international and national politics mean that the system continually fails to work in an orderly, ethical and efficient fashion. Instead it is regularly distorted in the allocation of its resources, obstructed in its access or unprofessional in its practice.

Those who take a more cautious but still positive approach to the evolution of international society must expect any progress towards sufficient, fair and high-quality humanitarian action around the world to be slow but would still expect the trend in performance to be essentially upwards. From this perspective, the overview in Chapter 2 is not too depressing. Despite perennial political distortions and continuing operational failings, the humanitarian system seems to be in great demand by certain governments and publics who want to fund it and use it more than ever to help millions of strangers around the world.

Less clear is whether the people on the receiving end of the system are getting what they want and need. Many are not getting nearly enough while others are not being asked if what they did receive was useful. However, there is no doubt from the various evaluations that have been examined in this ALNAP review, and from the general discussion around humanitarian action today, that the profession is more self-conscious and sophisticated in its understanding of itself than ever before. It knows what it needs to know and do to improve. The problem is – as both Tony Vaux and Peta Sandison point out in the following chapters – that the system is not very good at acting on what it knows. Good intentions get crowded out and make learning and improvement genuinely difficult locally and globally.

From a pessimistic perspective of the prospects for an orderly international society, things look different again. If we expect the world always to be essentially anarchical and dominated by a diverse mix of competing powers, interests and ideals, then we

would draw a more tolerant conclusion about the continuing political distortions and operational failures revealed in this new ALNAP review. We would not judge the system and its agencies so harshly. We would have to conclude that the very idea of organised, impartial and effective international humanitarian action is a very high ideal never likely to be fulfilled as we would wish. As a result, we might observe that international humanitarian action is neither all bad nor all good but that it is, at least, the preoccupation and preserve of a few powerful Western governments and their publics who believe in its ideals and pay most of its bills even if they also use it as a part of their wider foreign policies.

The inevitable range of competing and diverse political interests in the world means that we should not be surprised at the number of other powerful states who ignore this particular international humanitarian project. Many do not join in with it, are excluded from its Western club or actively seek to block and undermine it. Most obviously, states like China, Russia, India, Brazil and several rich Muslim states are notable by their absence from the centre of the formal system and do not pay much towards it. In their own systems, they too are highly selective about the wars and disasters with which they actively engage. Fairness and efficiency are not key criteria for them either.

India and Pakistan limit their humanitarian engagement but make significant peacekeeping contributions to the UN and play important roles in discussions of natural disasters from which they often suffer. Arab and other mainly Muslim states tend to focus their humanitarian advocacy and donations on wars which involve Israel or the USA fighting Muslim populations. They keep relatively quiet about and give very little to wars like those in Darfur and the DRC. China and Russia both explicitly equate much international humanitarian action with Western imperialism and prefer to focus on their own bilateral trade and aid relations to secure their own growing interests in Africa and Asia.

In short, we cannot evaluate progress in the fairness and effectiveness of international humanitarian action unless we have a baseline of what we can reasonably expect from it, within the wider political context. It would be the same with the speed of a 5000-metre runner. It would be impossible to judge her performance without knowing if she were running uphill all the way, over stony ground or along a smooth, flat track. A speed which would be slow on the flat might be pretty good if running uphill most of the way. Similarly, before we judge the humanitarian system we must be honest about our own political assumptions about

international society. Is the humanitarian system being asked to perform uphill, on stony ground or on a nice, smooth track? How we answer this question will determine how we judge the performance of the system.

1.2.3 Agency and recipient expectations

One of the interesting things about the last fifteen years of humanitarian action has been the determination of some parts of the system – initially the NGOs and then government donors and UN agencies – to be more explicit about what they expect from the humanitarian system through the Code of Conduct, various quality standards and the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. ALNAP's five reports to date have also made an important contribution to the clarification of the system's expectation of itself. The very process of doing syntheses of evaluation findings from the whole sector has helped to reveal many assumptions of perfection that exist in the industry on a whole range of issues. What evaluators keep identifying as wrong clearly reveals what they think is both right and possible.

All together, the standard setting, evaluation and discussion of improvement within the humanitarian community leaves an unambiguous message: that the global expectations of the humanitarian profession are very high across a vast range of people's needs and that they are, in many ways, equal to a standard of service expected within a modern state. Deep down, it seems that many people inside the humanitarian community expect the international humanitarian system to be a global emergency service that is as fair and effective as the combined ambulance, police and fire services of a modern state. This is a deliberate exaggeration but it serves to reveal the high standards expected by many humanitarian advocates as a simple matter of equal rights for all people worldwide.

Equally interesting, however, and a recurrent theme in the pages that follow, is that we really have a view of only the expectations of the providers in this system. Still, after many years of emphasising their importance, we have only the slightest inkling of the expectations of the recipients of humanitarian aid and protection – the people who actually suffer from war and disaster. These people are the real customers or end-users of humanitarian action. Any business or profession knows that it cannot hope to succeed without knowing what its clients, patients or customers actually need and want. If the last few years have been critical for revealing what

humanitarians expect from the system, their expectations must now be compared rigorously and routinely with those on the receiving end.

This is where the current discussion of need – which is rightly given so much importance in Chapter 2 – is critical. The international humanitarian system needs some credible measure of global needs which gives a continuous sense of its targets and its bottom line. Other parts of the international system – like the World Bank and UNDP – are able to estimate and aggregate a variety of socio-economic standards like the cost of living, parity of purchasing power between nations, the quality-of-life indicators and the human development index. It should not be difficult for humanitarians to work with these institutions and regional organisations to develop a similar scale for calculating generic need in war and disasters, then costing them according to different settings.

Such a system would be more sophisticated and more transparent than the current UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) which is so subjective and potentially self-interested. The CAP system involves those institutions with most interest in receiving the funds also being most responsible for calculating the needs. A pre-designed empirical calculation of need would be more scientific. It would allow the system to anticipate and prepare more coherently in advance of crises. It would also counter skewed public sentiment with scientific precision to prevent the absurdity of such imbalances as those between the Tsunami response and the DRC response. A humanitarian system that has aspirations to be a global system must have a clear and convincing way of describing its priorities, even if they are not met.

1.3 Global humanitarian systems

If the previous section describes the different expectations we may have for global humanitarian action in international society, it is now important to compare these with the system we actually have at the moment. To do so, I will paint a general portrait of the formal international system as it exists in international society today, and then also make some smaller sketches of several other, more informal global aid systems which are also emerging fast around war and disaster.

By the formal system, I mean the mainly Western-funded humanitarian system which works closely within or in coordination with the international authority of the United Nations and Red Cross movements. It therefore includes the great number of non-governmental organisations who take some funds and some policy direction from governments who invest mainly in this system, as well as also many other funds from individual private donors. By the informal system, I mean other large and organised aid flows which go to people affected by war and disaster but which do not go through the formal UN-centric system.

1.3.1 The formal international humanitarian system

Stepping back from the formal humanitarian system, the first thing we see from afar is the attempt by about twenty morally earnest and politically driven European and North American states to develop a rudimentary global welfare system that can provide a high-quality safety net for people suffering from war and disaster around the world. Already, they have achieved remarkable things. Almost every war or natural disaster now receives the attention of this nascent welfare system, usually mediated in some way through the international authority of the United Nations or the Red Cross movement. Significant and routine transfers of resources, equipment and expertise mean that millions of people receive help from this system every day.

Looking back further to the roots of this endeavour, we can see its origins in a variety of earlier nineteenth-century European and North American engagements with war, colonialism, anti-colonialism and the poverty of their own societies. From its mixed genesis in the Red Cross movement, international mission, colonial administration, independence movements, social reform and radical solidarity groups, the humanitarian system is now organising itself as an emerging form of global welfare. This emerging system is coming under increasing pressure to model itself on the elaborate needs-based and means-tested state provision that has become a feature of the political traditions of these countries. In line with progressive welfare theory, the formal humanitarian system also aims to inculcate a notion of rights, duties, self-help, economic opportunity and accountability into the societies in which it works.

The formal humanitarian system has a range of operators. It is currently managed mainly by the UN (an explicitly governmental organisation and the prototype of an

international civil service) and the Red Cross movement (an international network of government auxiliaries and volunteers). It also relies on a growing number of more or less independent NGO agencies which use both private and government money. All these implementers receive firm policy instructions from the humanitarian departments of their donor governments, although much of this policy is worked out in a continuous policy dialogue between donors and providers. UN agencies are complete subcontractors of the system while non-governmental and Red Cross/Crescent organisations operate independently or as semi-independent subcontractors.

The donor governments at the core of the system use this emerging global welfare system as a moral end in itself to help people in distress but also instrumentally as one of several foreign-policy instruments to secure their own democratic political influence wherever possible. In doing so, they work hard to apply humanitarian aid and ideals to stop other people's wars and to mitigate their own. Humanitarian aid is often a first step in a much deeper political project to transform a society in crisis. To some humanitarians, this dual use of humanitarian aid is a sinister mixed motive, but to the governments themselves, many of their taxpayers and not a few aid recipients, it seems like a natural win–win: a strategy for saved lives and improved politics. UN agencies and most NGOs share similar double objectives wherever they engage.

As it has developed in recent years, the formal system has adopted many of the routine practices of modern welfare provision in Western states. It has become increasingly concerned about its principles and the quality of its services. It wants to make decisions fairly, do things well and be able to prove its results in some good scientific reporting. To this end, it has tried to adopt a modern bureaucratic model of management and organisation to shape and sharpen its fast-growing organisations whose smaller antecedents were originally based on simpler notions of charity, volunteerism, activism and social service.

This organisational transformation has been deeply challenging to many humanitarian organisations of the late twentieth century – just as it was for the many nineteenth-century educational, medical and labour charities who were absorbed, modernised or rendered redundant by the emergence of state welfare in twentieth-century Europe or its commercial equivalent in the USA. Many of today's agencies – UN and NGO – continue to resist what they see as absorption into an essentially

government system that they cannot control. They have been particularly alarmed at possible co-option by these governments into ambiguous political agendas around war and disaster. In response, all UN agencies and most NGOs have settled for a compromise whereby they 'roll with the punch' on the big political emergencies but also speak out about forgotten emergencies with equal vigour to assert their commitment to global fairness. A few – like Medecins sans Frontieres and Oxfam GB – have gone further and refused Western government funds in wars where the donors themselves have been outright belligerents.

As the system has grown, the number of agencies has grown with it. Many new national and international humanitarian agencies have been formed so that the humanitarian profession is now crowded. Commercial companies and military forces have also established their credentials as contractors for humanitarian funds. But, still, the so-called 'international humanitarian system' has remained deeply parochial in its European and North American core. These governments have shown no obvious interest in going on a recruiting drive to bring in new governments as members of the system. Counter-balancing efforts by a few progressive NGOs to form wider global movements of popular humanitarian concern and funding have not yet risen to match the resources and power of the core humanitarian states.

This quick sketch of the formal system as it looks today reveals how politically and culturally specific this system really is. The formal humanitarian system is really 'our' system – I think I can assume that most readers of the RHA will be from within this system, not from the informal systems mentioned below. Although this UN-centric system reaches out to many different cultures and works within them, it is a very Western affair, as the TEC evaluation indicates so clearly in its analysis of Western aid overpowering local institutions. It works wherever it can in international society but is not really owned by all of international society. Indeed, a wider look at international society reveals that this very European and North American system is not the only global humanitarian project. There are others which are possibly even bigger and faster but not necessarily fairer or better in terms of impartial needs assessment, professional technique or capacity-building.

1.3.2 Informal international humanitarian systems

The formal humanitarian system may well be seen by states and individuals not party to it – usually by choice more than discrimination – as a relatively closed and particularly Western system. Many of these other states and individuals obviously prefer to provide humanitarian aid through other highly organised political funding systems or looser social networks. ALNAP is not in the business of evaluating these other systems, but it is important to be aware of them to see if they offer a site of fruitful learning or collaboration for the formal system, and also to understand how they might undermine Western ambitions for a formal global system.

First, there is the Islamic system that operates in the less bureaucratic but often even more welfarist Muslim tradition of *zakat*. Muslims make up the largest proportion of humanitarian aid recipients today and Muslim states and Muslim people give billions of dollars in aid when they are politically or emotionally moved to do so. Like the Western system, the Islamic system is a mix of government and private donors and is also highly political in its giving. It may not give much to Darfur, where Muslims are killing Muslims, but it certainly gives lots to Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq if Israelis or Americans are killing Muslims. The Islamic system can give freely and fast (if not necessarily professionally), without the bureaucratic statist culture of the Western system. For example, while the Western system has spent years discussing, researching and piloting the morality and efficiency of giving cash relief in emergencies, Hizbollah gave out $12,000 in cash to every war-affected household in southern Lebanon within days of the recent ceasefire.

Direct cash giving is a feature of another important humanitarian system in international society – the widespread practice of sending remittances. Most remittances support the development needs of peacetime families, but a significant amount contribute to and are increased during the emergency relief efforts of individual families in many parts of the world when war or disaster strikes. Partial by nature, this system is not strictly humanitarian either, but it can have a significant effect in crisis alleviation. Recent research by Tufts University shows that the dramatic decrease in remittances from Sudanese migrant labourers in Libya to their families in Darfur, after border closures in 2003 and Libyan restrictions on migration, was a massive blow to the livelihoods of thousands of families (Young et al, 2005, chapter 5). If sustained, these remittances could have been a vital source of

aid. The Tsunami evaluation also identified the importance of remittances without being able to quantify the flow of funds involved (Flint and Goyder, 2006, pp 27–28).

Several states are also much more active outside the formal system than within it. China's increased engagement with Africa and Central Asia has a humanitarian dimension which is strictly bilateral but often critical in the recovery and reconstruction stage as it provides new roads, power plants, other vital infrastructure and (highly conditional) loans. In certain places, Russia plays a similar role and India seems curious to start. Regional powers like South Africa, Nigeria, Malaysia, Iran and Venezuela may also play aid or rehabilitation roles that escape the accounting process of the Western system.

Finally, of course, as the Tsunami evaluation and the recent war in Lebanon showed so clearly, there is the enormous front-line role of local humanitarian systems. This vast and largely invisible system includes: host families who take in IDPs; neighbours who rescue their fellow villagers and families; friends and employers who help people with cash, goods or labour at critical moments of survival.

Looking at the variety of international humanitarian systems in this way, it is clear that Western-funded humanitarian action occupies a well-organised and far reaching niche in international society. It makes a point of working through the United Nations, the Red Cross and formal NGOs and so has international legality and legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of states. It has a particularly modern scientific way of operating but does not live up to all of its high ideals. At the moment, it has not convinced many other powerful states and movements within international society to join it fully. Many seem to prefer to operate their own systems even if the Western system takes much of the limelight in the global media.

Many people within Western humanitarian agencies are mesmerised by 'our system' and its apparent importance, but other political forces may remain untouched by it or infuriated by its pretension. Some very serious powers have no desire to see the Western system become the global welfare system of tomorrow. This has important implications for those who have global expectations of the formal system.

1.3.3 Expectations of humanitarian practice

This description of the outer political realm of the formal system is incomplete without a similar picture of its inner organisational realm of practice. As with politics, so too with practice – the expectations of evaluators are high not least because many operational problems cannot be blamed on politics. Certainly, as Vaux points out in Chapter 2, political pressure bears down on humanitarian agencies when donors are in a hurry, as in Afghanistan or the Tsunami response. Resistant armed groups and governments regularly stop agencies from working as they want to. Too much money or too little money from donors each brings problems of its own. Yet, the five-year trail of ALNAP evaluation syntheses still consistently suggests that, regardless of politics, agencies could much improve their day-to-day practice. This is undoubtedly true.

ALNAP's findings repeatedly confirm not just the same structural political flaws in the global fairness of humanitarian action, but also perennial problems in its professionalism and efficiency. The problems of neither politics nor practice are new. The most superficial glance at humanitarian history reveals that the modern humanitarian movement has always struggled on both fronts. If one reads accounts of Save the Children's relief operation in the Russian civil war of 1921, UN work in the Ethiopian famine of 1984 or this year's joint evaluation of the Tsunami response, each one laments the political interference of donor and recipient governments and the constantly debilitating operational effects of, for example, high staff turnover alongside the other constant operational difficulties.

Evaluations of the formal humanitarian system continue to show how the combined system struggles in highly strategic areas of operational response, as well as with political constraints. Chapter 2 cites the trend of the formal system continuing to embody an unbalanced portfolio of sectoral expertise so that, for example, food is over-emphasised at the expense of other critical needs. Provision of shelter is routinely amateur and ill informed. Camp management, protection, water and sanitation are similarly underpowered. It remains a mystery why, in an apparently entrepreneurial and still unregulated system, so few innovative and dynamic new agencies have appeared to fill the many gaps and opportunities in humanitarian response. Maybe it reveals what many in the French tradition fear: that the system has passed its innovative phase and is now creaking towards bureaucracy and overfed inertia. If so, the UN's ongoing humanitarian reforms and the many other

improvement initiatives need to challenge the culture of the system as well as its organisation and technique.

Many of these gaps were also highlighted in last year's Humanitarian Response Review conducted by the UN, which found continuing uneven expertise, skewed resources, inadequate preparedness, poor inter-operability and weak coordination in the system (OCHA, 2005, especially chapter 2). Previous talk of coordination has not done much to reorganise the spirit and resources of the sector more effectively on the ground. Perhaps clusters will now prove to be a magic word that enables people to organise the system's offer more evenly and expertly. Strong leadership will be an important part of this.

Beyond technical expertise within sectors, Vaux shows in Chapter 2 that expertise across the phases of crisis – relief, recovery and development – also remains strangely immature in a profession that has recognised a role for itself in all three phases for several decades. The key area of livelihood support – which has the potential to unlock the bolts between these three phases and avoid the professional anathema of dependency – is similarly undeveloped in many agencies. Particularly notable is the strange fact that the humanitarian sector has ideologically resisted the most obvious strategic partner in livelihoods work – the private sector – and tried unhelpfully to make income and markets a sacred and protected part of humanitarian space in times of crisis. Perhaps Grameen Bank's Nobel Prize success will encourage humanitarian orthodoxy to become increasingly porous to commercial values and techniques in supporting people's recovery.

A particularly bizarre aspect of agency performance is the way in which core parts of the humanitarian NGO and UN establishment set out elaborate values and standards which they seem to cherish on paper but forget in practice. Tony Vaux's bemusement at the widespread lack of operational and evaluative reference to the Code of Conduct is understandable. Why make codes if you do not use them daily in your work? The Humanitarian Response Review also noted the high talk-up but low take-up of the SPHERE standards. These standards have secured a few high-profile champions in certain agencies but are not yet emerging as routine industry standards in any way. But they may do so in future.

Expectations of good practice must also be disappointed by the important findings from Peta Sandison's research in Chapter 3, which shows that agencies still often fail to learn from evaluations of their operations. Sandison's findings conclude that

humanitarian agencies find it hard to use evaluations to make real improvements to their operational practice or to challenge political distortions systematically. Evaluators and those who commission them are both at fault, it seems, because evaluations are seldom designed to be user-friendly. Nor do they take enough account of context to apportion accurate responsibility for humanitarian failures between agencies and political factors. Many evaluations are also prone to criticism more than encouragement, fail to include a learning process or are administered as routine accountability 'rituals'. Although agencies profess to hold evaluations as crucial to improvement, they do not use them well and there is no systematic link between evaluation findings and wider policy making and decision making in the sector.

Such confused utilisation of evaluation findings makes one wonder whether dramatic practical improvement is a realistic expectation to have of humanitarian agencies within the terms of their current political contract with donors and receivers. Optimistic internationalists must surely ask why agency performance is not yet subject to rigorous and regulated international oversight. But it seems that this is not yet politically possible or politically important either. Peta Sandison makes clear in Chapter 3 that performance is not actually a strategic issue for humanitarian agencies, when nobody is really on to them about it. In the meantime, senior managers may be easily diverted by too many competing issues to make performance top of their to-do list, or maybe they are more interested in funding, status and coverage rather than quality. Maybe they are even in the grip of some deep denial or fatalism about their operations which they feel will always be thwarted.

Why does practice continue to be such a problem? Is it because the humanitarian system is a particularly bad learner, as ALNAP studies have often suggested? Is it because all the things which agencies try to do are genuinely extremely difficult and very hard to learn at system level? Or is it because these things are particularly difficult when attempted by an essentially extraneous force like the Western humanitarian system? Perhaps the issues of relief, recovery and development are not deep problems in themselves, but difficult only if you are coming at them as outsiders.

Is our attitude to practice also part of the problem? Maybe *being there* rather than *being successful* is somehow more important to the humanitarian imagination and its ideal of solidarity. Frankly, successful practice is seldom rigorously demanded of us.

Nothing usually happens to us if we are bad at our jobs. Contract culture means that failures are left to fade away with the end of a contract and are seldom addressed sharply with discipline or dismissal. When operations go badly, NGOs can retreat to the warm rhetoric of shared struggle while the United Nations remains in a world of its own, where the grim culture of the great bureaucrat lives on. If attitude is a factor in disappointing practice, then the humanitarian community does indeed need cultural as well as organisational reform – a nettle which has not been properly grasped in the UN reform process.

Many people in the humanitarian system do care deeply about its practice. Several common problem areas (which have been previously and regularly identified in previous RHAs) are being very actively addressed in various interagency projects and initiatives. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) is working hard on agency accountability, particularly to those who need and receive aid. The UN reform process and its new cluster approach is a well-supported and serious effort to address perennial problems of coordination and the optimal distribution of resources and expertise. For their part, donor governments are committing themselves to incremental steps towards their definition of Good Humanitarian Donorship which, among other things, takes important account of the principle of needs-based impartiality. SPHERE continues to consolidate and develop what constitutes good technical standards of professional work in key sectors, and People in Aid is building a clear sense of good practice in the recruitment, retention and development of staff – one of the chronic weaknesses of the profession.

Yet, at the moment, there is a lack of collective vision and synergy between all these efforts. Moreover, there is no single unit charged with a responsibility to oversee and report on all the separate initiatives, the progress they may be making in the system and their impact on the ground. Still, other than through ALNAP, we have little idea of how we are getting on overall. Still, we have no common and simple measures of global need and success. Still, there is no independent or semi-independent office or organisation that has the oversight and mandate to judge, criticise and praise the system from outside. The Humanitarian Response Review (OCHA, 2005) has recommended common benchmarks, but these are mainly around operational process not outcomes, and they are still seen as a matter of self-regulation by the IASC and its agencies rather than the work of a genuinely independent regulatory authority.

1.3.4 Reasonable expectations of the humanitarian system

So what expectation is it reasonable to have of the international humanitarian system, its prospects within international society and the performance of its organisations in war and disasters? Should we expect a lot or a little from the international humanitarian system, given the persistence of its political and practical problems? It seems that the humanitarian community itself is still torn over what it can expect of humanitarian progress. Deeply pragmatic in one part of themselves, agencies fast learn from operational experience not to expect too much from international society. Yet, equally infused with more than their fair share of idealists and campaigners, many humanitarian agencies constantly demand more from international society and seem to think that global perfection is possible.

ALNAP's five studies to date certainly give out a mixed message. Practitioners and evaluators of humanitarian action are at once pessimistic and ambitious. Many seem to agree with Tony Beck and John Borton, writing in 2003, that 'many factors that determine whether or not humanitarian action is successful or not are largely outside the control of humanitarians'. However, many also seem to elide this view with one which still has significant expectations of this flawed political system. The implication in most humanitarian discourse is that international society is indeed amenable to ordering according to humanitarian values. Why else would humanitarians continue to demand this?

1.4 A five-year view

It seems to me that the humanitarian profession should take a mid-term view of its possibilities and performance and not get too enthralled to ambitious long-term hopes for international society. Another five years is not a bad horizon for a mid-term view. An ideal system of global welfare is not imminent, so whether this remains a long-term goal, an inspiring hope or highly improbable in the minds of different humanitarians is not critical to where the system needs to focus its efforts in the next five years. The call for global welfare is an important motivating vision,

but the system and international society are still some distance away from such a goal. Small steps towards improvement may be more useful than grand aspirations for the people agencies can actually reach. Focusing expectations in this period means concentrating on what is feasible. This will require four main steps.

First, the system requires a realistic appraisal of its current limits and the external pressures and internal weaknesses which continually compromise it. In particular, every humanitarian programme must be designed and evaluated within its particular global and local context of political possibility, and not judged against ideals of humanitarian perfection alone. As we have seen, the application of humanitarian principles like impartiality and independence are more often thwarted in the outer realm of politics than the inner realm of agency competence. Precise, contextualised evaluation will help to distinguish usefully between political failures and humanitarian failures.

Second, within these limits, the system needs to identify the things it really can change and the softer border points where it can push those limits in the next five years. Many of the things which can be changed will be inner-realm organisational things which have already been identified around knowledge, expertise, capacity, effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, collaboration, linking relief and development, and innovation. But there will also be outer-realm changes in political attitude, wider ownership of humanitarian ideals and greater global impartiality where the system could make significant if uneven progress.

Third, developing a set of reasonable five-year expectations within and at the edges of the system's current limits will mean taking a highly strategic approach to improvement, instead of a very open-ended one. Humanitarian leaders could usefully set ten keynote objectives for external and internal change and improvement across the system, and work to meet them together. These objectives must be simply expressed as either process or outcome standards – understood by everyone and easily monitored and reported. Ideally, some will be easily adapted from the Code of Conduct.

Last, to monitor its progress against these keynote objectives, the system needs to set up the kind of oversight mechanism that has the power to evaluate improvements over the next five years. This is the dashboard and control room for gauging success which still does not exist in the humanitarian system. ALNAP could

build on its experience to take up this monitoring role and assess how the collective efforts of the system are progressing. As well as continuing with its regular retrospectives, ALNAP could then also be more forward looking and measure performance against the system's keynote objectives. To be taken seriously, ALNAP would also need some high-level power behind it. An independent high-level performance panel appointed by the system could actively investigate, consider and report on individual and collective progress and performance.

1.4.1 A culture of improvement

The approach taken to this five-year plan will be critical and must generate a culture of improvement. This must be motivating, widely owned and involve praise as well as sanction. In particular, the culture of humanitarian improvement needs to be positive, unbureaucratic and empowering, and should value a mix of increasing professionalism with continuing discovery and innovation.

1.4.2 Balancing consolidation and innovation

Much of the impetus for improvement in the formal humanitarian system tends towards consolidation at the moment. UN humanitarian reform and the several other improvement initiatives are all focused on bringing organisations and approaches into line so that they work more logically and effectively together. Consolidating good practice throughout the system is deeply important and represents the superlative virtue of the manager. But the system also needs innovation if it is to cope with and adapt to the inevitable shortcomings of its political and practical setting.

Innovation is the virtue of the entrepreneur. As the system moves towards conformity, it must still urgently encourage innovation and entrepreneurialism whereby humanitarian agencies can make new discoveries and risk new approaches. To see that this happens, at least two of the keynote objectives need to prioritise innovation and risk-taking in humanitarian politics and practice. If, in the next five years, the humanitarian system has only consolidated, it will have failed to take advantage of new ideas and will not have adapted to new opportunities.

History often shows that progress cannot wait for reform but requires innovation. Recognising that progress is not likely to be delivered quickly and scientifically in an orderly fashion around organisational reforms, political agreements and UN Security Council resolutions can free agencies to be more genuinely innovative. Less time spent waiting for the new organogram from Geneva, or campaigning for the right resolution to be passed in New York could leave more time for shaping an innovative solution on the ground. Such innovation must surely be the hallmark of a dynamic and entrepreneurial agency.

1.4.3 Encouraging positive thinking

Finally, it might also be good to change the culture of how we evaluate ourselves and our system in the next five years. Peta Sandison's work in Chapter 3 is revealing here. It shows that people in agencies seldom listen to and act upon evaluations. One of many reasons for this may be because most people do not like evaluations, which are often seen to bring bad news. What people want is praise and encouragement, not criticism and finger-wagging. Not unnaturally, therefore, humanitarians tend to shoot the evaluation messenger in the various ways that Sandison describes so well. Maybe they are right to do so?

Evaluations are by nature more negative than positive. Innately, they have more interest in problems than success. They are essentially critical in intent and they do not motivate. Instead, evaluations seem to switch people off and do not spur them on. It would be interesting, perhaps, if ALNAP and its agencies focused particularly on success for a while. For the next five years, evaluations could be encouraged to adopt a method of appreciative enquiry instead of the more intrinsically damning scientific model of measurement against objectives which were often rather hasty or donor-driven in the first place. It might do everyone good if evaluators became more positive investigators, asking 'what's worked well here?' The recipients of aid would, of course, be the key targets of these questions. The idea that recipients are important judges must be central to any new form of enquiry. Identifying positive experience should not mean that negative performances should be overlooked. These should still be exposed, but in the brighter light of what worked well.

A commitment to discovering the good news might well change attitudes and energy within the profession without necessarily becoming an exercise in crazed, deluded

optimism. We would probably learn more and then use this learning more if it came to us as praise and encouragement. This would not solve all the political problems of global equity, political favouritism and hard-nosed obstruction. However, it would mean that when agencies are able to hit the ground and work, they would do so better because they feel better – their minds more filled with models of success than with potential criticisms.

An essential part of this positive thinking is to communicate the millions of good things that humanitarian agencies do. They save lives every day, comfort people every day and employ people every day. Each one of these lives is extraordinarily precious. The system should find better ways to talk about these lives and represent them more powerfully in their thinking, decision-making and evaluations.

1.4.4 Changing international society

Humanitarian action is just one of many emerging but contested areas of potential common action in international society today. Trade, human rights, poverty, arms control, HIV/AIDS and carbon emissions are comparable contests. Many of the same NGOs and UN agencies are also at the forefront of activism on these other issues too. The reality of global competition, the emergence of new powers and the inevitable volatility of politics surely require us to have moderate and hedged expectations of progress on all these issues. This need not make humanitarian agencies into gloomy non-improving fatalists. Instead it allows them draw on a vision of the ideal system to focus realistically upon a shared and constructive mid-term programme in which they have reasonable expectations of themselves and others.

Political optimism may be a useful motivator but calibrated operational realism may make for better programming. We can hope for global welfare but are wiser to focus on more immediate mid-term dials. Particular improvements and innovations within humanitarian agencies must remain the priority of progress in the inner realm of humanitarian practice. In the outer realm of politics, the effort must remain on some key mid-term political objectives such as a proper scale of global need, some proven examples of donor impartiality, and a wider international ownership of humanitarian principles. All these incremental steps need to be monitored by a credible and independent authority with powers to investigate and report on progress against such key objectives.

In its aspirations for global welfare in war and disaster, the Western system might also improve its knowledge of the contribution of other informal humanitarian systems operating today, and make room for them in its calculations of international response. It is probably neither desirable nor politically possible to try to integrate these different systems, but it may be possible to learn from them, to influence them and to anticipate them in the increasing number of environmental disasters that look likely to strike the Earth in its current fragile state.

Last but not least, evaluators need to be realistic about the limits and prospects of the system they are judging in the years ahead. Evaluations that are cautiously progressive and not overly optimistic in demanding perfection of global response may help the system to focus on the possible. More user-friendly evaluations may ensure that learning is taken up, and a concentration on context will ensure that evaluations make real-world judgements about what is good and bad, better and worse, possible and impossible in the world as it actually is over the next five years.

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