

# PLANNING FROM THE FUTURE

Is the Humanitarian System Fit for Purpose?

November 2016



**HPG**

Humanitarian  
Policy Group

**Tufts**  
UNIVERSITY

Friedman School of  
Nutrition Science and Policy



**Feinstein**  
InternationalCenter

**KING'S**  
*College*  
LONDON

# Foreword

Four concerns explain the origins of the *Planning from the Future* project. The first is the increasingly accepted fact that, in the foreseeable future, humankind will be faced with unprecedented technological and societal change. These transformations may well have positive effects that will enhance the lives of a growing number of people around the world. At the same time, as with all such transformations, there, too, is a downside. That downside will be reflected in the vulnerabilities that are frequently concomitant with change. Hence, the second concern that led to the *Planning from the Future* project was the plausible prospect that the dimensions and dynamics of disasters and emergencies in the future will increase, perhaps even exponentially.

From this concern came the third. To what extent is the global community sensitive to such prospects? Beyond even those who are directly responsible for dealing with disasters and emergencies, is society more generally prepared to anticipate and mitigate the sources of future crisis drivers? Finally, this concern led to the more immediate issue that underpins the overall *Planning from the Future* project, namely what does the humanitarian sector's past and present record suggest about its capacity for adjusting and responding to rapid, complex change in the future?

We, the *Planning from the Future* partnership, believe that these concerns in general, but more specifically the last, need wherever possible to be brought to the attention of all those who have roles and responsibilities for dealing with ever-more complex and uncertain disasters and emergencies. In no sense are we suggesting that the analysis that follows is definitive, but we are suggesting that a debate needs to be generated to test a proposition that has grave and, in a growing number of instances, existential humanitarian implications.

We would hope that in the aftermath of the World Humanitarian Summit, there will be increasing interest in testing the viability of the humanitarian community and the challenges that lie ahead. With that in mind, the partnership will maintain a website, [planningfromthefuture.org](http://planningfromthefuture.org), as one step towards promoting humanitarian futures-oriented discussion and debate. So, too, is the partnership committed to joining with others in a wide range of forums to present its findings and their implications.

As the acknowledgments above suggest, a broad spectrum of expertise was sought to develop this analysis. In many instances, that expertise has gone well beyond the confines of the humanitarian sector. It has involved the natural and social sciences, the private sector as well as the military, social networks and local communities – all to assess whether the past and the present should or should not be a guide to a humanitarian future. And, if the latter, what needs to be done to make the sector fit for the future?

This is the question that ultimately underpins the efforts of the *Planning from the Future* partnership.

*Randolph Kent*  
*Planning from the Future*  
*November 2016*



# Executive summary

Is the humanitarian sector fit for purpose? Does it have the capacity and vision to tackle the crises of today, tomorrow and deep into the future? The scale and complexity of the conflicts and disasters confronted by humanitarians and the populations they aim to help leave them bruised and sometimes abused. There is a widespread feeling of frustration among humanitarian organisations and donors, both in the field and at their headquarters.

If the humanitarian system is unable to deal with the challenges of today, what does this tell us about its ability to prepare for the challenges the next generation will face? Imperfect as it is, buffeted by politics and chronically underfunded, humanitarian action remains essential for people in extremis. The question that Planning from the Future (PFF) raises, therefore, is how will these tensions and interactions be managed in the future – twenty or thirty years from now? What do we need to do now to prepare for then – for a humanitarian future that will be paradigmatically different from the past? The PFF project explores the reasons why fundamental reform is critical to achieving a more modern, effective and adaptive humanitarian system, and argues that this goal requires a rethink of how the sector looks and operates.

The report is organised into three main chapters. Chapter 1 – A history of game changers identifies key moments in the history of the humanitarian system and discusses how they influenced its structures, power dynamics and processes, laying the foundation for the analysis that follows in the rest of the report. It highlights continuities in the system: many of the problems and pathologies that it suffers from today are deeply rooted in its history. While the system has expanded and diversified, its basic power, structures and approaches have largely remained the same. The humanitarian architecture looks remarkably similar to the way it did in the 1950s – only much bigger.

Chapter 2 – The current humanitarian landscape describes current global trends affecting the sector, what works well and what doesn't, and makes the case for change. The total number of people in need has risen sharply, especially the caseload resulting from violent conflict, but so has the gap between need and coverage. Institutions have grown apace and significant advances have been made in the technique

of humanitarian response; the growing use of cash and market mechanisms is perhaps the most significant game changer in how the system works. There has been some streamlining in the humanitarian architecture, but key issues of leadership and decision-making have not been addressed. The system remains over-proceduralized and complex. At the same time, counter-insurgency agendas have heightened the securitization and militarisation of humanitarian action. Principles are continuously threatened by the conduct of war and, notwithstanding increased commitment, the system remains essentially reactive on protection issues.

This report analyses the malaise in the humanitarian community driven by the over-arching realization that the system is not 'fit for purpose'. Much of this pessimism results from the fact that humanitarian action cannot break out of the space that politics assigns to it. New practices and changes have not made old problems go away, whether it is in terms of failures of leadership, governance or the power relations in the system. These relations are still largely dominated by a small number of core actors, a kind of self-governing 'oligopoly' of mainly Western donors and large international and non-governmental aid agencies – over which the formal intergovernmental system has only limited oversight.

Chapter 3 – Planning from the future looks at future threats and risks and how they might be addressed by a more adaptive and responsive humanitarian sector of tomorrow. While attempting to predict the future is hazardous and all too often futile, there are few analysts who do not recognize that disasters and emergencies over the next two decades will be more complex and uncertain, and their dimensions and dynamics far more extensive. Chapter 3, reflecting on the mixed record of the humanitarian sector's past and present, suggests that the present humanitarian sector is faced with a serious capacities challenge – one that requires fundamental institutional change. Humanitarian organisations will have to be more anticipatory and adaptive, and will have to adopt new ways of working and certainly new approaches to leadership. This is followed by conclusions, including a six-point vision for future humanitarian action that takes a more anticipatory, protective and accountable approach

to crisis response, and recommendations that offer a roadmap of quick wins, systemic overhaul and future-proofing for achieving that vision.

PFF shares the sense of outrage expressed by the UN Secretary-General in his report to the World Humanitarian Summit about the suffering of civilians and the failure of the international community to do enough about it; about the fact that all too often humanitarian action is subordinate to, or substitutes for, politics; that sovereign interests trump individual rights – even in cases of mass atrocities; and the blatant inequities that privilege some lives – some crises – above others in terms of money and attention. The findings of the PFF project also point to a sense of frustration that, despite vast improvements in analytics and forecasting, humanitarian action is still reactive and that, despite the dedication of individual aid workers and some attempts at reform, the humanitarian system as a whole still under-performs, and lacks the trust of the people it aims to help.

Current frustrations with the sector are the result of a recognition that humanitarians alone have neither the depth nor the breadth of knowledge or ability to address humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities in all their complexity, now and in the foreseeable future. The result is a systemic discontent that has called into question the foundations of humanitarian action – its ethos, its emblems and the constellation of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals.

The PFF partner institutions recognise that major change is difficult, and perhaps even unlikely in the current context. If the past is any guide, radical change in international institutions only happens in the context of a major shock, such as the two world wars and the consequent reshuffling of international institutional tectonics. Since then, change in the international system has only happened by accretion and, with few notable exceptions has lacked depth. Fundamental reform is necessary but there are too

many vested interests within the system and too much resistance to thinking beyond the institutional box. The trigger for change will likely come from without, starting from a balanced analysis of what needs to change and related remedies. A constituency for change will need to emerge in civil society and among those affected by crises themselves.

This Planning from the Future report offers a diagnosis of what ails the system and a broad outline of what change could look like, what needs to be done to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and protection today and to boost its capacity to adapt and equip itself for an uncertain future. The appointment of a new UN Secretary-General with years of humanitarian experience provides an opportunity to put change on the international agenda. Whether ‘broke’ or ‘broken’, the humanitarian system of the future needs to do more than simply muddle through.

Based on the vision outlined above, this study proposes three levels of recommendations: (i) ‘Practical Measures for Immediate Implementation’, that is, high-impact improvements for which there is already near-universal support; (ii) ‘System Overhaul’, which calls for major reform of the structures, governance and modus operandi of the system, including an independent review that would identify how change could be implemented; and (iii) ‘Planning from the Future’, to help the humanitarian sector adapt and plan for an ever-more complex and uncertain future.

The report is the final output of the Planning from the Future project, an 18-month study conducted by King’s College London, the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition, Tufts University and the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute. This synthesis report, and its supporting research and case studies, can be accessed at <http://www.planningfromthefuture.org>.

# FUTURE HUMANITARIAN ACTION. A 6-POINT VISION:

01

## REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL HUMANITARIAN STAKEHOLDERS

- It is 'of the world' – neither 'of the North' nor partial to any agenda. It is directed to all crisis-affected people in need of humanitarian action.
- It is local, but external experience is valued and available to support locally-led action, or to act where local parties cannot.
- Its alliances are based on strategic partnerships between international, national and local organisations, from a wide range of sectors.
- Its activities, where possible, are based on the principle of subsidiarity, which puts control and decision-making as close as possible to whose actions on the ground.

02

## PRINCIPLED

- It is guided by the humanitarian principles embodied in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), international refugee law and the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct.
- It is always impartial. It is able to act in an independent and neutral manner when required, particularly in conflict situations.
- It is honest and transparent in the way it invokes those principles and respects them.
- It works flexibly to protect life, rights and livelihoods, both in contexts where IHL requires a narrow focus on protecting life and dignity and in those where longer-term strategies can be developed. ▶



# FUTURE HUMANITARIAN ACTION. A 6-POINT VISION: *(continued)*

## 03 PROTECTIVE

- It is focused on the dynamics and circumstances that threaten the safety and dignity of people affected by armed conflict, displacement and other crisis situations
- It is informed by the aspirations and agency of those at imminent risk – whether displaced, besieged or unwilling to flee.
- It develops crisis-specific strategies that prioritise issues of greatest concern to affected groups, while investing in relationships and initiatives that safeguard the space needed to uphold humanitarian values.
- It focuses on protection outcomes not agency interests and rhetoric.
- It invests in evidence-based advocacy and mechanisms to maximise compliance with IHL, refugee law and human rights norms.
- It puts the protection of at-risk groups – in situ, displaced, refugees – at the centre of all humanitarian action, within and beyond the immediate crisis setting.

## 04 ACCOUNTABLE

- It is accountable to affected people and prioritises their interests and needs over mandates and agency interests. It puts dignity and choice over paternalism and control.
- It is accountable to its funders to take, and manage, calculated risks while making effective use of limited funds.
- It is accountable to its peers, working in complement with organisations that supplement its skills and resources toward collective outcomes.

## 05 NON-PARTISAN

- It is mindful of politics but is non-partisan in all its activities, including public pronouncements.
- It is able to work with a broad constellation of actors, including warring parties, national and regional disaster management authorities, civil society and the private sector, while retaining its independent character.
- It is able to support resilience programming, social protection and livelihoods initiatives when applicable to the context.

## 06 PROFESSIONAL

- It values professionalism, but embodies the voluntary spirit that lies at the root of the humanitarian imperative.
- Its programmes and decision-making are informed by evidence – independently verified where possible.
- Its actions are driven by a deep understanding of the context in which they are taking place.
- It is governed by independent, transparent and accountable institutions, with leaders that embody the humanitarian ethos and strive for excellence in management practice.
- It is able to mobilise sufficient funds to anticipate, prepare for and respond to crises irrespective of their causes or human impacts.
- It is honest and transparent about its mistakes – and applies the lessons inferred by them.
- It develops strategies that are designed to anticipate emergencies and disasters in the longer term.