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# Humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific Engaging the Debate in Policy and Practice



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Editors

# Humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific

Engaging the Debate in Policy and Practice

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# The Evolving Humanitarian Landscape: Rise of the Asia–Pacific Region



Alistair D. B. Cook and Lina Gong

**Abstract** This collection offers insights of the international humanitarian system from within the Asia–Pacific. It adds to the conversation on reforming the global humanitarian system by providing the space to share perspectives of what constitutes humanitarian action from our place in the world. This collection considers what constitutes humanitarianism in the Asia–Pacific, and how it shapes policy and practice in the region and globally. The authors in this collection answer these questions by focusing on a range of issues from national to sectoral perspectives to relations between ‘traditional’ and ‘emerging’ players. The authors conclude that the dynamics of the humanitarian system from the perspectives of the Asia–Pacific are rooted in their localized experiences and built outwards. The first significant trend is that understandings of humanitarianism the Asia–Pacific are primarily shaped by the experience of disasters at home. Second, national governments play a dominant role in humanitarian affairs in the region. Finally, the humanitarian landscape in the Asia–Pacific constitutes a diverse yet under-appreciated set of actors.

**Keywords** Asia–Pacific · Humanitarianism · Natural hazards · Community of practice · Humanitarian affairs · Private sector · Civil society · Civil-military relations · China · India · Philippines · Australia · Pacific islands · ASEAN · Indonesia · Nepal · USA

## 1 Trends and Issues in the Humanitarian Sector

Talk of humanitarian reform at the United Nations has a long history since the establishment of the UN humanitarian system on 19 December 1991 with the adoption

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of UN General Assembly resolution 46/182. However, since its formal establishment in the United Nations system the first series of changes came through the Humanitarian Reforms of 2005 to provide more flexible financing, a stronger coordinator role and the UN Cluster System. When the most recent reform process culminated in the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, there was great promise with the diversity of participants from across the globe representing different countries and sectors feeding into the summit processes to provide direction to root-and-branch reform. This reflected the evolving humanitarian landscape that is featured by multi-stakeholder partnerships. At the same time, it became well-known that the United Nations was dominating these summit processes articulating New York and Geneva-centric guidance. There was a relatively low presence of high-level politicians at the summit and *Medecins Sans Frontieres* withdrew before it took place. MSF withdrew because it lacked faith in the process to hold states to account and appreciate the necessary differences between humanitarian and development action. Such developments led observers to question the summit's potential impact in terms of political commitments and the utility and representativeness of the project. Concurrently, the dominance of conflict settings over disasters raised further questions over its impact in and representation of the Asia-Pacific, the region with greatest exposure to natural hazards.

The growing humanitarian needs are a compelling reason for humanitarian reform. A study by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre shows that the world saw a record high of 33.4 million new displacements in 2019, with 8.5 million caused by violence and conflict and 24.9 million by natural hazards (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020: 1). While the global humanitarian discourse tends to prioritize conflict-settings due to the protracted nature of many conflicts, natural hazards actually displace far more people as the statistics show. This trend is likely to continue or even worsen as climate change is predicted to induce more natural hazards. However, the ability of the humanitarian community to alleviate human suffering is constrained by issues such as a lack of humanitarian funding and geopolitical rivalry. Despite the record high of humanitarian needs, donations have been declining, with over two thirds of the appeal in 2019 unfunded by July 2019 (Beaumont 2019). In particular, the United States has demonstrated declining interest in international affairs and multilateralism in general, with the decision in early August 2019 to freeze foreign aid for the rest of the year as its latest manifestation (Wong 2019). This tendency of a major aid donor adds to the challenge facing the humanitarian community.

Increasing commitments from emerging donors to some extent fill the gaps left by the shrinking of donations from traditional donors. Yet most recently in 2019 and 2020 both emerging and major donors have reduced their funding for humanitarian assistance, while the number of people in need continues to grow. In contrast to the US retreat, China has significantly increased its commitment to humanitarian affairs. This is evident in the increases in China's humanitarian funding, institutional restructuring to support China's humanitarian role and strengthened cooperation with UN agencies. This support often falls outside the main catchment of humanitarian contributions. The Chinese government committed a total of USD 3 billion to the

South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund and USD 200 million to the UN Peace Development Trust Fund. In part, this collection provides a platform for countries in the Asia-Pacific to articulate their understanding of humanitarian work and, as such, offer new ways to evaluate who and where actors are involved in such work. In China, new government bodies were established in 2018 to strengthen China's involvement in international cooperation in humanitarian affairs, namely the Ministry of Emergency Management and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). The Chinese government signed agreements with various UN agencies in 2019 on cooperation in disaster risk reduction, emergency response, humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities and health assistance (CIDCA 2020). Similar developments were also seen in other emerging donors that used to be recipients of humanitarian assistance. India established the Development Partnership Administration under the Ministry of External Affairs in 2012 to improve coordination and monitoring of its aid programmes. The scale of India's development assistance in 2015 was \$1.8 billion which included humanitarian aid (OECD 2020a, b). Likewise, Indonesia launched the Indonesian Agency for International Development in October 2019, with an endowment fund of \$212 million so far (Pinandita 2019). Although emerging donors are yet to level or surpass historic major donors in terms of financial commitments, their status as developing countries and previous experience in dealing with humanitarian situations induced by various causes can inform their aid activities in other countries (Richmond and Tellidis 2014: 573).

In particular, the prospect of China's greater role in humanitarian affairs has given rise to questions, such as whether and how the international humanitarian community will be able to socialise China, what changes China's expanding role will bring to humanitarian work, and how China's growing power resources can best benefit humanitarian action. Such discussion feeds into the broad debate on the implications of China's rise for the international system. Positions on these issues shape how China carries out humanitarian action and engages humanitarian actors, which can have an impact on the international humanitarian community at normative, policy and operational levels given China's growing influence on global agendas. Therefore, an examination of China's perspective constitutes a key component of this book's contribution to the global understanding of humanitarianism and humanitarian action.

Humanitarian affairs have always been a site of negotiation in international politics with international and local actors seeking to provide assistance to populations affected by disaster or conflict. Dynamics in the bilateral relations between donors have impacts on humanitarian action and global humanitarian reform. The US-China rivalry gives rise to concerns over the implications for humanitarian affairs, for which leadership and cooperation is essential. Traditional and emerging donors differ in their positions on key issues of humanitarian affairs, such as the relations between humanitarian, development and political agendas (Richmond and Tellidis 2014: 568). The heightening of tension between US and China risks more intense competition rather than complementarity between the two approaches. The same concern also applies to the relations between China and India. Both countries have been categorized into the group of emerging powers that challenge the existing liberal order and cooperated in instances related to issues like the responsibility to protect and