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Towards ICCS 2022

HADR in Multilateral Asia: Whither Faith-Based Actors?

By See Seng Tan

SYNOPSIS

With big powers seemingly throwing off restraint and privileging power over principle against their strategic rivalries, and interactions between and among the great religions of the world deteriorating significantly, the need for multilateralism around HADR has never been greater.

COMMENTARY

THE TALIBAN's victory in Afghanistan, which has been simultaneously hailed and lamented by observers is certainly a big blow to Western intervention in a country that has a different set of beliefs and values. In many other parts of the world, such blood-soaked "clash of civilisations" continues.

Nevertheless, there are instances where efforts to provide support, regardless of race, religion and ethnicity, have been fruitful. One prominent area is cooperation among faith-based actors in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.

Inclusion of Non-State Actors

The post-Cold War era witnessed the rise of "participatory regionalism," which is the inclusion of non-state actors in spaces and activities that were previously deemed the exclusive preserve of states. Many of these non-state actors are religiously motivated, driven by their respective callings to display compassion and hospitality towards their fellow humankind.

As a result, the participation of faith-based actors in peace and humanitarian missions across the world began to garner greater attention. This shift in perception and policy was extraordinary for Asia, where countries uphold the importance of sovereignty and non-intervention in state matters, often making it unfavourable for multilateralism.

Being the world's most militarised and dynamic region, opening its borders for humanitarian missions was a much-needed leap in humanitarianism. This is because the region is a host to a myriad of natural and manmade humanitarian crises such as cyclones, earthquakes, and ethnic conflicts.

Having religious actors participate in the road to recovery together with people from different backgrounds helps reconcile differences, creates understanding between cultures and helps newly formed communities in the aftermath of disasters to build more socially cohesive societies.

Despite the prevalent weakness of multilateralism in Asia, what has proved contrarian is the relative willingness of regional players – including faith-based organisations – to seek ways to collaborate and synergise with one another in HADR in the common interest to serve and save communities adversely impacted by disasters.

Faith-Based Actors

It is hard these days to find a faith-based organisation in Asia that does not engage in some form of HADR efforts, or at least claim to do so. When a disaster strikes, it is often local churches, mosques or temples that are among the first to respond to the crisis on the ground, and one of the longest to remain in the recovery and rehabilitation process.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) of the United States is one example of a faith-based organisation that has partnered with local faith-based organisations in countries such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India to engage in HADR-related work within local communities.

The involvement of faith-based actors in HADR-related operations in Asia is ubiquitous – not as standalone actors, but as part of the wider growth of local faith-based and secular humanitarian agencies.

In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, for instance, World Vision, a Christian International Non-Government Organisations (INGO), worked closely with Muhammadiyah, the second largest mass-based Muslim organisation in Indonesia to develop projects focusing on education and health of children in Aceh, Indonesia, a Muslim-populated province that was severely impacted by the disaster. Their efforts were no less significant than the contributions of state actors and better resourced standalone western INGOs.

Asia's New Paradigm of Humanitarian Assistance?

The talk of “a new paradigm of humanitarian assistance” for Asia has become endemic in regional policy and academic discourse. This does not imply that faith-based

organisations enjoy comparative advantage over their secular counterparts as humanitarian actors as they are seen as more compassionate and hospitable.

As the religious leader, Timothy Fitzgerald once observed, simplistic tropes like “angel in the house” and the “irrational maniac” are not particularly helpful when explaining the involvement and impact of religious actors in HADR.

But, as argued by the regional experts, Robin Bush, Philip Fountain and Michael Feener, the expansion of “participatory regionalism” in Asia, has increased the scope of religious actors in leveraging resources for humanitarian assistance and disaster response and in advocating for disaster prevention and mitigation efforts.

Potential Tensions

Nonetheless, there is need to practice some caution when faith-based actors are engaged in HADR as they are increasingly interacting with one another in the humanitarian space.

Disaster relief expert, Muhammad Riza Nurdin when explaining religious activism in Aceh after the 2004 Tsunami, said that Muhammadiyah was the preferred partner of World Vision because of Muhammadiyah’s established presence and networks in the affected communities and its proven track record in community service.

Yet critics have charged some faith-based humanitarian actors, especially Christian organisations, for their propensity to proselytise. But humanitarianism’s so-called proselytism problem goes beyond religious evangelism – Cecelia Lynch and Tanya Schwarz speak of “donor proselytism”.

In this practice, donors place undue pressure on humanitarian actors to win over converts or conform to neoliberal conceptions of efficiency, sustainability, and measurable results. Tying HADR to evangelisation efforts is a hindrance to wider inter-faith cooperation.

Any sensitivities and tensions among faith-based organisations responding in a humanitarian crisis could have implications for inter-faith dialogue and collaboration across the world. Hence, the promises of interfaith cooperation are many in the humanitarian space, but so are the limitations.

Multilateralism as Key

This brings us back to the relevance of multilateralism. With so many actors competing to be part of the HADR operations, disaster zones in Asia have become crowded with numerous players, including faith-based actors. Often, everyone gets in each other’s way. Hence, the need for greater multilateral coordination and coherence among actors has never been more urgent.

Regular HADR dialogues that bring together relevant policy, military, academic and increasingly, faith-based actors for the purpose of sharing experiences and best practices and fostering innovation have proven invaluable in establishing common terms of reference and approaches and divisions of labour within HADR.

These initiatives could be undertaken by overarching humanitarian organisations in regions or countries. In many disaster-prone areas in Asia, the United Nations' Office for Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) plays a crucial coordinating function that has allowed non-state actors to contribute in synergistic ways with state agencies.

Within Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) is an inter-governmental organisation that plays a similar role to OCHA. These organisations would be a good platform for both state and non-state actors to come together to build better HADR responses.

Governments can initiate these conversations by providing space and resources for these organisations to conduct these collaborations in their country.

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