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HUMANITARIAN FUTURES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Policy Report

June 2023

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Executive Summary

Gaps in humanitarian responses to recent crises such as COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war show that approaches informed by past experiences are insufficient to deal with today's threats and risks, not to mention those in the future. A shift to future-oriented approaches is needed for organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to be prepared for challenges ahead. The notion of humanitarian futures, which emphasises adaptation, anticipation, and innovation, provides an alternative perspective to develop humanitarian policy. This report discusses what humanitarian futures stands for, identifies what capability enhancement measures are needed for organisations to meet future humanitarian challenges, particularly those in Southeast Asia. It also proposes practical ways the regional humanitarian community can prepare for the future.

Introduction

In December 2022, the United Nations launched a record US\$51.5 billion humanitarian appeal for 2023. Practitioners, policymakers, and academics agree that existing humanitarian norms and practices are inadequate for addressing today's challenges, leave alone future challenges.¹ COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian war have demonstrated that crises which were once considered highly unlikely can occur and cause significant humanitarian consequences. These developments have prompted discussions on what kinds of future we will face in the next decade and beyond. Moreover, what actions will aid humanitarian organisations to become prepared for future challenges.

Such reflections are particularly relevant to Southeast Asia. Like the rest of the world, the region faces the risks of interconnected and complex disasters that often have consequences beyond the geographical region where they may have initially occurred, such as epidemics, climate change, and natural hazards. Moreover, human-induced risks can exacerbate humanitarian responses to these disasters, such as heightening geopolitical tensions and the dangers of destabilising mis- and dis-information on social or other media. Is the regional humanitarian system and its stakeholders fit for dealing with tomorrow's challenges? What changes are needed?

The notion of humanitarian futures, which emphasises adaptation, anticipation, and innovation, provides an alternative perspective to develop humanitarian policy in Southeast Asia. The Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Programme of RSIS and the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre have jointly organised three workshops on humanitarian futures since 2021 where participants from different sectors explore what is meant by "futures", and imagine "what might be of humanitarian action" in the longer term in the region.

Drawing on discussions in the workshops and semi-structured interviews with scholars and policymakers working on humanitarian response and emergency management, this policy report discusses what humanitarian futures stands for, identifies what capability enhancement measures are needed for organisations to meet the types of humanitarian challenges in the future, and proposes practical ways the region can begin to prepare for the future. This research is administered

¹ Saez, Patrick, Jeremy Konyndyk, and Rose Worden. *Rethinking Humanitarian Reform: What Will it Take to Truly Change the System*. Washington D.C., Center for Global Development, 2021.

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What is Humanitarian Futures?

Futures thinking gaining momentum

Futures thinking refers to a set of theories, approaches, processes, and tools that organisations can use to identify emerging issues and formulate solutions. It is not new to the policy community as governments in many countries have increasingly adopted future-oriented approaches in policy planning, such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK. Instead of assuming one future, futures thinking creates a desired future from multiple possibilities. A general future-oriented work process starts with scanning the environment to look for emerging issues and trends, followed by planning possible scenarios, identifying a preferred future, and creating policy solutions to achieve the desired future. A range of tools are recommended for futures practice and exercise, some of which are horizon scanning, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, backcasting, and roadmapping.²

A conventional cycle of policy and strategic planning is five-year or shorter, while futures thinking generally applies to a longer term, such as 5 to 20 years and beyond. Rather than being reactive, creating a preferred future requires active anticipation, adaptation, participation, and collaboration of stakeholders.³ One issue with futures planning is that if the time horizon is beyond the tenure of the current leadership of an organisation, especially the smaller ones, the sustainability of interest and investment in the future-oriented measures will likely be in question. Another issue is competing priorities. Organisations tend to prioritise immediate challenges, due to funding, resource and capacity constraints. When a vision seems too impossible and distant, or when radical changes are required, it is difficult to get buy-in from the target audience of futures thinking.

Nevertheless, futures thinking is gaining traction, particularly with well-resourced organisations. The UN plans to organise the Summit of the Future in September 2024.⁴ The event is a follow-up to a report of the UN Secretary General released in 2021, titled “Our Common Agenda”, which calls for shifts away from

² UK Government. *The Futures Toolkit: Tools for futures thinking and foresight across UK government*. London, Government Office for Science, 2017.

³ Asian Development Bank. *Futures thinking in Asia and the Pacific: Why foresight matters for policy makers*. Philippines, April 2020.

⁴ “The future of international cooperation: Time to think big, urges Guterres.” *UN News*, September 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099522>

the existing model of global cooperation.⁵ The report and the forthcoming summit reflects the recognition that global governance based on past experiences is inadequate to tackle the fundamental challenges facing the world today.

Humanitarian futures

Humanitarian futures represent a set of future-oriented approaches that facilitate organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to be better prepared for crises in the future. In addition to the unprecedented level of humanitarian needs, the humanitarian community has faced fundamental challenges in the past 3 years. COVID-19 exposed many operational vulnerabilities, such as shortages in medical supplies, disruption in humanitarian supply and logistic chains, curtailed deployment of international staff, and cuts in funding. Increased military involvement in pandemic and disaster responses in many countries has reinvigorated the debate on the compatibility between the military and humanitarian principles.⁶ In the Ukraine crisis, the humanitarian community has to manage competing priorities, and political interests strongly influence humanitarian decisions.⁷ Discussions re-emerged on questions such as whether the humanitarian community should still uphold neutrality in situations like Ukraine, how humanitarian organisations engage different parties to the conflicts, and how to deal with online activities that shape public perceptions of humanitarian work.⁸

Humanitarian scholars and practitioners have presented different ideas on how the humanitarian landscape might be like in the future and how the humanitarian ecosystem and individual organisations should evolve.⁹ Based on history and current trends, Hugo Slim, a seasoned humanitarian practitioner and scholar, identifies 10 possible developments that will produce changes in how humanitarianism is understood and practiced.¹⁰ A EU study in 2021 examined the

⁵ United Nations. "Key proposals across the 12 commitments." 2021, www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Key_Proposals_English.pdf

⁶ Gibson-Fall, Fawzia. "Military responses to COVID-19, emerging trends in global civil-military engagements." *Review of International Studies*, Vol.47, No.2, (2021): 155-170.

⁷ Redfern, Corinne. "How the focus on Ukraine is hurting other humanitarian responses." *The New Humanitarian*, 7 July 2022, www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/07/07/Ukraine-aid-Russia-invasion-funding-donors

⁸ Saez, Patrick. *Navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the Ukraine crisis*. London, ODI, 2022.

⁹ The New Humanitarian. "The future of aid." 12 November 2020, www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/11/12/future-of-aid; UN OCHA. "Six trends that will shape the future of humanitarian action." Medium, 2020, <https://medium.com/humanitarian-dispatches/six-trends-that-will-shape-the-future-of-humanitarian-action-a47d19f6ac61>; Pusterla, Francesca and Elia R. G. *The future of humanitarian aid in a new context full of challenges*. Brussels, European Parliament, 2021.

¹⁰ For the ten clues, see Slim, Hugo. "The Future of Humanitarian Aid." (lecture, Fordham University, New York, 19 October 2022).

future of the regional organisation's humanitarian aid programme.¹¹ These assessments primarily draw on past experience and current dynamics, which are relevant to the ongoing humanitarian emergencies and those in the immediate future.

An alternative approach is planning from the distant future. One example is the work of the Humanitarian Futures Programme at King's College, London, from 2004 to 2015. The Humanitarian Futures Programme applied the futures approaches in humanitarian contexts and developed the open-source "Testing the Future Exercise",¹² which facilitates humanitarian organisations to identify practical ways to prepare for their desired futures. Another example is the "Strategy 2030" of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), released in 2021.¹³

These descriptions of humanitarian futures converge on a few issues which are essential for organisations to achieve their preferred futures. Anticipation has been repeatedly mentioned as early action has proved more effective than reaction. The World Meteorological Organization unveiled the "Early Warnings for All" initiative during the COP27 on 7 November 2022, which aims to ensure everyone in the world is protected by early warning systems for extreme weather events in the next 5 years.¹⁴

Anticipation means not only early warnings but also translation of the information to early action. Despite numerous pandemic predictions before the outbreak of COVID-19, such as the one in the UK in 2016,¹⁵ few policymakers took them seriously and even fewer foresaw the types, dimensions, and duration of the disruption caused. Some critics pointed out that humanitarian responses to the Ukraine crisis fell behind the early warning intelligence.¹⁶ These gaps highlight the importance of strengthening the awareness and willingness of organisations to anticipate and mitigate risks.

¹¹ Pusterla, Francesca and Elia R. G. *The future of humanitarian aid in a new context full of challenges*. Brussels, European Parliament, 2021.

¹² Humanitarian Futures. "Toolkit." 13 June 2023, www.humanitarianfutures.org/toolkit/

¹³ IFRC. *Strategy 2030*. January 2020.

¹⁴ World Meteorological Organization. "Early Warnings for All Action Plan unveiled at COP27." 7 November 2022, <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/early-warnings-all-action-plan-unveiled-cop27>

¹⁵ Booth, Robert. "Coronavirus report warned of impact on UK four years before pandemic." *The Guardian*, 7 October 2021, www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/oct/07/coronavirus-report-warned-of-impact-on-uk-four-years-before-pandemic

¹⁶ Kamen, Sydney. "Opinion: The crisis in Ukraine shows the need for anticipatory action." *Devex*, 25 March 2022, www.devex.com/news/opinion-the-crisis-in-ukraine-shows-the-need-for-anticipatory-action-102903

In rapidly changing crises, organisations need to be adaptive and flexible. During the pandemic, greater use of remote humanitarian programming¹⁷ and contactless aid¹⁸ were examples of adaptation. Innovation is another capacity that organisations need to build and improve as humanitarian issues and the surrounding environment are increasingly complex. Digitalisation is a current trend in humanitarian action and other sectors as well.¹⁹ Organisations need to consider how to keep up with this trend, which involves not only adoption of new technologies but also innovation in processes to ensure proper use.²⁰

A multistakeholder approach is always emphasised in humanitarian response, but inadequate collaboration and coordination between stakeholders persist. A study by the International Council for Volunteer Agencies (ICVA) finds that the delivery of COVID-19 vaccination in some humanitarian settings is not fully connected with the existing humanitarian coordination structure, and this can lead to insufficient coverage of the marginalised communities in vaccination programmes.²¹

Leadership is crucial when initiating and implementing future-oriented changes, as resistance and challenges are inevitable in the process. The tension between the emergent nature of humanitarian work and the long-term orientation of futures thinking makes the diffusion of humanitarian futures difficult. A traditional definition of humanitarianism is to save lives and relieve suffering but not to address the root causes.²² Although there is the trend that some humanitarian organisations extend their work beyond emergency relief and engage in activities to enhance the welfare of vulnerable groups, many remain focused on immediate humanitarian needs. The second issue is how far humanitarian futures should aim for. Due to constraints in funding and resources and institutional dynamics, a usual cycle of planning for many humanitarian organisations is 5 years or shorter. It is therefore a test for the leadership of an organisation to strike a balance between being future-oriented and realistic.

¹⁷ Care. *Remote Humanitarian Management and Programming: Guidance Note*. May 2020.

¹⁸ Ives, Mike. "‘Contactless’ humanitarian aid has its perks, and pitfalls." *New York Times*, 10 February 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/asia/tonga-aid-tsunami-volcano.html

¹⁹ Veron, Pauline. *Digitalisation in humanitarian aid: opportunities and challenges in forgotten crises*. European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2022.

²⁰ European Parliament. *Technological innovation for humanitarian aid and assistance*. 2019.

²¹ ICVA. *Principles of effective COVID-19 vaccination response in humanitarian contexts*. September 2022.

²² Barnett, Michael N. "Humanitarian Governance." *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol.16 (2013): 379-398.

A Preferred Humanitarian Future in Southeast Asia?

What is the preferred humanitarian future in Southeast Asia? There are multiple causes of humanitarian needs in the region, but national and regional policies have prioritised emergency response and disaster management, possibly because of the region's high vulnerability to natural hazards and the relatively low political sensitivity of international cooperation in disaster issues. This approach, however, is increasingly challenged, as other risks and threats heighten.

Climate change is altering the pattern of disasters, with the threat posed by droughts increasing. Proper drought intervention measures are different from those for earthquakes and tropical storms, as droughts have a slow onset but a significant impact on agriculture and food security. Great emphasis should be placed on preparedness, adaptation, and risk mitigation,²³ which are currently under-invested.

COVID-19 showed that public health emergencies can cause significant humanitarian concerns and revealed a lack of coordination between humanitarian and health sectors in our existing humanitarian system, including that in Southeast Asia. Growing diffusion of the Internet has culminated in higher risks of cyberattack and mis/disinformation.²⁴ With some Southeast Asian countries considering building their own nuclear power plants, the scenario of countries in the region having to deal with transboundary impacts of nuclear meltdown should not be overlooked.

Political and security risks are increasingly a concern to the humanitarian community. The Turkey-Syria earthquake earlier this year revealed yet again the restrictive impact of sanctions on humanitarian action and highlighted the need for pre-agreed arrangements for such scenarios. The Ukraine crisis demonstrated that inter-state wars are not improbable. Gaps and challenges exposed in the global humanitarian response to the Ukraine crisis highlights the importance to plan for worst-case scenarios. These lessons are particularly relevant to Southeast Asia, which is disaster-prone and on the forefront of great power rivalry.

Southeast Asia's approach to humanitarian action can be described as nationally led, regionally supported, and international when needed. Weakness of this approach is increasingly felt as the regional risk landscape is changing. After the

²³ ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action for Adaptation to Drought 2021-2025*. Jakarta, October 2021.

²⁴ Xu, Rachel. "You Can't Handle the Truth: Misinformation and humanitarian action." *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, 15 January 2021, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2021/01/15/misinformation-humanitarian/>

military coup in February 2021, humanitarian engagement between Myanmar and the international community has significantly reduced. Many foreign governments have avoided official interaction with the military government so as not to render it legitimacy.

At a regional level, ASEAN has grown to be a leading humanitarian actor after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, exemplified by its involvement in the disaster response after the Palu earthquake and tsunami in 2018, during which the AHA Centre was entrusted by the Indonesian government to coordinate assistance offered by foreign NGOs and the private sector. With regard to its vision on the future, ASEAN aims to build “a resilient community with enhanced capacity and capability to adapt and respond to ... disasters...”²⁵ and become a global leader in disaster management.

However, ASEAN’s inadequate responses to humanitarian needs induced by COVID-19 and the Myanmar political crisis in the past few years have led to doubts in the organisation’s ability to lead regional humanitarian response to situations other than natural hazards. The Myanmar crisis has presented a difficult case for ASEAN. It has been unable to repeat its successful humanitarian diplomacy after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, during which ASEAN managed to persuade the junta to accept international humanitarian aid.

While it is simplistic to attribute ASEAN’s limited progress in the ongoing crisis to a single reason, a lack of mandate and capacity of ASEAN’s relevant bodies is an important factor that limits its response to politically controversial situations. Whether it is a public health emergency or a political crisis, the need is clear for ASEAN to transform and adapt its institution and mandate to a future when humanitarian challenges are more complex and interconnected.

In addition to ASEAN’s internal dynamics, the broad regional security environment matters. Major power competition has been felt in humanitarian responses. Growing distrust has made cooperation and coordination between major HADR providers more difficult, with the Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami in 2022 as a good example.²⁶ While ASEAN should continue to exercise its convening powers to bring dialogue partners together in regional events and exercises,

²⁵ ASEAN Secretariat. “ASEAN Community Vision 2025.” 13 June 2023. www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf

²⁶ Wallis, Joanne, Anna Powles, and Henrietta McNeill. “When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific.” *The Strategist*, 8 March 2023, www.aspistrategist.org.au/when-disaster-strikes-australia-new-zealand-and-the-us-should-partner-with-not-for-the-pacific/

Southeast Asian countries should consider scenarios when capacities and assets of different partners are needed and develop plans to ensure effective coordination.

Recommendations

The need for alternative approaches to deal with future humanitarian challenges has been well recognised, as demonstrated by the UN Summit of the Future, the IFRC Strategy 2030, and the ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook.²⁷ However, the adoption of future-oriented approaches is uneven across organisations in the humanitarian sector:

- A phased strategy is needed to diffuse futures thinking in the humanitarian sector in the region.

The idea of “futures” can be circulated to organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities through workshops and seminars. Moving beyond the introductory phase, futures events should target participants who are involved in strategic planning of their respective organisation, given that visionary leadership is essential for future-oriented changes.

- Major international humanitarian organisations and networks should take the lead in operationalising futures thinking, and share their lessons and experiences with other organisations.

The IFRC Strategy 2030 sets an example of future-oriented planning in the humanitarian sector, the production of which essentially follows the aforementioned futures work process.²⁸ ASEAN and other major stakeholders in Southeast Asia should consider developing possible future scenarios and solutions that incorporate distinctive regional dynamics and trends, as recommended in the ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook.

- Diffusion of futures thinking can start with adopting an anticipatory approach in immediate humanitarian planning.

Organisations with sufficient capacity and resources, such as ASEAN, national disaster management authorities, and defence establishments, can consider establishing a unit within an existing crisis management team, which will include dedicated staff to focus on immediate future scenarios through a Pandora Cell, and a team to project possible longer-term future scenarios. It is important that these teams communicate sufficiently with other stakeholders to ensure the translation of analysis and planning into action in reality. The unit does not have to be permanent, as the team

²⁷ ASEAN Secretariat. *ASEAN Disaster Resilience Outlook: Preparing for a Future Beyond 2025*. Jakarta, October 2021.

²⁸ IFRC. “Implementing Strategy 2030.” 13 June 2023, <https://solferinoacademy.com/why-strategy-2030/s2030-implementing-strategy-2030/>

members can be mobilised from different departments of an institution during crises. This modality can address the concern over cost.

About the Author



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About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.



NTS Centre conducts research and produces policy-relevant analyses aimed at furthering awareness and building the capacity to address non-traditional security (NTS) issues and challenges in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. The Centre addresses knowledge gaps, facilitates discussions and analyses, engages policymakers, and contributes to building institutional capacity in Sustainable Security and Crises. The NTS Centre brings together myriad NTS stakeholders in regular workshops and roundtable discussions, as well as provides a networking platform for NTS research institutions in the Asia Pacific through the NTS-Asia Consortium.

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