



## New actors and local responses

Findings from the Advanced Course on Crisis, Recovery & Transitions in Beijing, October 2013

### Introduction

The so-called ‘traditional’ humanitarian sector has been slow to adapt to the contribution of new actors, such as regional organisations and private enterprises. However, there remain key opportunities to develop new models which build upon the resilience of crisis-affected populations and the contributions of numerous new actors in this field, including countries such as China.

These findings emerged from the week-long Advanced Course on Crisis, Recovery and Transitions organised by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in partnership with Tsinghua University’s School of Public Policy and Management (SPPM). The course, which was held in Beijing in mid-October 2013, also involved collaboration with the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) at the University of York and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government’s Institute for Governance (ANZIG). Speakers were drawn from a wide range of institutions, including universities, think tanks and organisations such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the China International Search and Rescue (CISAR) Team and the National Disaster Reduction Centre of China (NDRCC).

The following sections identify some of the key discussion points highlighted by speakers, participants and organisers.

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## Business as usual: international engagement with crises

The Advanced Course involved a review and critique – to which speakers and participants both contributed – of existing humanitarian institutions, including the United Nations and the Red Cross movement, as well as aid financing and coordination mechanisms. Participants were particularly critical of subcontracting arrangements which, while seen as beneficial for accountability, have often unnecessarily wasted vital humanitarian resources. For instance, aid contributions from United Nations member states may be allocated to particular UN agencies which then contract international NGOs who in turn subcontract much of the implementation to local NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). Several participants called for mechanisms to ensure that less aid is lost due to subcontracting arrangements as funds makes their way from donors to those directly supporting crisis-affected communities.

Doing so will require not only new mechanisms but, equally importantly, capacity-building initiatives designed to genuinely strengthen local entities and enable them to work with foreign donors and major humanitarian institutions without excessive supervisory arrangements. Participants and speakers highlighted shortcomings in existing models of capacity-building, noting that they often rely on costly external experts, ineffective short-term training or on-the-job approaches that often fall by the wayside amidst the demands of programme implementation.

Beyond subcontracting and capacity issues, participants and speakers both noted the increasingly complex and convoluted nature of traditional humanitarian institutions. For example, clusters have morphed from gap-filling forums intended to ensure consistent attention to areas such as protection and internal displacement into an all-encompassing bureaucratic maze. One session on leadership noted one example in which inter-agency collaboration and creativity had been hampered once stakeholders began discussing who would lead the effort. Some speakers and participants noted that concern for institutional mandates and ‘turf’ had at times gone against the wellbeing of crisis-affected people.

## New actors: regional organisations and the private sector

The course also highlighted opportunities and pockets of innovation, particularly around the growing roles of so-called ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ actors, such as regional organisations and private firms.

Several participants and speakers had direct experience of working in or studying regional organisations, including the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One presentation, for instance, noted ASEAN’s key role in enabling aid access in Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, overcoming the government’s reluctance to allow a large and hard-to-manage international aid presence in the country. In addition to facilitating aid access for international agencies, ASEAN helped nearly 2,000 aid workers receive visas and developed a system to help monitor and coordinate aid in response to the crisis.

Related examples from the OIC, IDB, the East African Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) emerged during the course. For instance, one participant noted that the OIC was currently delivering 41 projects through its Islamic Cooperation Humanitarian Affairs Department (ICHAD) and is in the process of establishing a Humanitarian Response Fund. In the past, the OIC has undertaken operations to support crisis-affected populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Gaza, Somali refugee camps and many other locations. The IDB meanwhile is implementing interventions related to human development, basic infrastructure and agriculture and rural development, including programmes providing young people with education, vocational opportunities and access to microfinance. Several other examples were raised during the Advanced Course.

The private sector is also playing an increasing role in humanitarian action and post-crisis recovery. During the Course, it was noted that the private sector has long played a key role in supplying aid agencies and making goods and services available in the aftermath of



*I wish to express my deep thanks and gratitude to the ODI and Tsinghua University for the excellent course and the terrific atmosphere in which it was conducted. That was really wonderful and as I said before, for me it was the best training course in terms of content and organization I ever attended”*

AZHARI GASIM AHMED - Lead economist, Islamic Development Bank



Satellite system in the Natural Disaster Reduction Center of China © Humanitarian Policy Group

crises. However, participants felt that it was important to move beyond a primary concern with the role of the private sector as a supplier, service provider or donor via corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Instead, they noted ways in which the private sector could bring to bear new technologies to assist crisis-affected communities, whether in the form of geospatial imagery from Google or the IKEA Foundation's efforts to develop improved shelters, in partnership with UNHCR. For instance, one participant noted the ways in which multinational banks have helped strengthen the resilience of national banks in Africa – enabling them to continue operations during and after crises – by sharing their contingency plans and continuity arrangements. Still, participants noted a continued need to develop creative ways in which firms could contribute to emergency response and preparedness within the scope of their 'core business models'.

### Learning from emerging powers: The Chinese experience

The Chinese government, while often referred to as a 'new' actor in humanitarian work, in fact has long experience in responding to disasters, both domestically and abroad. As Professor Zongchao Peng, the director of Tsinghua University's Center for Crisis Management Research, noted, 35% of all earthquakes worldwide with a magnitude of 7.0 or greater in the twentieth century took place in China. The country is vulnerable not only to earthquakes but also to floods, droughts, fires, typhoons, blizzards and epidemics such as SARS. On average, disasters cost China 1.6% of its GDP; during the first three quarters of 2013, natural disasters caused a

reported \$84.5 billion-worth of damage. During the first nine months of this year alone, 856,000 homes in China were destroyed by disasters.

Professor Lan Xue, Dean of SPPM at Tsinghua University, noted that the 2003 SARS epidemic was particularly influential in shaping China's approach to crises. Following the epidemic, the Chinese authorities concluded that their approach to disaster preparedness and response was overly centralised and that its emergency management services were outdated. Since that point the Chinese authorities have, like much of the international community, followed a familiar pattern: first introducing highly structured approaches such as complex contingency plans at multiple levels, before concluding that a more flexible approach which accounts for civil society and community contributions was crucial.

China's crisis response tools have not only developed domestically – but also internationally. The Chinese International Search and Rescue Team, which draws upon military, police and civilian expertise, was deployed to Iran following the 2003 Bam earthquake, to Aceh in Indonesia following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake and elsewhere. In these capacities it has treated thousands of patients and rescued dozens of people trapped under rubble. While only one manifestation of Chinese humanitarianism abroad, it demonstrates the country's desire to contribute to emergency response within and well beyond its own region.



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China has also applied technology to disasters in creative ways. For instance, the NDRCC includes a state-of-the-art operations room from which natural disasters can be monitored using a range of tools, including imagery from three orbiting satellites and unmanned drones operated by private firms. The NDRCC is staffed primarily by programmers, scientists, technicians, GIS specialists and others. Maps and satellite imagery created by the NDRCC is made available to countries around the world through its partnership with the United Nations Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response and its involvement with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Despite its strengths, humanitarian action in China often faces many challenges common to the 'traditional' system. These include a complex series of ministries, departments and agencies at the national, provincial and local levels which periodically have difficulty coordinating with each other. Likewise, Chinese experts often noted that – for all of the work the government is able to do – communities are often the first and most important responders when crises strike in China and abroad. Hence, like international and nongovernmental organisations, Chinese officials and experts have strived to understand how they can bolster communities and help them to prepare for and respond to crises themselves, rather than relying entirely on the government.

### **Conclusion: The changing humanitarian landscape**

Course speakers and participants broadly noted that the humanitarian landscape is changing, bringing new opportunities and new challenges. Promising ideas are rapidly emerging, propelled by new actors such as the private sector, regional



*Interview with Markus Werne, Deputy Head, UN OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.*

Click to view the video in an [external player](#).

organisations and countries such as China, but institutional procedures and political considerations too often continue to take precedence. The notion of leadership – and, specifically, adaptive leadership – emerged several times during the Course. A new generation of humanitarian leaders, some felt, is needed to overcome organisational hurdles and refocus aid work more fully on the needs of vulnerable and crisis-affected populations. Future Advanced Courses in Beijing will specifically take up this question of crisis leadership in a continuing partnership with Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management.

If you are interested in learning more about the Advanced Courses in York and Beijing, or if you are interested in registering for an upcoming course, please visit the [course page](#) or e-mail us at [hpgadmin@odi.org.uk](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org.uk).