Future Research Directions for Humanitarian Affairs in the Asia–Pacific

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Abstract Over the past two years from project inception to research completion, there are several areas that emerged as worthy of further study. In this chapter, we document several of these potential future research directions for scholars and policy practitioners to further consider. Some of these research puzzles have been repeated over a longer period and gained particular attention during the global consultations ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit and in regional policy dialogues in the Asia–Pacific. We also reflect on the challenges that the COVID-19 global pandemic in the year 2020 posed not only for the humanitarian community but for global society as a whole, and its implications on future research.

Keywords Future research · Strategy · Humanitarian affairs · Disaster management · Disaster preparedness · Disaster governance · Asia–Pacific · ASEAN · China · Indonesia · India · Pacific islands · Complex disasters · Humanitarian financing

1 Introduction

While this collection was shepherded through the publication process, the world experienced the rapid spread and disruption of COVID-19. The global pandemic affected the daily lives of people the world over, saw the closing of international borders and a prolonged humanitarian crisis. The experience of COVID-19 challenged the multilateral system and highlighted once again the deep connections between societies and the environment. It highlighted the limitations to the global humanitarian system as international travel was curtailed and global supply chains were disrupted with international, regional and local actors adapting their responses to available resources. The ensuing response effort underlined the discontinuity
between humanitarian and development actors, and the need for an integrated whole-of-society approach to ensure those most in need received the necessary assistance. The struggle for most countries to manage the specific humanitarian challenges caused by the pandemic in the early days of the outbreak included the shortage of vital medicines and medical equipment and pointed to the importance for the global humanitarian community to adapt to local restrictions amidst seasonal hazards.

2 Crafting a Humanitarian Research Agenda Fit for the Future

Back in 2016, the outcome document of the World Humanitarian Summit, ‘An Agenda for Humanity’, set out five core responsibilities for the global community to alleviate human suffering, which are ‘Political leadership to prevent and end conflicts’, ‘Uphold the norms that safeguard humanity’, ‘Leave no one behind’, ‘Change people’s lives: From delivering aid to ending need’, and ‘Invest in humanity’. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold it became clear much more work was needed to achieve these goals. Alongside the World Humanitarian Summit saw the launch of the ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management in Southeast Asia which set out a roadmap to develop capacity in the region on disaster management and humanitarian response over the next decade through three mutually-inclusive elements—‘institutionalisation and communications’, ‘financing and resource mobilisation’, and ‘partnerships and innovations’. Once again, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that although significant progress was made in disaster management in Southeast Asia it was largely limited to natural hazards. The multi-faceted ramifications of the public health crisis underscored the need to consider systemic risks more broadly in the development of regional and global governance mechanisms. While both the global ‘Agenda for Humanity’ and the ‘ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management’ reinforce the commitment of stakeholders in the Asia–Pacific to build a more resilient region, the COVID-19 experience illustrated the inadequacies of our humanitarian system.

Within the Asia–Pacific over the past year, there was a re-evaluation of the regional system and its role in humanitarian situations. It was particularly pertinent as countries faced simultaneous disasters like the impact of cyclones during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one significant institutional component of the Asia–Pacific, ASEAN was established in 1967 to facilitate regional cooperation. Over the past fifty years, the regional grouping has demonstrated resilience through the maintenance of the principles of consensus-building and non-interference, and facilitated trust-building not only within the regional organisation but also between regional states and the international community. It provided a necessary bridge between the international community and Myanmar in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, but remains underutilised in providing a mechanism to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rohingya exodus and the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State in recent years. While
unpredictable and reliant on individual leadership, it nonetheless remains an important avenue of engagement. Academic and policy research in furthering the institutional development and leadership in ASEAN in this domain is a necessary avenue to pursue if a resilient region is to be achieved.

There is however nascent institutionalisation with the establishment of regional coordinating bodies that highlights a greater commitment to providing predictable humanitarian mechanisms and points to a more networked or systems-based approach to regionalism. The announcement of the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases Centre in November 2020 represented the region’s latest effort towards institutionalisation. In addition, it is necessary that the region integrates the mechanisms for dealing with different challenges that can lead to humanitarian crises, since the risk of complex and concurrent disasters is real as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next ten years, it will be important to establish ways in which to minimise this unpredictability through the establishment of a baseline of conditions to activate humanitarian action across the Asia–Pacific in the multiple and interconnected humanitarian challenges we face.

Once the mandate for a humanitarian response is established, it needs to be sufficiently supported to be effective. The essays in this collection show that there exists a regional architecture for carrying out humanitarian assistance that consist of bilateral partnerships, multilateral frameworks and regional institutions. Some examples include the US-Philippines security alliance, Australia’s bilateral partnerships with the Pacific island states, Japan’s bilateral and multilateral support for disaster management and humanitarian action in Southeast Asia, ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). Efforts to improve humanitarian operations in the region should be based on continuing and reinforcing commitments through the existing arrangements towards a more future-oriented and holistic humanitarian architecture.

One such challenge that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated is the need to rethink funding models that are adaptive and draw from across society. While the mandate and regional role of the AHA Centre is clear, its formal funding from each member state remains at $90,000 per annum. As a result, financing the operational capacity of the AHA Centre needs to be sourced from other stakeholders, and the niches of relevant stakeholders and forums identified. Japan has been a major source of funding for the regional body, primarily through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund. The European Union signed a financing agreement with ASEAN, worth 10 million Euros, to enhance cooperation on crisis and disaster management in the region. China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ASEAN on disaster management cooperation signed in 2014, in which China pledged 50 million Chinese yuan of grant assistance to the regional organization to enhance capacity in disaster management. However, there has been delay in disbursement of the Chinese funding, and this reflects the challenge to translate the increasing commitment to tangible outcomes. It is therefore imperative that strategies and mechanisms are developed to ensure greater sustainability of humanitarian funding and to give the AHA Centre greater independence to set a needs-based agenda. This case highlights the need for
strategies and mechanisms that encourage and facilitate cooperation between the regional bodies like the AHA Centre and new funding sources from both within the regional community of state and non-state actors and those external to Southeast Asia.

Apart from state partners, the potential of non-state stakeholders needs to be explored further. There are multiple options outlined in the ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management, which can also offer opportunities to other geographic areas of the Asia–Pacific. One of the significant opportunities is to develop an agreed strategy to engage the diaspora. Diaspora communities are known to engage more in their own communities than elsewhere while living abroad. This engagement includes volunteering in disaster-affected areas; as developers of new ideas; utilising their personal and business connections; and to transfer knowledge back to their home communities. Alongside the development of a diaspora strategy for the Asia–Pacific is the potential to further develop regional humanitarian financing mechanisms. In the aftermath of a disaster, one of the challenges faced is the availability of cash to fund basic necessities for the affected population. The establishment of the Pacific Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance Program builds on an initiative between the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, with financial support from the Government of Japan and the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery. The experience in the Pacific offers insight into the further development of the Southeast Asia Disaster Risk Insurance Facility (SEADRIF) and can be applicable to other areas of the Asia–Pacific, like South Asia.

The discussion in this collection highlights the proliferation of humanitarian actors in the Asia–Pacific and thus the need to strengthen their respective role and to improve coordination among the multiple actors. Although controversies exist over military involvement in humanitarian action, the Asia–Pacific countries generally accept the military as a first responder, particularly for aspects like search and rescue, logistics, medical treatment and engineering work notably in natural hazards. This was again demonstrated in the COVID-19 response as militaries were called upon as government capacity was stretched to its limit. Furthermore, given the benign nature of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, it has also been a platform for militaries to build confidence that is threatened by issues arising from the traditional security domain. A recent example was the first ever China-ASEAN naval drill in October 2018 which included search and rescue mission. Moreover, there have been several iterations of confidence-building measures in Southeast Asia to de-escalate tensions between claimant states in the South China Sea over the course of the regional forum’s history. These measures have evolved and include the development of Table Top Exercises (TTX) and Simulation Exercises (SIMEX) highlighting important modalities for states and societies in the region to build disaster preparedness. Given that militaries played an important role in the pandemic response in many countries and many Asia–Pacific countries face the risk of simultaneous disasters, a scenario of the concurrence of the pandemic and natural hazards can become a component of these joint exercises and for future research.

Likewise in the humanitarian arena, the region has witnessed the running of several TTX and SIMEX engaging stakeholders in a variety of bilateral and multilateral
scenarios. As governments and communities become increasingly aware of conflicts and natural hazards in the region, some governments have also identified niche areas in which to drive humanitarian action in the region forward from the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Military Medicine in Thailand to the establishment of the Militaries Ready Group under the Malaysian ASEAN Chairmanship in 2016 and the Regional HADR Coordination Centre in Singapore in 2014. Over the next decade it will be important to ensure the sustainability of these TTX, SIMEX and other humanitarian initiatives that deliver tangible benefits towards executing a more effective response whatever the nature of the disaster. It is necessary to review these various measures to assess overlaps and duplication, and to consolidate the necessary TTX, SIMEX and other initiatives into a more cohesive regionally-important catalogue of activities in humanitarian affairs. This will necessarily include academic and policy research in these areas to assess, critique and evaluate these developments and their implications.

Finally, Asia–Pacific states have the highest exposure to natural hazards and experience in the humanitarian response to them. They also contribute to humanitarian operations in conflict settings with notable contributions to UN peace operations from Fiji in the Pacific Islands to Indonesia in Southeast Asia to Bangladesh and India in South Asia. However, it remains unclear how successful states in the Asia–Pacific are in utilising their experiences in one context to contribute to the other, particularly the development of institutional memory and transferable skills.

3 Conclusion

It is important to identify ways in which to capture this knowledge to build on previous experiences to identify lessons learnt and chart a pathway forward for a more resilient Asia–Pacific region. In the immediate future there are several avenues to advance an Asia–Pacific research strategy to improve humanitarian action as briefly outlined here. It will take a combination of stakeholders and forums, and for different geographic areas to share their experiences to ensure the Asia–Pacific becomes better prepared, capable and more resilient to the risks the region faces.