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...
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 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
intervention (Dunne and Teitt 2015). However, geopolitical considerations prompt competition between the two countries in their aid activities as in the relief efforts after the Nepal earthquake in 2015 (Chand 2017). Hence, the changing geopolitical dynamics at global and regional levels are a major factor that impact humanitarian reform.

Apart from geopolitics, humanitarian reform is influenced by new trends in the humanitarian sector, which will impact the future humanitarian eco-system. First, actors such as the military, the private sector, spontaneous volunteers and diasporas, which traditionally do not have a humanitarian mandate, are increasingly being recognised for their role in, and increasingly involved in, humanitarian response (Carbonnier 2015: 56). While the proliferation of humanitarian actors broadens the pool of aid and support, the challenge is to optimise the allocation and utilisation of aid from diverse sources. This explains the increasing emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships in humanitarian action.

Second, calls for localising humanitarian response has gained more traction in the global discourse since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Localisation in the humanitarian sector essentially refers to “a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action” (Fabre 2017: 1). In this context, local means geographic, physical, social and national proximity to the communities affected by disasters (Maxwell 2018: 2). Such proximity often comes with knowledge of local context, relationships, culture, religion and language, which have impacts on the success of humanitarian response. Contextual knowledge better informs decisions on allocation of aid. Religion shapes how local communities perceive and respond to disasters and aid and influences their trust in humanitarian workers (Sun et al. 2018). Hence, local actors often have better access to acceptance by the affected communities even than the national actors (Robillard et al. 2020: 16).

In addition, due to the rise in nationalism and improvement in the capability to deal with disasters, some national governments have become less willing to grant access or offer conditional access to international humanitarian actors. Such a tendency also highlights the need to support the growth of local actors and partner them in humanitarian action. Moreover, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has further highlighted the importance of local actors as the outbreak presented a scenario that international humanitarian workers are prevented from travelling to the affected communities. Such dynamics in the humanitarian sector point to the immediate need to proactively reform the humanitarian system. It presently appears that the humanitarian system will be reformed by external events such as COVID-19 and those actors operating outside the formal UN-centred humanitarian system than those from within it. This reality provides impetus for this collection to bring together scholars from the Asia-Pacific to reflect on the understandings of humanitarianism from countries and positions that often only gain peripheral attention in the global humanitarian discourse.
2 Relevance of the Asia–Pacific Region

Against this background, this book contributes to the debate on humanitarian reform by presenting how major Asia–Pacific countries conceptualise and practice humanitarianism. This examination is important because how countries understand humanitarianism shape their approaches to humanitarian action both as donors and recipients. Humanitarianism essentially refers to “the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate danger of harm” (Barnett 2005: 724). However, there are variances among countries within the region. What has shaped Asia–Pacific countries’ perspectives of humanitarianism? What are the positions of prominent countries and sectors in the Asia–Pacific on the key issues? How do they or do they not differ from one another? What role do governments play vis-à-vis other humanitarian actors broadly defined in the region? The discussion suggests that understandings of humanitarianism in the Asia–Pacific are shaped by the dominance of natural hazards and national culture and tradition and that the translation of humanitarianism to humanitarian practices is influenced by geopolitics and regional norms. Humanitarian action in the region is featured by the dominant position of national governments and the growing roles of non-governmental actors and the private sector as important partners, which has long be under-appreciated in the humanitarian landscape.

The fourteen chapters presented in this collection look at different perspectives and practices of humanitarian action in the Asia–Pacific by exploring the significance of these actors. The Asia–Pacific has, over the past few decades been a site for global power competition and cooperation. Non-traditional security issues have been considered the ‘low-hanging fruits’ of cooperation, of which humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is identified as where the most intense and widest cooperative activity occurs relative to other non-traditional security issues. This is as a result of the exposure of the Asia–Pacific to natural hazards, the relatively low institutional capacity or political will of many states to prioritize sustainable development, and the reliance on traditional donor countries to bankroll emergency preparedness and response activities in the long term.

A key humanitarian policy challenge for the Asia–Pacific has been how to engage China, maintain more traditional donors like the United States, Japan and Australia, and increase recognition of the diversity and importance of non-state actors in an international system with overlapping institutional arrangements arguably centered around ASEAN—the oft-referenced ‘ASEAN Centrality’ in Asia–Pacific international relations. The emergence of Indonesia and India as significant powers reflected in the shift from ‘Asia–Pacific’ to the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as the emerging dominant regional nomenclature further diversifies the humanitarian landscape as both India and Indonesia seek to provide regional leadership and develop partnerships. According to the Financial Tracking Service of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the outgoing humanitarian funding from the national governments and official aid agencies of—Australia, China, Indonesia, India, Japan and the United States in 2019 amounted to over $9 billion, and the total global tracked
Fig. 1 Tracked humanitarian funding from the six Asia–Pacific countries in 2019. Source UN OCHA FTS. *The combined amount of the five countries was derived from putting the key words—Government of China, Government of Australia, Government of Japan, Government of India, Government of Indonesia, Government of USA, USAID, JICA, and Australia Aid International. Last accessed on 14 July 2020, https://fts.unocha.org/data-search/results/outgoing?usageYears=2019&organizations=2976%2C4391%2C4537%2C476%2C12%2C4846%2C463%2C4356%2C2053%2C6911%2C2060%2C8492%2C2933%2C5822#search-results, *The global number was from the Appeals/Plan Overview Data 2019, https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/overview/2019, last accessed on 14 July 2020

funding was $18.76 billion (Fig. 1). Hence, the Asia–Pacific as the center of cooperation on disaster response should elicit much interest from within and outside the region. It is this interest that provides further reason to understand the perspectives and practices of humanitarian action from those dominant actors in the Asia–Pacific.

A second major challenge is the prominence of disasters over conflict in the Asia–Pacific compared to the global primacy of conflicts over disasters in humanitarian affairs. This trend is principally shaped by the region’s high vulnerability to natural hazards. Asia in 2018 accounted for 45% of disaster events, 80% of the death toll and 76% of the total population globally (CRED 2019). As a consequence, the region suffers more economic losses from natural hazards than other parts of the world. In the past three decades, the economic losses as percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the Asia Pacific was above 0.3% while the world’s average has been 0.1% (2019: 8). Hence, individual ASEAN Member States, and collectively as the regional organization of Southeast Asia, have been proactive in facilitating technical and institutional developments on disaster management and emergency response. With the universal buy-in of all its member states and dialogue partners like Australia, China, India, Japan and the US, the success of and trust in this framework has led to it being adapted to conflict situations in response to the Marawi Siege in the Southern Philippines and the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar, both in 2017. This has caused concern in the international humanitarian community over the different ingredients needed for effective humanitarian assistance in disaster and conflict settings.
Besides the demand for cooperation in non-traditional security, the humanitarian landscape in the Asia–Pacific offers both challenges and opportunities. The exposure to natural hazards has placed countries in the Asia–Pacific at the ‘coalface’ of disaster response, which provides them with experience in this arena that few else in the global community have access to on this scale. This provides the region with the opportunity to become a global leader in disaster governance drawing on their local knowledge. Such experience in dealing with natural hazards informs the region’s views on issues that are central to humanitarian reform. For instance, disaster response in the Asia–Pacific has long seen the active role of local actors like faith-based organisations (Gianisa and Loic 2017). Hence, localised disaster response already exists in the Asia–Pacific and the focus of the localisation agenda here should be placed on giving local actors greater agency, contributing to capacity development and knowledge transfer. Moreover, the region’s experience points to the need to differentiate local and national actors and strengthen coordination across layers of response (Cook and Chen 2019).

The experience of natural hazards also places national governments in charge of most disaster responses. This has led to national governments self-identifying as humanitarian actors, which causes challenges within the global humanitarian system. The reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand, the humanitarian principles which underpin International Humanitarian Law are clear on the need for a commitment to uphold humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Governments by their very nature are partial and political. On the other hand, there is no such consolidated body of law to cover disasters. The Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance (IDRL Guidelines) were designed by the IFRC and supported by states in 2007. Since then the formal development of a consolidated body of international law on disaster relief continues to be a work-in-progress. This therefore poses a difficulty for humanitarian actors over what parts of what bodies of international law they fall under in disaster contexts. As a result, we are faced with a region frequently exposed to natural hazards and a global system ill-prepared to govern it.

It is within this framework that each of the following chapters focuses on specific actors or relationships in understanding the humanitarian landscape in the Asia–Pacific to unravel these opportunities and challenges. The first four chapters on China respectively examine the country’s understanding of humanitarianism, the involvement of its military forces in domestic and overseas humanitarian operations, and its use of disaster diplomacy in bilateral and multilateral settings reflecting its emergence as a prominent humanitarian player. Lina Gong examines how China defines and uses the concept of humanitarianism and argues that while the state-centric and development-oriented approach has enabled China to materialize its comparative advantage in capacity and resources, it faces challenges to prove its approach as a robust alternative to the existing ones. You Ji discusses how the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), one of China’s most important actors in disaster response, conceptualizes and practices humanitarian action at home and abroad. Lin Peng analyzes China’s disaster diplomacy in the context of China-Nepal relations as part of its policy toolkit and the limitations it will face as an established humanitarian player.
Tiewa Liu and Hongsheng Sheng review China’s engagement with the humanitarian components of the UN system since the 1970s and how it has become a global leader in the United Nations system.

India has also emerged as a humanitarian actor in the Asia–Pacific as part of its “Act East” Policy under Prime Minister Modi since 2014. Paula Banerjee traces the historical factors that have shaped India’s understanding of humanitarianism and provides insight into India’s responses to major humanitarian emergencies in the world in the past five decades. She argues that domestic public opinion needs to be considered in the discussion on India’s expanding role in humanitarian affairs. Traditional donors and active humanitarian players in the international system like Japan and Australia have been key sources of funding and resources for humanitarian action in the region. Masataka Nakauchi traces the development of Japan’s approach to foreign aid since the 1990s. However, he observes the initial rise and now the fall of the concept of human security in Japan’s foreign policy. He identifies a tendency of the Abe Administration to adjust its approach to foreign assistance from one centered on human security towards a more traditional security approach. He discusses the possibility of the Japan Self-Defense Force assuming a greater role in Japan’s foreign assistance through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities. Derek McDougall examines Australia’s leading role in disaster response in the South Pacific. He argues that Australia’s multisectoral approach to humanitarian engagement has been implemented through bilateral and multilateral partnerships. Australia’s historical dominance in the South Pacific will likely continue to shape the humanitarian system in the region even as it becomes crowded with more actors in the field.

Likewise, Southeast Asia is home to a multisectoral humanitarian approach with diverse partnerships between civilian agencies, militaries and non-state actors. As the regional organization, ASEAN provides an increasingly important forum for humanitarian partnerships, evidenced by the interactions in the ASEAN Regional Forum in disaster response that involves not only ASEAN member states but also its major partners like Australia, China, India, Japan and the United States. Alistair D. B. Cook discusses how ASEAN’s regional humanitarian architecture has evolved and argues that Southeast Asian governments maintain a primary role in humanitarian affairs and the regional organization provides the pre-eminent forum for humanitarian affairs in the region. At the operational level, the military is often the first responder in the face of disaster given their unique capabilities. Christopher Chen examines the place of the military in the changing humanitarian landscape in the Asia–Pacific and discusses the opportunities and challenges that the military bring to the humanitarian world. Despite the contention and controversy associated with the involvement of the military in humanitarian action, he argues that it is necessary to reconsider the meaning of humanitarianism in line with the evolving nature of the humanitarian landscape.

The private sector is another key stakeholder in post-disaster response and recovery, whose importance however has been under-appreciated. Ranit Chatterjee divides the engagement of the private sector divides into short-term and long-term.
The short-term activities that include relief distribution and early recovery and rehabilitation alleviate immediate humanitarian needs and the long-term engagement focuses on reconstruction and resilience-building. He argues that a sufficient understanding of the role and potential of the private sector contributes to better mobilisation of capacity and resources to meet the growing demands for humanitarian aid.

Within Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the most vulnerable to natural hazards, accounting for 1012 out of 1604 disasters between 2012 and 2018 in the region, according to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) (Pang and Dimailing 2019: 8). Following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, Indonesia established a national disaster management system guided by Law No. 24/2007 on Disaster Management adopted in 2007 and coordinated by the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management (BNPB) set up in 2008. After the Palu earthquake and tsunami in 2018, the Indonesian government doubled its funding for disaster relief to 15 trillion rupiah ($1.06 billion) in 2019, and the proposed budget for 2020 was four to five trillion rupiah ($342 million) (Reuters 2019; Antara 2019). Nevertheless, funding at this scale is unable to meet the need to finance disaster management (Pratiwi and Swasono 2020). This makes international and cross-sectoral cooperation important. Moreover, as aforementioned, Indonesia is increasing commitments to providing foreign aid.

The dual role of Indonesia as aid recipient and new donor provides a reason to understand how Indonesia thinks and practices humanitarianism. Tiola and Keoni Mazuki argue that Indonesia’s humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts are primarily rooted in the spirit of the country’s 1945 Constitution and the founding ideology of Pancasila (or Five Principles), both of which recognise the values of humanity and solidarity among nations. Indonesia’s domestic humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts are a part of the government’s function as maintained by the constitution, but its international engagements are influenced by domestic politics and public opinion. The chapter analyses how an Islamic identity influences Indonesia’s humanitarian aid to other countries as well as the growing role of Indonesian Islamic organisations in disaster response.

The Philippines is the most exposed country to all types of natural hazard in Southeast Asia, ranking higher than Indonesia in terms of hazard exposure. It was affected by 165 natural hazards between 2012 and 2019, second only to Indonesia in Southeast Asia (Pang and Dimailing 2019: 8). In view of the country’s high vulnerability to natural hazard, the Philippine government established the cross-sectoral National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) under the Department of Defense in 2010 to oversee the country’s response to disasters. The Philippine government appropriated P20 billion ($404 million) for disaster management in 2019 and eventually released about P6.2 billion ($125 million) (Government of the Philippines 2020). Disasters cause about 5% of the country’s GDP annually, and this means about P17 billion in 2019 (ESCAP 2019: 3). Hence, the Philippines faces budgetary constraints as Indonesia as well as many other disaster-prone developing countries.
Among the diverse partnerships between the Philippines with state and non-state international donors, the US-Philippine alliance has been crucial for the country’s disaster relief. Julius Trajano reviews the existing military and civilian agreements between the Philippines and the US and explains how these frameworks contribute to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Philippines through two cases, namely Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and the Marawi Conflict in 2017. The benefits of the bilateral partnership include providing platforms for fast delivery of humanitarian aid, institutionalising a multinational military coordination mechanism, sharing of resources and advancing resilience and disaster risk reduction at the local level. He further argues that the bilateral partnership is compatible and complementary with regional multilateral frameworks. Beyond these traditional international humanitarian interactions between states, Ela Atienza and Dennis Quilala focus on the particularly enabling environment in the Philippines for NGOs to play a role in disaster response and describe the contributions of NGOs in the time of disasters. They highlight the diversity of non-state actors within the humanitarian landscape illustrating the complexities of the system today.

With such a collection of chapters, this book captures the dominant dimensions of humanitarian affairs in the Asia–Pacific from the perspectives of traditional and emerging national players and the underappreciated roles of civilian, military and non-state actors that will influence the global humanitarian system in the years ahead. Rather than capturing a monolithic humanitarianism, these conversations provide further evidence of the presence of a number of humanitarianisms in the Asia–Pacific (Yeophantong 2014).

Japan and Australia represent the traditional donors whose commitments and preferred mode of assistance can be influenced by domestic politics and geopolitical calculation. China and India are emerging actors in the global humanitarian system. While their developmental orientation in foreign assistance coincides with the increasing emphasis on the humanitarian-development nexus, they have reservations over certain aspects of the existing paradigm of foreign assistance that includes humanitarian aid.

Indonesia and the Philippines are on the receiving end of HADR efforts and ASEAN has emerged as the pre-eminent platform for cooperation and coordination in Southeast Asian humanitarian affairs. Their experiences and lessons accumulated through operations can be of value for and inform strategy in the global humanitarian system. Further, the crucial role played by governments, local non-state actors and the private sector in the Asia–Pacific calls for deeper reflection on the role and engagement of a diverse landscape of actors with the UN-centred humanitarian system. As such, this book wishes to contribute to the study of humanitarian affairs, international norms and global governance more broadly.

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