



The Resurgence of Sovereignty and Political Centrality of Humanitarian Crises

Definition

A resurgence of sovereignty in countries affected by humanitarian crises leads to increasing control over humanitarian assistance activities. Implementation of restriction measures and even denial of access for NGO's, particularly INGO's, becomes more frequent. Consequently, there are increasing obstacles against the participation of NGOs which could be to the detriment of affected populations in need of adequate support if not provided by the government or private sector.

Key Insights

By 2030, governments of humanitarian crisis-affected states will be more inclined to resist external intervention and will prefer more localized approaches.

Crisis affected states will be more reluctant to allow international organizations to operate independently within their borders. There will be pressure on national NGOs to increase capacity. Where international NGOs are allowed to operate, there will be more preconditions placed on their programming, such as hiring local staff whenever possible.¹ In some instances, crises may be exasperated by the refusal to allow in qualified response organizations, in others, national response capacities will be strengthened to mount a localized response.

By 2030, humanitarian crises will become increasingly political.

In an increasingly interconnected world, crises can have severe and widespread implications. With increased media attention, humanitarian issues are taken much more seriously today than in decades past. Governments are now under greater pressure to address

¹ Kent, R., Armstrong, J., Obrecht, A. (2013) '[The Future of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Humanitarian Sector](#)', Humanitarian Futures Program



them. Mishandling humanitarian crises, or even the perception of which², can result in administrations losing power. Where aid comes from and who it goes to are also increasingly political issues. Donor and recipient nations are also held accountable by their constituents for their perceived complicity in dealing with unpopular states.³

Changes by 2030

➤ ***National capacities of developing countries to respond to humanitarian crises increases***

Many developing countries have seen their capacities and willingness to respond to humanitarian emergencies significantly increase. For example, an increasing number of countries have created national disaster management authorities. Among the 38 most environmentally vulnerable countries⁴ in 2015, 18 have a national disaster management authority including India, Bangladesh and Pakistan⁵. Given this increased capacity, these countries tend to favor their own capacities of emergency response over external intervention from international organizations. Currently, an increasing number of countries, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region⁶ possess substantial resources to respond to disasters unilaterally.

This trend also reflects a greater demand to preserve the space of national governments to act in times of crises concurrently demonstrating their leadership, their capacity to be the primary service provider and their ability to respond to the political challenges that can emanate from disasters. The trend of nationalizing humanitarian responses is also supporting the regionalization of responses as regional bodies are similarly building capacity. Regional entities, which are predicated on the support of national governments and are less inclined to challenge government policies or approaches, are more likely than INGOs

² Walsh, Kenneth T. (2015) '[Hurricane Katrina Was the Beginning of the End for George W. Bush](#)', *U.S. News*, 28 August 2015

³ Jespersen, H., Simonsen, J., & Kent, R. (2013) '[Review of the GHD Initiative: Challenges and perspectives of remaining relevant in a changing humanitarian landscape](#)', *Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHD)*

⁴ As identified in the INFORM index, INFORM (2016) '[Index for risk management global results report](#)'

⁵ Development Initiatives (2015) '[Global Humanitarian Assistance report 2015](#)' pg 88

⁶ Harvey, Paul (2010) '[The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters](#)', Meeting Background Paper of the 26th ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur 16-17 November 2010



to be drawn on where surge capacity is required. For example, ASEAN⁷ was a key actor providing assistance to Myanmar in 2008 following cyclone Nargis while the governing regime rejected any other external assistance⁸. The role of international actors has been challenged for numerous reasons, but often cited is as a lack of communication between INGO's and national authorities breeding resentment. These situations sometimes lead to the creation of "a public discourse of hostility and distrust of humanitarian organizations"⁹ seen as intrusive and as "less effective than national actors"¹⁰.

The level of government capacity to respond to disasters still differs greatly between countries and regions. Even in developing countries, government responses can be insufficient to meet the needs of populations in emergencies (e.g. the Fukushima response), necessitating international assistance. This is even more pronounced in less economically developed countries and as a result is likely to see a continuation in the relevance of the international aid structures though the dynamics of implementing programming will shift as national capacities grow.

No	Year	State	Disaster	Actor	Type of Rejection
1	2012	Iran	Earthquake	Iranian Red Crescent, Government	Rejection of international aid workers and supplies
2	2012	USA	Storm	Government	Rejection of aid offer from the Iranian Red Crescent
3	2011	Japan	Tsunami/ Nuclear Disaster	Government	Rejection of international aid workers, USA expert team
4	2011	Turkey	Earthquake	Government	Rejection and extradition of international aid workers and supplies
5	2010	Russia	Forest Fire	Government	Rejection of international aid workers and supplies
6	2009	Philippines	Storms	Government	Rejection of aid for the region of Mindanao
7	2009	Indonesia	Earthquake	Government	Rejection of aid for the region of West Java
8	2008	Myanmar	Cyclone	Government	Rejection of international aid workers and supplies

9	2005	USA	Hurricane	Government, National Agency (FEMA)	Rejection of International aid, aid by ICRC, offers from Cuba and Venezuela
10	2005	India	Tsunami	Government, Military	Rejection of aid for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands
11	2005	Pakistan	Earthquake	Government	Rejection of aid from India
12	1999	Venezuela	Flood	Government	Rejection and extradition of U.S. troops
13	1995	Russia	Earthquake	Government	No national aid plea despite of massive international pressure
14	1995	Japan	Earthquake	Government	Access denied for international aid workers
15	1991	India	Earthquake	Government	No national aid plea despite of massive pressure from affected region
16	1984	Philippines	Storm	Government	No national aid plea despite of massive international pressure

Table: Cases of rejected humanitarian aid offers, 1984-2012, sources: reliefweb and press research

Cases of rejected humanitarian aid offers, 1984-2012,
Source: Dany Charlotte, Why is humanitarian aid rejected?
Comparing the motives of autocratic and democratic states (2013)

⁷ Baldwin, Katherine (May 2009) [Myanmar: ASEAN finds new purpose with Cyclone Nargis response](#)

⁸ Allan Craig and O'Donnell Therese (2013) [An offer you cannot refuse? Natural disasters, the politics of aid refusal and potential legal implications](#), Amsterdam law forum Vol 5, No 1, Vrije University Amsterdam

⁹ ALNAP (2010) [The role of national governments in international humanitarian response](#), 26th Annual Meeting, 16-17 November 2010, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, [pg 14](#)

¹⁰ ALNAP (2010) [The role of national governments in international humanitarian response](#), 26th Annual Meeting, 16-17 November 2010, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, [pg 13](#)



➤ **Greater political centrality of humanitarian crisis**

The increasing recognition of many humanitarian crises as complex emergencies with political, social and economic dynamics is a recognition of the multi-causal nature of human vulnerability and the plurality of potential hazards¹¹. The framing of humanitarian crises in this manner has raised the political stakes for the actors who are involved (or not) in the response, most notably for national governments who want to be seen as capable of leading even in times of crisis. The political instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid, where the needs of crises-affected populations are subordinated to advance a broader political agenda by key stakeholders (predominantly governments or non-state actors), can create barriers to effective humanitarian action.

Affected states have to give their consent to international aid. Total and partial rejections of humanitarian aid are more frequent particularly after natural disasters. 16 cases of international humanitarian aid being rejected after severe natural disasters have been identified between 1984 and 2012 with a significant increase since 2005¹². Rejection of aid can be directed towards all humanitarian aid offers including those from states, UN organizations, NGO's or Red Crescent. The Government of Myanmar's rejection of international aid for the response to cyclone Nargis in 2008 for "fears of foreign intervention aiming at regime change"¹³ remains the most significant case. Since then, there have been other high profile cases of aid rejection, not limited to natural disasters including the Venezuelan government's rejection of international assistance in the face of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in country due to severe shortages in food and medicine¹⁴.

Aid rejection often stems from a plurality of factors, for example, the state is wary of the political agenda of the international community, the state does not wish to permit foreign aid workers to assess the situation or the state believes that it can adequately respond alone. In 2010, the Chilean government attempted to manage the response to the earthquake without

¹¹ Nascimento, Daniela (2015) [One step forward, two steps back? Humanitarian Challenges and Dilemmas in Crisis Settings](#), The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance

¹² Dany, Charlotte (2013) [Why is humanitarian aid rejected? Comparing the motives of autocratic and democratic states](#), Paper prepared for the 7th ECPR General Conference, September 2013, Bordeaux

¹³ Allan Craig and O'Donnell Therese (2013) [An offer you cannot refuse? Natural disasters, the politics of aid refusal and potential legal implications](#), Amsterdam law forum Vol 5, No 1, Vrije University Amsterdam

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, (October 2016), "[Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis](#)" and Amnesty International (2016). [Venezuela: Stubborn politics accelerate catastrophic humanitarian crisis](#)



external assistance before accepting international aid, given the magnitude of the disaster¹⁵. The fears of foreign influence for societal and political change, mistrust and hostility towards aid workers, the perception that INGOs are western and politicized and the supremacy of the sovereignty principle are cited for explaining total or partial rejection of international assistance¹⁶.

Politicization of humanitarian crises is adding greater complexity to their resolution and can force humanitarian organizations to compromise their principle of neutrality in favor of access to populations in need.

➤ ***Humanitarian assistance as a geopolitical instrument***

The acceptance or rejection of aid is not the only aspect of politicization regarding humanitarian assistance¹⁷. Where aid is channeled by donors is seen as highly political matter. “While some crises attract considerable attention and thereafter large amounts of international humanitarian assistance, others remain persistently underfunded and ‘forgotten’. Despite strong evidence of vulnerability and humanitarian need, these crises are routinely missing from international media headlines and repeatedly absent from the list of countries receiving the most humanitarian assistance”¹⁸. It is clear, given the uneven allocation of financing to crises which do not necessarily reflect the level of need, that donors integrate their own objectives into funding decisions including historical or diplomatic ties, their geo-strategic perspective, and domestic political priorities¹⁹.

In addition to aligning humanitarian assistance to domestic priorities, donor governments can be more direct in using aid as a geopolitical instrument. Bilateral humanitarian aid (government to government) can be seen as method of diplomacy by many developing countries and can be used as a form of soft power. Important new institutional donors, such as China, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates greatly favor direct bilateral support to affected governments. During the 2010-2014 period non-OECD DAC countries they provided only 6.5% of the total reported humanitarian assistance but they provided 50% of all

¹⁵ Other example can be cited such as for 2004 tsunami with rejection from India and Thailand. Schimmelpfenning Sandra (2010) [‘Why Chile is not accepting international assistance’](#), The Huffington post

¹⁶ Dany, Charlotte (2013) [‘Why is humanitarian aid rejected? Comparing the motives of autocratic and democratic states’](#), Paper prepared for the 7th ECPR General Conference, September 2013, Bordeaux

¹⁷ Allan Craig and O'Donnell Therese (2013) [‘An offer you cannot refuse? Natural disasters, the politics of aid refusal and potential legal implications’](#), Amsterdam law forum Vol 5, No 1, Vrije University Amsterdam

¹⁸ Development Initiatives (2016) [Global Humanitarian Assistance 2016](#) pg 57

¹⁹ Development Initiatives (2016) [Global Humanitarian Assistance 2016](#) pg 61



direct funding to affected governments on the same period²⁰ and increased it to 70% in 2015²¹. The emphasis of new donors on bilateral aid reinforces the trend of states leading responses within their borders and gives them the opportunity to rebuff aid which could be viewed as biased or conditional on governmental changes.

Funding by donor region to the 10 recipients of the most international humanitarian assistance, 2015



Development Initiatives (2016) Global Humanitarian Assistance 2016 pg 61

➤ **Rising impediments against NGOs and particularly INGOs interventions**

As a consequence of the resurgence of state sovereignty, humanitarian interventions have become more difficult. Governments in affected states have become more reluctant to allow international organizations to intercede in crises in their borders. There is a push for national NGOs to replace the work done by INGOs based in foreign countries: “since 2012, more than 60 countries have passed or drafted laws that curtail the activity of non-

²⁰ Development Initiatives (2015) [Global Humanitarian Assistance 2015](#) pg 76

²¹ Development Initiatives (2016) [Global Humanitarian Assistance 2016](#) pg 73



governmental and civil-society organizations... [while] ninety-six countries have taken steps to inhibit NGOs from operating at full capacity”²². Countries such as Israel, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Venezuela, Russia, India and China, among others, have recently passed increasingly restrictive laws. This wave of restrictions, particularly from developing countries, is specifically targeting human rights NGO’s and NGO’s considered as under western influence. Increasingly frequently NGOs are obliged to register and precisely report their activities to the local authorities. At the same time, practical constraints such as unusual delays to obtain visas, more restrictive tax regimes, extradition of foreign workers, financial penalties and even staff imprisonment have been on the rise.²³ In addition, counterterrorism measures, principally issued from western countries, have had negative impacts on NGOs activities. This trend is seen as more likely to continue since it is difficult to repeal laws or even practices. It represents a real challenge for humanitarian NGOs activities while it interferes with humanitarian principles such as impartiality.

Weak signal: Deepening disparities of countries’ points of view on humanitarian assistance in international institutions

Increasing disparities of views are highlighted in the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, “the only official forum for donor and disaster-affected states to discuss humanitarian issues” in the United Nations²⁴. On one side, western donor governments promote “the need to respect the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence and to ensure ‘safe and unhindered access’. On the other hand, governments of the G77, representing 134 developing countries, “stresses the primary role of the affected state in the ‘initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory”²⁵. This growing division could put even more pressure on current humanitarian system which is highly dependent on international organizations and is traditionally supporting a more western view.

²² Sherwood Harriet (2016) [‘Human rights groups face global crackdown 'not seen in a generation'.](#), The Guardian, 4 November 2016

²³ Harvey, Paul (2010) [The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters](#), Meeting Background Paper of the 26th ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur 16-17 November 2010

²⁴ Harvey, Paul (2010) [The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters](#), Meeting Background Paper of the 26th ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur 16-17 November 2010

²⁵ Harvey, Paul (2010) [The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters](#), Meeting Background Paper of the 26th ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur 16-17 November 2010