Project rationale and objectives

History is absent from most discussions and debates on humanitarian policy and practice. Lessons from the past are frequently distorted by short-term frameworks or simply ignored despite the fact that many of the challenges faced by humanitarian organisations today are not novel. Even when the history of humanitarianism is invoked, there is a tendency to overlook or deny its complexity.

This attitude has produced a set of received truths about humanitarian action that disguise its historical reality and can inhibit present and future action. For example, it is commonly assumed that, since the events of 9/11, humanitarian access to populations in need has become increasingly difficult because of external actors challenging the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality. Yet the history of humanitarianism reveals a far more complicated picture: the twentieth century witnessed repeated challenges to this principled model from actors outside the humanitarian sector as well as from the agents of humanitarian action themselves. This misperception has obscured the fact that many of today’s challenges stem from a rapidly growing humanitarian system that has extended its reach and ambitions into types of conflict and crisis situations that, in the past, would have been politically and operationally off-limits.

Furthermore, most historical accounts of humanitarian action focus on its Western-oriented evolution – in other words, the creation of organisations to respond to humanitarian needs in Europe in the aftermath of the world wars. Whilst these organisations have broadened their scope to populations in the global South, they continue to be funded by Western governments, have their main offices located in Western Europe and North America and are guided by frameworks, practices and values that derive from the North. Nonetheless, as other forms of humanitarian action play an increasingly significant role in addressing needs in crisis and conflict contexts, many humanitarian organisations are starting to recognise that
improving the acceptance, coordination and reach of humanitarian action requires engagement with what are often referred to as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘emerging’ donors and humanitarian agencies. The humanitarian sector’s Western-oriented nature and outlook are now seen as major shortcomings to effective humanitarian action; yet, in practice, there is little understanding of the diverse histories and perspectives of humanitarian action across the globe.

The overall objective of the study, therefore, is to identify and understand the principal changes in policy, practice and institutional architecture that the humanitarian sector has undergone since the beginning of the twentieth century with the aim of helping the sector better understand its history and make greater use of historical analysis and lessons in current discussions and debates aimed at improving humanitarian action. In addition, the study will also engage with non-Western actors so as to ensure that the analysis of the humanitarian sector’s history is more inclusive and representative of various regional perspectives. At a time when the humanitarian sector is seeking to engage more actively with non-Western national governments, militaries and civil society actors, it is intended that the research project will assist such engagement and dialogue.

Methodology and research questions

The study will be guided by the following overarching questions:

• How has humanitarian action evolved and changed since the beginning of the 20th century? How has this evolution differed in different geographical regions? What key trends and issues can be identified?
• Is there a common understanding of the meaning, origins and composition of humanitarian action across different geographical regions? How do these relate to each other, if at all?
• What analysis and lessons can be derived from historical trends and issues to inform current debates and discussions on humanitarian policy and practice?
The historical review will focus on changes in humanitarian action since the beginning of the twentieth century. It will explore six ‘dimensions of change’. These are:

- Knowledge/norm developments (human rights, international relations, attitudes to national and international welfare, humanitarian principles, humanitarian intervention, research and training platforms etc.)
- Institutional developments (UN, Red Cross, NGO, donor etc)
- Technological developments (telegraph, telephone, radio cargo aircraft, helicopters, internet, satellite media transmission, satellite photography, mobile phones etc.)
- Events creating “humanitarian” needs (natural disasters, conflicts, genocides/mass killings, forced displacements (refugee and IDP movements)
- Practice developments (programme management, logistics management, accountability systems, planning, monitoring, evaluation)
- Developments in the political/geo-political context (imperialism, colonialism, decolonisation, Cold War rivalry, post-Cold War, the Global War on Terror, the emergence of regional powers (e.g. BRICS) and organisations (e.g. ASEAN))

A preliminary schematic framework as to how these six key dimensions might interact in generating change in the humanitarian sector has been developed (see Figure 1).

---

1 The framework was developed by John Borton, based on an initial review of literature. The findings of the review were outlined in a Scoping Paper, which was discussed at the first Steering group meeting. A further review of the history of the humanitarian sector was carried out using the reading list for the “History of Humanitarian Aid: Population and Displacement” course provided by the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) at Manchester University.
The three key dimensions of Knowledge/Norm Development, Technological Development and Institutional Development are posited as interacting between themselves as a distinct group. Practice Development is identified as a separate key dimension located between and interacting with the distinct group and the events. This tentative framework speculates that Practice Development is affected by, and in turn affects, developments within the distinct group and that it affects and is in turn affected by, the disasters, conflicts and other events creating humanitarian needs. All the dimensions are located within and are affected by the overall political and geo-political context.

The historical review will be developed in four overlapping phases:

- **Phase one (July 2011 – June 2012):** An initial working paper will be prepared by the study team outlining a preliminary historical review, based on the existing literature on the history of humanitarian action. This initial working paper builds on the
commissioned Scoping Paper and literature reviews undertaken in 2011, and will summarise and assess the principal developments in policy, practice and architecture since the beginning of the twentieth century. The working paper will draw on a wide range of sources, including government documents, agency and UN archives, published literature on the history of humanitarianism (primarily in English and French) and oral interviews with experienced practitioners and policy-makers. A workshop will be organised with longstanding members of the international/global humanitarian community, including the Steering Group, to discuss and review the draft working paper. The working paper will be revised following the workshop and subsequently published. In addition to helping the humanitarian sector better understand its history, the aim of the working paper is to have a preliminary historical narrative that can be used to initiate a comprehensive engagement with various regional perspectives.

Phase two (January 2012 – January 2013): In order to develop a broader humanitarian history, regional research teams will be formed and tasked with collecting regional historical analyses of humanitarian action. This will consist of an account of the principal elements and strands in the evolution of humanitarian action within their region during our period of focus, assessing both formal and informal mechanisms of intervention. The teams will comprise of regional academics, policymakers and practitioners and detailed terms of references will be developed to guide their methodology and analysis. This is likely to include a review of the literature in the language(s) of the region in question and the use of workshops with key regional stakeholders to discuss and review preliminary findings. The project will initially develop two regional teams (the Middle East and South East and East Asia) with the aim of developing two more teams at a later date within the framework of a project extension.

Phase three (January 2013 – June 2013): Once analyses of the regional perspectives are developed, the core study team, in consultation with the regional teams and the Steering Group, will bring together the overall findings and pull out the key trends and lessons that are pertinent to current humanitarian debates and discussions, including the need to better understand the changing nature of humanitarian action in
the 21st century. A final HPG report will be published in May/June 2013. The possibility of publishing the findings in a full length book will also be explored.

- **Phase four (June 2013 onwards):** A comprehensive dissemination phase will be developed, which will include the publication of multiple products (policy briefs, podcasts, blogs etc) focused on various strands and lessons emerging from the overall analysis. Public events and roundtables will also be organised across the different regions, bringing together different humanitarian communities to discuss the research findings and promote greater engagement and dialogue.

A Steering Group has been created to provide guidance to the project and facilitate access to sources of information, such as humanitarian agency and government archives. The members of the Steering Group have been chosen so as to ensure the project targets key stakeholders and links the research with existing processes aimed at better understanding the history of humanitarian action. The members include:

- Prof. Sultan Barakat (PRDU, University of York)
- Prof. Michael Barnett (George Washington University)
- Jane Cocking (Oxfam)
- Nicola Dahrendorf (LSE)
- Wendy Fenton (Humanitarian Practice Network)
- Randolph Kent (Kings College)
- Jo Macrae (DFID)
- John Mitchell/Paul Knox-Clarke (ALNAP)
- Hugo Slim (Oxford University)
- Prof. Bertrand Taithe (University of Manchester)

The study team includes:

- John Borton
- Margie Buchanan Smith
- Eleanor Davey
- Samir Elhawary
- Lilianne Fan
- Matthew Foley
- Sara Pantuliano
- Eva Svoboda