

## The growing role of regional organisations in humanitarian action

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### Key messages

- Regional organisations are increasingly active in humanitarian action, developing specialised policies and institutions to tackle issues such as emergency response, disaster risk reduction and conflict management.
- Regional institutions are most engaged with humanitarian issues when they are not seen as threatening state sovereignty, when they are financed by donors from outside of the region, when they are framed in technical terms and when they are part of broader global processes.
- Regional organisations have received credit for signing international agreements and establishing institutions regardless of the enforcement of those agreements or the effectiveness of those institutions. Those studying and interested in working with these organisations must consider the impact of their activities upon the wellbeing of crisis-affected people and institutions.

Regional organisations are increasingly engaged with a wide variety of humanitarian issues, and international organisations are hopeful that they may help to share the work involved in responding to disasters, mediating conflicts and undertaking peacekeeping operations. There have been a number of prominent examples where they have done so. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) worked closely with the United Nations and the

Myanmar government to ensure that foreign aid agencies could enter the country and respond to the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. In 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) helped to negotiate a resolution to conflict in Yemen which helped to end violence there and impel the country's ruler of 33 years to step down. In 2013, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed peacekeepers to Mali to work with

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French and Chadian forces in securing the country following a military coup and outbreak of insurgency in the north. There are also many instances of regional organisations contributing to humanitarian outcomes in less prominent ways.

This Policy Brief explores the contribution of regional organisations to humanitarian action. Any such discussion must recognise the basic fact that regional organisations are all formal interstate bodies representing generally contiguous territories, though each regional entity is unique and represents a distinct set of histories, values, cultures and mandates. Very little applies to ‘regional organisations’ as a category, a fact which national, multilateral and non-governmental bodies must acknowledge as they determine how best to engage with these so-called ‘emerging’ actors.

### **The rise of regional humanitarian institutions**

Regional organisations began to emerge following the Second World War, with the League of Arab States (1945) and Organization of American States (1948). Their growth was propelled by decolonisation, which led countries to band together both out of solidarity and in response to perceived threats (e.g. apartheid South Africa in the case of the Southern African Development Community).<sup>1</sup> With a few notable exceptions, particularly the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) in East Africa, they were primarily political and economic bodies addressing issues such as tariffs, immigration, border management and security.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically humanitarian bodies such as the OAS’ 1965 Inter-American Emergency Aid Fund, the Central American Integration System (SICA)’s disaster coordination centre (known as CEPREDENAC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)’s Food Security Reserve were soon followed by a range of other regional institutions. These tended to come in waves. First, following a spate of conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, conflict management and prevention entities proliferated within the African Union (AU) and its regional economic communities.

These included conflict warning systems in eastern, western and southern African regional organisations, in addition to the AU’s Peace and Security Council in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Next, prompted by the impending Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) on disaster risk reduction and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, regional organisations in the Asia-Pacific accelerated regional cooperation surrounding natural disasters.<sup>4</sup> ASEAN’s landmark Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (ADMER) came in 2005, and SAARC established its Disaster Management Centre a year later. The AU, ECOWAS, SADC, the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and others took similar steps.

More recently regional humanitarian institutions have taken on a new form. While initial bodies were generally issue-specific and often followed major international trends and multilateral agreements, regional organisations have begun to approach humanitarian issues as a broader category. ASEAN, for instance, established its Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance, known as the AHA Centre, in late 2011, the same year that the AU adopted its Humanitarian Policy Framework. The OIC now has a broad-based International Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs Department and – like ASEAN – a dedicated humanitarian funding mechanism.

Such developments may point to a new and more mature regional humanitarian architecture more ‘owned’ by the region and less inspired by UN processes. Against this, however, is the fact that regional humanitarian institutions – while financial data is rarely available – continue to be heavily financed by foreign donors rather than by countries within the region. For instance, SOPAC, the main disaster monitoring and management centre in the Pacific, which is run by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, receives the vast majority of its budget

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1 L. Fawcett, ‘Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism’, *International Affairs*, vol. 80, 2004.

2 ROAPE, ‘The Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development’, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 21, no. 59, 1997.

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3 H. Wulf and T. Debiel, *Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: Tools for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Regional Organisations?* (London: London School of Economics, Crisis States Research Centre, 2009).

4 E. Ferris and D. Petz, *In the Neighborhood: The Growing Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management* (Washington DC and London: The Brookings Institution–London School of Economics Project on Internal Displacement, 2013).

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from the European Union. Likewise, SICA's Center for Natural Disaster Prevention receives funding from the US, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and Swiss governments, as well as from the European Commission, the World Bank, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and a number of NGOs. Hence, analysts have questioned the degree to which these institutions are beholden to donor priorities rather than genuinely regional concerns.

### How regional organisations engage with humanitarian action

While the recent proliferation of regional humanitarian initiatives has been reasonably well reported, less is known about what these institutions have achieved in practice. A dearth of publicly available documentation (evaluations, annual reports) makes it difficult to answer this question without additional fieldwork, which the Humanitarian Policy Group will be undertaking in 2013 and 2014. However, a review of the research literature and regional organisations' own materials provides a sense of which entities are involved in which kinds of activities. Specifically, this review focused on assistance to refugees, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and conflict management.

While many regional organisations have policies addressing refugees, few were involved in coordinating assistance for refugees, studied refugee issues or consolidated donor funds to help meet humanitarian agencies' needs. Where they did engage directly with refugees, regional organisations generally provided mostly symbolic levels of assistance. For instance, ECOWAS allocated up to \$15 million in food aid to refugees in West Africa, though the food involved had been financed by the African Development Bank and distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the Arab League has arranged for the delivery of modest amounts of medical supplies to Jordan for the benefit of Syrian refugees.

Despite regional organisations' stated concern regarding the trans-boundary impacts of refugee flows, they appeared to find it difficult to engage given the political sensitivities surrounding refugees in countries of origin and host nations. For instance, CARICOM and SAARC

have been unable to discuss the situation of Haitian refugees in Jamaica and Bhutanese refugees in India and Nepal, respectively, despite repeated attempts to do so. National governments which prefer to address such issues internally or bilaterally with neighbouring countries have, at least in particular instances, prevented regional forums from engaging. Furthermore, tending to view refugees as a protected category under international law, regional organisations such as the OAS and the Andean Community (CAN) have housed them under their legal departments, rather than approaching them from a more fully humanitarian vantage point.

A significant portion of regional organisations' efforts were focused upon DRR, an area which has generally been perceived as far less politically sensitive. Regional DRR efforts date back to the 1970s, when SAARC and ASEAN both established food security reserves and the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission was established. In the early 1990s, the OAS established its Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction, and CARICOM agreed to launch the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency. However, DRR efforts witnessed particular progress in the run-up to and following the HFA, which included a stated role for regional organisations and a regional monitoring process. The HFA also proved particularly influential among regional organisations because, while giving them a role, it did not require them to make sizable investments. Instead, they were allowed to focus upon their primary strength as regional political and coordination entities: developing frameworks and action plans for member states to pursue independently. Today, nearly every regional organisation has policy frameworks focused on DRR and has established centres to conduct research on disasters and engage in some sort of early warning activities. However, as previously noted most activities in this area are financed by international donors or stakeholders from outside of the region.

Regional organisations have also engaged with conflict-related tensions – and the realm of conflict management – albeit selectively. For instance, the OAS has provided support to negotiations over conflict in Colombia, and the OIC has helped to reduce tensions in Mindanao in the Philippines and negotiate aid access in Somalia.<sup>6</sup> In

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5 ECOWAS, 'ECOWAS Supports Ivorian Refugees in Liberia with Humanitarian Assistance', *Echoes of ECOWAS*, vol. 32, 2012.

6 I. Sharqieh, 'Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts?', *Peace and Conflict Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012.

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the Middle East, the GCC earned praise for its work in negotiating a peaceful end to the conflict in Yemen, and the Arab League authorised the creation of a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011 to help protect civilians there (and undermine the Libyan leader, who had antagonised many of his counterparts in the region).

African regional organisations, including the AU and various regional economic bodies, have dealt with conflict in a number of ways, including by establishing early warning systems. The AU and ECOWAS have been exceptionally active in peacekeeping missions. AU peacekeepers have been deployed to Burundi, Sudan/Darfur and Somalia. In Darfur the AU mission was primarily charged with protecting civilians, and in Somalia the mission was formally mandated with helping to ensure continued aid access. That said, AU peacekeeping missions have also been accused of being too small and poorly trained to fulfil the humanitarian and protection mandates they are assigned.<sup>7</sup>

In West Africa, ECOWAS is generally credited with forcing conflict parties into peace talks in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 and with preventing conflict in Guinea in 2009 by threatening a military intervention. Its 2013 intervention in Mali on the heels of French and Chadian forces is also seen as having set the stage for the establishment of a UN mission there later in the year. Although ECOWAS has established a practice whereby it intervenes in conflicts despite knowing that it is likely to become overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge, its decision to do so appears to be motivated by a calculation that its intervention will impel the UN to overcome misgivings and become involved earlier than it otherwise would have done.

## Conclusions and implications

Regional organisations are becoming increasingly active in the humanitarian sphere, building on decades of work, particularly in the Americas. There is increased optimism, particularly after ASEAN's role in enabling humanitarian access in Myanmar, that regional organisations can become key humanitarian actors. Despite this optimism, regional organisations do not necessarily fit into any one model or possess any

across-the-board benefits. Some, such as SAARC, have primarily served as discussion forums among senior officials. Others, including SICA, CARICOM and those in the Pacific, are primarily for cooperation around technical challenges. Meanwhile, ASEAN and the Arab League appear to be grappling with diverse interests and agendas among their members about their future roles, their adherence to principles of non-interference and their willingness to engage with sensitive issues.<sup>8</sup> Such heterogeneity is not necessarily a problem and, at this stage, allows regional organisations to observe and learn from one another.

At present it is not feasible to indicate how humanitarian actors should engage with regional organisations across the board. They must be addressed on an individual basis, and engagements must reflect regional organisations' strengths and achievements, particularly in the case of organisations such as the AU, ECOWAS and ASEAN. Furthermore, as evident in the proliferation of regional DRR initiatives, it is important to frame cooperation as a technical rather than a political or legalistic undertaking. As one can learn from the HFA, international frameworks which specify a role for regional bodies, which have fixed deadlines and which include regular monitoring processes will be most likely to impel progress and follow-up.

That said, instances such as the HFA also make clear that 'progress' must be increasingly framed in tangible rather than institutional or policy-level terms, in relation not only to DRR specifically, but also humanitarian action more broadly. At present regional organisations have tended to win praise for creating new institutions and establishing committees and policy frameworks, without necessarily making any material contribution to the lives of vulnerable populations and those affected by conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies. Policy formulation and institution-building must eventually give rise to practical action if regional organisations are to become significant humanitarian actors. Meaningful progress will continue to be financed by the international community – including bilateral and multilateral institutions – and overseen by national authorities, but regional organisations have a clear role to play in mobilising resources from the former and promoting compliance among the latter.

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7 M. Bateman and M. Hammer, *Don't Call Me, I'll Call You? Challenges and Opportunities to Realising the Responsibility To Protect in Regional Peacekeeping* (London: One World Trust, 2007).

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8 R. Ramcharan, 'ASEAN and Non-Interference: A Principle Maintained', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2000.