

HPG Report

Regional organisations and humanitarian action

Rethinking regional engagement

Sherine El Taraboulsi, Hanna B. Krebs, Steven A. Zyck
and Barnaby Willitts-King

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About the authors

Sherine El Taraboulsi and Barnaby Willitts-King are Research Fellows at the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG). Hanna B. Krebs and Steven A. Zyck were formerly researchers with HPG.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

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Acronyms

ACE	AHA Centre Executive	EERT	ECOWAS Emergency Response Team
AHA Centre	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management	EU	European Union
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia	IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	ICHAD	Islamic Conference Humanitarian Affairs Department
AU	African Union	IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
CAN	Andean Community	LAS	League of Arab States
CAPRADE	Andean Committee for the Prevention and Response to Disasters	OAS	Organization of American States
CARICOM	Caribbean Community	OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
CDEMA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency	OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
CEPREDENAC	Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America	PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
ECHO	European Union Humanitarian Affairs and Civil Protection Department	SADC	Southern African Development Community
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group	SICA	Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
		WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

1 Introduction

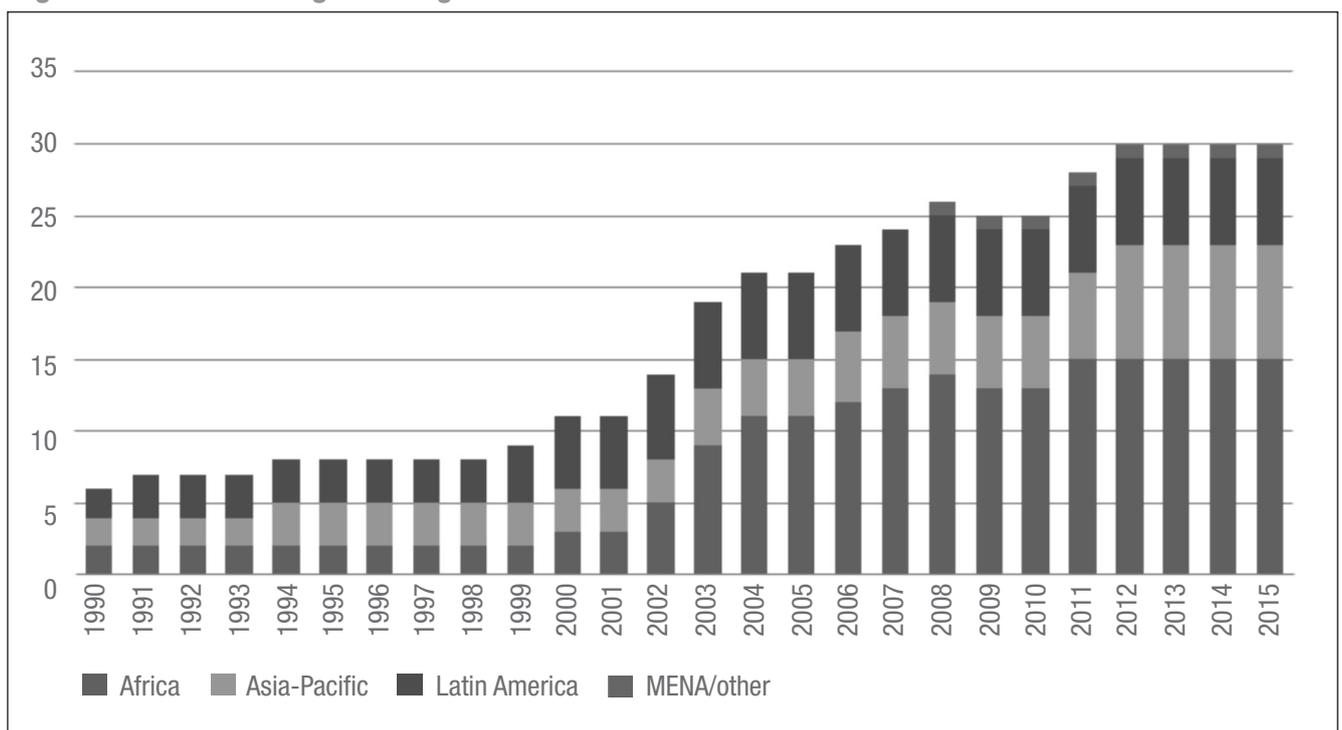
With the expansion of protracted conflicts, pandemic outbreaks and natural hazard-related disasters around the world, the international humanitarian system is struggling to fulfil its mission. There is an emerging consensus that humanitarian action and the way it is conducted, as well as traditional structures of coordination, cooperation and funding, all require reform if we are to better address the complexities of humanitarian engagement (Wilton Park, 2013). Despite advances in humanitarian response, the system is still falling short in addressing the broader structural challenges both posed to and residing within it.

The problems confronting the humanitarian system have stimulated renewed interest in regional engagement, and in the role, potential and limitations of regional organisations in humanitarian action. Regional intergovernmental organisations in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific are becoming increasingly visible players. While it is often stated that regional organisations are an ‘emerging’ humanitarian actor, many have in fact been involved for years in numerous areas, including

disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, humanitarian coordination and aid delivery, and in a variety of crises, ranging from natural disasters and conflicts to pandemics such as Ebola.

Regional organisations are signing international agreements, generating new policies and creating institutional mechanisms to address emergency response, disaster risk reduction and conflict management. Humanitarian capacity has become increasingly institutionalised in the form of specialist centres and departments. While in 1990 there were only five regional humanitarian institutions, by 2015 this number had grown to 30 (Figure 1). The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have sought to address conflicts in their regions, and in a small number of notable instances regional organisations have become directly involved in facilitating access to crisis-affected populations. Chief among these was the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in responding to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, although the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation

Figure 1: Growth of regional organisations’ humanitarian institutions



Source: Zyck, 2013.

(OIC) also drew praise for its work in Al Shabaab-controlled parts of Somalia during the 2011 drought and famine (Fan and Krebs, 2014; Svoboda et al., 2015). Regional organisations in the Americas, the Caribbean and the Pacific, most notably, have long pioneered regional and sub-regional efforts to monitor, predict, prepare for and respond to natural disasters; regional efforts to monitor and combat drought and famine have been ongoing within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for decades (Zyck, 2013a).

Regional organisations do not operate in a vacuum: they are directly influenced by the geopolitical contexts in which they operate. Regional integration is largely dependent on the ability of regional organisations to broker and forge convergence among the member states (ADB, 2010), and sometimes convergence among member states is around inaction, rather than consolidating regional cooperation. For example, Arab leaders saw the Arab League as the gatekeeper of their nations' sovereignty, not a vehicle of integration or cooperation. As a result, no substantial economic or trade agreements have emerged out of the League. Rhetoric on Arab unity was used to 'legitimize their regimes, but not to undertake cooperation that would delegate authority to the regional organization' (Barnett and Solingen, 2007; ADB, 2010: 10).

Power differentials between member states influence how agendas and priorities are set, adding an extra layer of complexity in regional engagement. States have different regime structures, capacities, norms and beliefs, making it difficult to arrive at easy agreement on policies or enforce agreements (Barnett and Solingen, 2007; ADB, 2010). Membership rules and entry requirements into a regional organisation vary; they are usually set by the founding states and as such reflect their preferences. If those preferences change the membership rules change, but this is rarely a smooth process and may meet with resistance from other member states.

This research examines the varying roles of regional organisations and provides a preliminary overview of the various layers of interdependence between international, regional and local organisations in the humanitarian sector. In addressing regional organisations, we recognise that they are not one category or a single unit of analysis: each regional entity represents a 'distinct set of histories, values,

cultures and mandates' (Zyck, 2013: 2). Better engagement with regional organisations requires customised approaches that take into account those differences and build on them.

1.1 Research strategy and methods

This report draws on the findings of a two-year HPG research project on 'Zones of Engagement: Regional Action and Humanitarian Response'. The project was designed to capture the current state of regional organisations involved in humanitarian action around the world, explore the role of regional organisations and analyse the rationale for their involvement in humanitarian action, as well as the ways they differ from – and can complement or, in some instances, replace – traditional humanitarian actors like the United Nations.

The study began with a desk review of the pertinent academic and grey literatures on regional organisations' growing role within the humanitarian community (see Zyck, 2013a; 2013b). That review catalogued the growth of regional humanitarian institutions and identified key similarities and differences among them. The research then moved on to a series of case studies of regional organisations, with a special focus on ASEAN and the OIC. The ASEAN study examined the Association's role in responding to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2011 (Fan and Krebs, 2014), while the OIC study looked at the organisation's role in Somalia, in partnership with the Mogadishu-based Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (Svoboda et al., 2015). Across the fieldwork locations, the research team interviewed and consulted more than 120 representatives of regional organisations, national governments, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, donor entities, civil society organisations and affected communities.

This paper also draws on meetings and workshops, including a roundtable discussion in Jakarta in 2014 and a major, three-day conference of regional organisations organised by HPG in Dubai in 2015. The Dubai conference included more than two dozen senior humanitarian figures from nine regional organisations and more than a dozen experts on regional humanitarian action.

In this report, we will be using a broad understanding of humanitarian action that includes, but is not limited to, the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative's definition of humanitarian action as activities designed to 'save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations' (GHD, 2003: 1). The report takes stock of the various dimensions of regional organisations as entities in their own right,

and the forms of their engagement. It acknowledges two caveats that will require further examination: first, the varying trajectories of different regional organisations and how they can benefit from one another in terms of humanitarian best practices; and second, distinctions (institutional and operational) between regional organisations that primarily focus on addressing disasters, and those that operate in conflict zones. Developing an institutional memory for regional organisations may help create a more effective and sustained presence within the humanitarian system.

2 Multiple regionalisms? Conceptual and operational parameters of regional organisations

The space occupied by regional organisations between the international and the national and/or local has resulted in confusion about how they are defined and the scope of their activities. While the United Nations recognises the role of regional organisations in the maintenance of peace, security and stability in Chapter VIII of its Charter, it does not provide a clear definition of regional organisations, instead referring to them as ‘regional arrangements or agencies’. Likewise, the term ‘region’ has never been properly defined (Baert et al., 2012). A ‘region’ can be a reference to a geographic space, as well as to an economic, social, cultural and/or political one (Archer, 2001). This has resulted in the development of various organisations with vastly different memberships, mandates, capabilities and operations. Regional organisations include trade pacts such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, broader institutions like the AU and issue-specific bodies such as the Nile River Initiative. There are also organisations rooted in identity, like the League of Arab States, and religion, such as the OIC (Zyck, 2013). Many states have multiple ‘regionalisms’; in Africa, for instance, the majority of countries are members of at least two regional organisations, and often many more. These multiple regional and sub-regional groupings typically have conflicting objectives, programmes and mandates.

Each regional organisation emerged as a response to a specific historical context. Regional organisations in Africa evolved as an attempt to address the legacies of colonial rule and economic under-development, and as an expression of African autonomy (Jaye and Amadi, 2011: 4). The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) (1963–2002) ‘fostered a concept of the region as encompassing the entire African continent and this remains the ideational core of African regionalism today’ (Hellquist, 2014: 5). The Arab

League ‘was born as the organizational substitute for the unfulfilled Arab homeland’, while ASEAN is a coalition of interests, rather than ideologies – ‘a small group of internally diverse regimes which never sought to unite beyond intergovernmental cooperation to mutual benefit’ (Hellquist, 2014: 6).

Box 1: The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The idea of the OIC was put forward by King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia in 1969 as a reaction to an attack against the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. It was consolidated into a formal establishment in 1971, and in the mid-1970s it ‘welcomed a range of new members primarily from Africa, including a number of nations which were not necessarily majority Muslim’. One of the motivations to join was that membership was a precondition for loans and grants from the OIC’s subsidiary organ, the Islamic Development Bank.

The OIC’s biggest relief operation was its humanitarian response to the famine in Somalia in 2011. It was involved in a number of capacities: as a diplomatic actor, a technical and operational actor and as a donor. The OIC is credited with having greater access to Al Shabaab-controlled areas than other international organisations. However, ‘the assumption that this Islamic identity was the single most important factor in obtaining access is inaccurate’ – it was more the significant role played by individual organisations within the OIC Coalition (Svoboda et al., 2015: 1).

Box 2: The African Union

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was born in 1963 to promote the unity of African states. In 2002 it became the African Union (AU) as a counterpart to the European Union in Africa that would contain a central bank, a court of justice and an all-Africa parliament. Its major achievements include mediations in border disputes, including between Algeria and Morocco (1963–64) and Kenya and Somalia (1965–67); advocating for international economic sanctions against South Africa as long as apartheid was in place; in 1993, creating a mechanism to engage in peacemaking and peacekeeping; sponsoring an international panel headed by former Botswanan president Ketumile Masire in 1998, to investigate the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 (a report was released in 2000); and the entry into force in 2012 of the AU Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the 'Kampala Convention'), the world's first continental instrument legally binding governments to protect the rights and well-being of displaced people.

ASEAN developed from a role as convener in the 1970s to active engagement in more critical security problems following the end of the Cold War. The forest fires in Indonesia in 1997, the SARS epidemic in 2003 and the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 are all examples of that shift (Fan and Krebs, 2014). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) went from a regional organisation that focused on economic development to one that tackles security issues which it was not 'originally envisaged to address' (Jaye and Amadi, 2011: 3), with peace-making and peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia.

Arriving at a working definition of what constitutes a regional organisation is difficult: plausible criteria could include geographic proximity or contiguity, legal status, mandate and functional or sectoral focus (cf. Zyck, 2013). However, applying criteria such as these assigns boundaries to regional organisations (often boundaries of convenience): in rendering them conceptually limited, their complexities are undercut and simplified. The OIC, for example, incorporates member states that are far from geographically

proximate or contiguous. Moreover, who defines that contiguity? And what criteria are used to define it?

There is thus a definitional confusion about what constitutes a regional organisation, particularly in a non-Western context. Wunderlich (2012: 653) argues that little is known 'about regional organizations beyond the EU or about the circumstances under which regional organizations emerge as international actors'. The existence of multiple regionalisms in Africa testifies to this confusion. This multiplicity has resulted in 'operational problems in the governance and administration of the African integration process', with one analyst suggesting the need for a transition from multiple regionalisms to inter-regionalism, whereby relations between regional groupings are institutionalised and regulated (Habibu-Yaya, 2015: 8). A deeper understanding of their evolution and space within the global humanitarian system, one that is commensurate with the growing expectations being placed on regional organisations, could help direct their future engagement in meeting the needs of crisis-affected people.

It is also unclear what role 'regionalism' could or should play within the sphere of liberal internationalism, which continues to favour multilateral engagement in crises and disasters. In May 2011, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Resolution 65/276 on the participation of the European Union in the work of the United Nations, bridging the gap between regional and global governance systems (Langenhove, 2012: 91). How does this apply to non-Western organisations?

2.1 Mandates and areas of operation

As well as different histories, regional organisations have different mandates and areas of operation. In Asia, for example, member states of regional organisations tend to grant their institutions a mandate to address 'natural' disasters, but not humanitarian crises resulting from conflict or crises of a political nature. This is in part due to the risk profile of the region – it experienced approximately 40% of all the world's natural disasters annually from 2001 to 2011, affecting more than 200 million people a year (Guha-Sapir et al., 2012: 29). In the case of SAARC, India, the organisation's dominant force, has traditionally preferred bilateralism over regionalism

Table 1: Summary of regional organisations

Regional organisation	Focus of action	Forms of action
ASEAN	Natural disasters; non-traditional security threats	Emergency response; information-sharing
AU	Natural disasters; conflicts	Emergency response; information-sharing; early warning; conflict resolution; IDPs; livelihoods; protection; military missions
CARICOM/CDEMA	Natural disasters	DRM; coordination
ECOWAS	Conflicts	Military missions
IGAD	Natural disasters (droughts); conflicts	Conflict prevention and resolution
OAS	Natural disasters; conflicts	Conflict resolution; IDPs
OIC	Natural disasters; conflicts	Emergency response; conflict resolution
PIF	Natural disasters; conflicts	DRM
SADC	Conflicts	Conflict resolution
SICA/CEPREDENAC	Natural disasters	DRM; coordination
SPC	Natural disasters; climate vulnerability	DRR; information-sharing
SAARC	Natural disasters	DRM; information-sharing

in diplomacy based on the fear that its neighbours would unite against it (Wulf, 2009: 10; Nathan, 2010: 7). This preference is reflected in the SAARC Charter, which states that ‘bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations’ of the organisation (SAARC, 1985).

In the Pacific countries, different regional organisations focus on different activities and types of crises (Jeggle, 2014: 267). The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) helps its member states address the risks posed by natural disasters and climate vulnerability, focusing primarily on DRR rather than emergency response. In contrast, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) (formerly the South Pacific Forum) has engaged with conflicts in places such as Bougainville, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Beginning with the collective rejection of nuclear weapons’ testing in the Pacific Islands in 1971, it has made efforts to establish norms and standards for regional security and to commit leaders to promoting security and preventing conflict. However, such activities have remained primarily focused on diplomatic solutions to conflicts, rather than the humanitarian consequences of violence.

The humanitarian mandates of regional organisations in the Americas also tend to focus on natural disasters. The Central America Integration System (SICA) offers a specialised regional disaster risk management forum in the shape of the Coordinating Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC), established in 1988. After

Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in 1998, CEPREDENAC was mandated with the application of a new Strategic Framework for the Reduction of Vulnerability and Disasters in Central America, as well as the implementation of a Regional Disaster Reduction Plan (PRRD). CARICOM likewise focuses on disasters and the mobilisation and coordination of relief (CDEMA, 2013). The Organization of American States (OAS) has tended to move beyond this sole focus on natural hazards, and has also examined some of the consequences of conflict, most notably through its humanitarian de-mining programmes and its work on refugees and displacement.

African organisations have had some of the broadest mandates with relevance to humanitarian issues. The AU’s Special Emergency Assistance Fund (SEAF) has supported a wide range of interventions promoting livelihoods and addressing disasters and other emergencies, including early warning, food storage, reforestation, post-emergency reintegration, emergency preparedness and post-disaster reconstruction in more than 30 AU states (Ferris and Petz, 2013: 36). The AU is also developing a Humanitarian Framework Policy for Africa aimed at providing strategic guidance to all humanitarian actors on the continent in preparedness and capacity-building (Ferris and Petz, 2013: 38).

African organisations have a visibly more interventionist stance than counterparts in other regions. The founding mandates of the AU, ECOWAS and SADC recognise that conflict resolution is a

prerequisite for political and economic stability (Nathan, 2010: 11). Article 4 of the AU Charter opened up the possibility of military intervention in cases of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity, and upon request of a member state ‘in order to restore peace and security’ (Wulf, 2009: 15). This interventionist mandate translated into the establishment of the African Standby Force and military operations such as the AU missions in Burundi (AMIB) and Sudan (AMIS), and the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in West

Africa. IGAD also has a mandate to promote peace and stability and to create mechanisms for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts, though its attempts in this area have been limited, with temporary successes in Somalia in 2004 and south Sudan the following year (Nathan, 2010). Likewise, SADC proved unable to address the Angolan civil war in any meaningful way (Nathan, 2010: 7), and was crippled by the divergent strategies of member states in the face of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Nathan, 2006).

3 International frameworks for engagement

The past two decades have seen regional organisations move away from fragmented, sector-specific efforts to establish more broad-based humanitarian institutions such as the OIC's Islamic Conference Humanitarian Affairs Department (ICHAD) and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). These institutions have provided a clearer interlocutor for UN agencies and other humanitarian actors, and have prompted a new wave of thinking on how regional organisations can more fully contribute to humanitarian action, either alongside or in lieu of the international community writ large. In May 2015, a high-level meeting at the United Nations General Assembly called for strengthening cooperation between the United Nations and regional and sub-regional organisations via frameworks that reflected the comparative advantages of the United Nations and its regional and sub-regional partners. Central to the meeting was a wider recognition of the complementarity between the international and the regional, and the need to institutionalise and consolidate that interdependence into policy.

A number of international frameworks support regional organisations' humanitarian role, and there have been calls for strengthening cooperation between regional and international structures, including UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which established the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); the Millennium Development Goals; the

Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) on DRR; and numerous materials surrounding the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). The WHS regional consultation in Tokyo concluded that 'governments and the humanitarian community need to capitalize on regional organizations' emerging role in humanitarian response for the repository, dissemination of knowledge and expertise on innovation' (WHS, 2014: 3). Stating that 'regional intergovernmental organizations should play an important role in the regional platforms for disaster risk reduction' (WCDRR, 2015: 14), the recently adopted Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 underlines their relevance in addressing future challenges.

Regional and international organisations are not always aligned in their objectives, and may also be at odds with the international humanitarian system, especially in the context of conflicts, for example when the UN Security Council authorised Resolution 1973 and launched coercive action in Libya in March 2011. The Council made several references to the cooperation of the League of Arab States, the AU and the OIC (Baert et al., 2012: 2). However, while the UN and the EU were pursuing an intervention in Libya, the AU suggested a peace initiative, not coercive action, following its guiding principles including the Lomé Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes in Government (2000) and the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2002), both of which prohibit unconstitutional changes in government (de Waal, 2012).

4 Regional organisations: opportunities and challenges

Interviews for this study indicated a gap between how regional organisations are perceived by different actors, and the reality of their operations. There is a discrepancy between the degree to which regional organisations are embedded in their contexts, and the expectation that they are closer to community needs than international actors, and their technical and organisational capacity to deliver assistance effectively. Perceptions of the neutrality of regional organisations are a source of debate within academic and practitioner circles. Because they are considered closer to the local context than international actors, and because their governance structures are dependent on member states, their ‘neutrality’ is questioned and, at times, diluted. Thomas Princen, for example, argues that they can be ineffective because they carry ‘neither the advantages of the major powers or concerts – [they do] not have the bargaining capacity – nor that of the “neutrals”’ (Princen, 1992: 229).

In response to this view, respondents interviewed for this study urged a distinction between contexts of conflict and disasters when it comes to evaluating neutrality – according to one respondent from a regional organisation:

We should separate between humanitarian action in conflict on the one hand, and disasters on another. They always get mixed. When we mix the problem, we mix the solution. We lose the clarity of the problem we want to resolve. Eighty percent of humanitarian action is directed to conflict zones. The problem is that we generate recommendations for conflict settings and then apply it to disaster management and then get the wrong recommendations.

Another challenge posed to regional engagement is a technical one, involving decision-making, articulating a common vision and, in turn, homogeneous approaches, especially if member states have conflicting interests. Who sets the agenda for a regional organisation’s humanitarian engagement? What degree of ownership does a regional organisation’s leadership have over the

strategies they set? Kasaija (2013: 133) points out that, in the case of Africa, while countries may share culture and history, they have rarely ‘spoken with one voice on issues concerning the continent’. In West Africa, ‘in some cases, conflict affected countries accused neighbouring states of having played a surreptitious role in their predicament and even threatened to take reprisal actions’ (N’Diaye, 2011: 49). Furthermore, ‘at any point during the Cote d’Ivoire conflict in September 2002, in Senegal throughout the 1980s and 1990s, throughout the Mano River basin neighbouring countries have accused one another of interference’ (N’Diaye, 2011: 49). In the absence of internal cohesion, the AU’s capacity to respond effectively and consistently to crises is highly questionable. Cook (2015) raises related concerns over the representativeness of regional organisations. For example, it is doubtful that ECOWAS’ humanitarian agenda is truly representative of all its member states, rather than primarily reflecting Nigeria’s strategic interests.¹

A third problem is efficiency. Respondents described smoother decision-making and less bureaucracy in regional organisations as opposed to international ones. While this is not necessarily true to their organisational structures, there is the perception, on the part of civil society actors and beneficiaries, that regional organisations are less bogged down in bureaucracy than multilateral international organisations, which allows them more access to local organisations that do not have the capacity and sometimes the expertise to write long proposals and reports. The UN and international NGOs were described as ‘inefficient’ because of ‘very long and unnecessary processes’, especially compared to the OIC, for example, which has a ‘faster process’ and ‘lower administration costs’. Moreover, a simpler grant application process seems to be in place – ‘an easy process when it comes to contracts. You don’t need to have a perfect proposal or go through a long

¹ This argument can also be made about the US in NATO and the OAS, and Russia in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Kabia, 2009).

and arduous process. If you work with them on a number of projects, they will trust you'. However, this may reflect less demanding or consistent expectations among regional organisations in terms of quality control, budgeting, results and impact monitoring. This difference also tends to be driven by the quality and accountability requirements of member states or donors.

Respondents from civil society organisations and beneficiaries perceived regional organisations as more effective insofar as they invest in infrastructure while also delivering relief assistance. When compared to the UN and other European humanitarian actors, Islamic organisations were described as 'more noticeable' because, while the UN 'spends hundreds of millions of dollars in Somalia, we [they] don't know where the money went'. Regional organisations seem to be evolving a development-based approach to assistance. According to one professional: 'The best humanitarian practice is to help, but not give all the time, but rather take affected communities out of their situation. We have to invest/encourage more development projects instead of focusing only on humanitarian assistance'. This reflects a broader conception of humanitarian action than that of Western agencies, in common with many rising donors, with less distinction between humanitarian and development assistance. Although figures for assistance from regional organisations are not readily available, this perception could also reflect greater levels of trust in regional organisations, particularly in the Islamic world, compared to 'Western-dominated' UN and NGO agencies.

With these perceptions of less bureaucracy and closer ties to the local context, it was suggested that regional organisations are able to enhance regional coordination and, in turn, increase the capacity of key national institutions. They have a major role to play in supporting the ability of national governments to effectively lead humanitarian action. They can, for example, capitalise on their convening power, help national governments understand their rights and obligations regarding humanitarian issues under international law and help member states share experiences and lessons for coordinating and shaping humanitarian operations. As regional organisations' humanitarian institutions grow and develop, they can become a source of capacity-building for member states' national disaster management agencies, line ministries, militaries, local authorities and local organisations involved in crisis preparedness and response. This, however, would require further buy-in by member states in regional structures.

Respondents expressed their interest in seeing regional organisations engage further in humanitarian diplomacy, to actively lobby for decision-makers to act in the interests of affected populations and with respect to humanitarian principles. The links between a regional organisation's diplomatic and humanitarian wings can be an opportunity to leverage rather than underplay such a role and focus on crafting regional agreements on humanitarian action (among member states and between member states and the international community), negotiating access to ensure that assistance reaches crisis-affected communities and contributing to conflict resolution and the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Investing in people was described as critical to regional (or national or local) leadership of humanitarian action. One way to do this has been through establishing capacity-building programmes that aim to identify emerging regional humanitarian leaders and provide them with additional support to realise their potential. For example, ASEAN's AHA Centre Executive (ACE) Programme provides several months of training on issues such as the global humanitarian system, programme management, strategy writing, team-building and public speaking.

4.1 Regional organisations in focus: a mapping of roles

Here, we group the various roles of regional organisations into three categories: Intermediary, Interlocutor and Intervener. We also make suggestions as to how each of those roles can be optimised within the international humanitarian system.

4.1.1 Intermediary

As an intermediary, regional organisations are actors and implementers – they constitute a link between national and local needs and international humanitarian organisations. Regional organisations are well-positioned to play this role because they have faster decision-making processes and fewer bureaucratic impediments, and are expected to be able to respond to urgent situations faster than multilateral organisations (Paliwal, 2010; Franck, 2006). It remains unclear, however, if smoother bureaucracy would be maintained if funding to regional organisations were increased. One respondent worried that regional organisations may become torn between trying to meet international standards while carrying out their humanitarian

activities the 'local way': 'We know international mechanisms but we understand which size fits which context, and we need to be selective'.

There are examples of successful cooperation between international and regional organisations that may point a way out of this dilemma. ECOWAS performed a key role as an intermediary in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau – 'the peace agreements signed to end the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone were signed under the auspices of ECOWAS, notably the Cotonou, Abuja and the Accra peace agreements on Liberia and the Lome Peace Agreement on Sierra Leone'. This was a collaboration between the UN and ECOWAS, but the bulk of the mediation initiatives was undertaken by ECOWAS (Olonisaken, 2011: 15). Other examples include ASEAN's humanitarian intervention in Myanmar in 2008 following Cyclone Nargis. The government initially refused international assistance, and it was through ASEAN's initiative that an intervention was coordinated between the UN, ASEAN and the Myanmar government. One respondent highlighted this as an instance where a regional organisation facilitated humanitarian assistance while respecting the sovereignty of the state concerned. A year later, the ASEAN intervention was described as 'a conduit between a military government distrustful of any foreign involvement and an international donor community that feared the junta would divert any resources it gave in response to the disaster' (Baldwin, 2009).

There are also challenges to this intermediary role. In the case of ECOWAS, there are limitations stemming from insufficient funding and a lack of technical capacity. Nevertheless, it still has the advantage of superior regional knowledge and the commitment of its member states to regional security and integration, which may constitute the basis for systematic peacebuilding in the region. The missing link remains making a practical operational reality of tools such as the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (Olonisakin, 2011: 27).

Another dimension of regional organisations' role as intermediary is the devolution of power, whereby the humanitarian response in a disaster or conflict is passed on to the regional organisation, based on the assumption that regional bodies are closer to the needs of affected populations. The concept of subsidiarity fundamental to the operations of the EU

helps in understanding this devolution. Within the context of the EU, subsidiarity aims to determine the level of intervention that is most relevant based on areas of competence between the EU and its member states. This concerns action on three levels: European, national and local. It is thus a tiered structure for power allocation which favours delegating power to a lower tier of authority (O'Brien, 2000): 'a principle of locating governance at the lowest possible level – that closest to the individuals and groups affected by the rules and decisions adopted and reinforced' (Slaughter, 2004).

Within the context of regional engagement, subsidiarity does have its merits, but delegation of governance in regional engagement is also not without its challenges and its critics (Vischer, 2001; Marquardt, 1994). Analysts have questioned the capacity of regional organisations' structures to act as efficiently as their international counterparts. ASEAN, for example, articulates its goals in the preamble to the 1967 Bangkok Declaration as follows: 'to promote regional cooperation in Southeast Asia in the spirit of equality and partnership and thereby contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity in the region'. Nevertheless, the structure of East Asian regional organisations has prevented the development of strong and effective regional governance mechanisms. This is because of an inherent tension between state sovereignty/autonomy on the one hand, and regional governance on the other. This has been influenced by ASEAN's organisational structure, and the ASEAN formula, as Amitav Acharya described it, emphasises a non-interventionist model, which has led to an over-reliance on consensus-based decision-making, affecting both the effectiveness of the regional organisations model in South-east Asia and the future of those structures as a viable model and intermediary for humanitarian action.

4.1.2 Interlocutor

As interlocutors, regional organisations are more familiar with the socio-cultural landscape in which they operate. Their understanding of cultural, political, ethnic and social aspects/drivers of crisis is stronger than distant states'.² Interviews confirmed this view –

2 This point is also supported by former UN General Assembly president Sam Kahamba Kutesa who acknowledged that 'regional and sub-regional organizations are distinctly positioned to understand the root causes and dynamics of issues in their regions'. 'Statement of the President', http://www.un.org/pga/111114_statement-joint-debate-un-regional-organisations.

one respondent from a regional organisation described 'political acceptance' by member states towards the regional organisation that represents them. As such, their response is likely to be more contextually appropriate (Moller, 2015; Zyck, 2013; Paliwali, 2010). This understanding is also the result of a shared fate – conflicts and disasters are seldom confined to a state but almost always flow into neighbouring states, and sometimes even regions. In West Africa, for example, multi-layered complexities of demographic, political, economic and cultural ties exist between countries whose boundaries were carved haphazardly (N'Diaye, 2011: 49). This reasoning is the foundation of the notion 'African Solutions to African Problems' which, since the 1990s, has gained widespread support among developed states (Beswick, 2010). However, there are problems with the role of regional organisations as interlocutors related to neutrality, homogeneity and representativeness.

Fostering trust is central. Perceptions of trust on the part of beneficiaries and local organisations towards regional organisations emerged as their core asset in all the interviews conducted for this study. However, there were also perceptions of distrust between regional organisations and among their member states as a result of power differentials between members and tensions between state sovereignty and regional engagement, especially in contexts of conflict. This has resulted in a failure to create regulations that would be 'regional' rather than solely 'local': in the case of South-east Asian regional organisations, regional governance mechanisms are squeezed out because this distrust perpetuates a preference for state autonomy and capacity, as well as continuing openness to global governance mechanisms (Foot, 2011). While dialogue continues among member states, many are reluctant to deepen cooperation due to concerns that other members who are seen as rivals would turn this to their own advantage (Foot, 2011).

There seem to be higher levels of trust towards regional organisations among local organisations, partly on account of their straightforward bureaucratic and governance structures. For example, one respondent from a civil society organisation in Africa explained that they do not wait to receive funds but start operations once they receive funding approval – 'The reason is that we know that they will not change their mind. It is about trust. And this is good for those who need urgent help'. This 'light touch' approach contrasts with the more onerous requirements of aid

bureaucracies such as the UN – but there is clearly a balance to be struck between speed and informality on the one hand, and on the other the rigorous assessments and coordinated responses that (at least in theory) the more established aid actors apply. This may also relate to different appetites for risk, the relatively small amounts of funds disbursed and direct relations between regional organisations' officials and grantees. As regional organisations grow in size, one challenge will be to maintain the strong levels of trust from local organisations, while dealing with the issues that a greater role would imply in terms of scrutiny, consistency and rigour.

Regional organisations have a local history in addition to a regional one, and the continuity of their activities in disaster and conflict areas was highlighted by respondents as a factor in their effectiveness and in consolidating bonds with the communities they assist. UN agencies were described as selective because they tend to choose locations that are more secure or stable. It was also said that Islamic regional organisations had more in common with the regions they work in in cultural and social terms, facilitating the brokering process. This has given the OIC access, for example, in Al Shabaab-held areas which international organisations could not reach.

To ensure trust, regional organisations need to broker convergence with national and local actors. This can happen by promoting regulatory preparedness for humanitarian action at the national level. While regional organisations are rightly wary of introducing regulations and policies that would require resolution with national and international legal frameworks, they can play a role in promoting national laws to facilitate humanitarian action. Such laws and regulations would, for instance, identify what sorts of processes – customs, accreditation of foreign medical teams, liability for humanitarian agencies, licencing of foreign aid actors – would and would not apply during an emergency. Policies, collectively known as the 'Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance' (also known as the 'IDRL Guidelines') are one example of how regulatory preparedness can be enhanced.

Investment in new mechanisms is needed to cultivate trust and create a sense of community among regional organisations. This could happen via establishing regional research centres and networks

for humanitarian action. Many of the leading research centres on humanitarian issues are in Europe and North America. While regional organisations may not wish to recreate Western-style think tanks or university departments focused on humanitarian issues, they do have the potential to establish virtual think tanks at the regional level, bringing together academics, experienced humanitarian professionals and others in order to provide technical inputs and share information and know-how, as is already happening in South-east Asia.

It is important to streamline and establish rules of engagement for bilateral military support during disasters and other emergencies. Regional organisations, including ASEAN, have increasingly carved out a role as arbiters of inter-military cooperation. Given that a neighbouring country's military may be well-placed to respond to a nearby disaster, governments and militaries need pre-agreed operating procedures to guide the use of military assets in disaster response. Regional organisations could help institutionalise regional agreements and guidelines such as SOPs to strengthen interoperability among national militaries, or Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) to facilitate operational cooperation. Such instruments would not pre-approve one country's military intervening in another country's disaster, but they would mean that procedural and operational guidelines for the deployment of military actors are pre-determined, rather than hastily negotiated amidst a major disaster.

4.1.3 Intervener

As an intervener, regional organisations are actors in their own right, often in response to the needs of their member states. While the OAU refused to intervene in the genocide in Rwanda so as not to interfere in the affairs of one of its member states, this has changed. The constitution of the AU permits collective intervention in a member state to combat

'war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity', and on this basis the AU has intervened in Darfur (ADB, 2010: 9; African Union, 2002). However, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights established by the 1981 Charter on Human and People's Rights has had little influence and has been largely ineffective in reducing human rights violations in Africa, or in getting member states to adhere to the Charter (ADB, 2010: 9).

Regional organisations' engagement with conflict management has been highly uneven between different regions (Zyck, 2013) – though with the expansion of conflicts around the world, within and across states, regional organisations may be faced with new challenges and may not be able to be as selective in their engagement. While African organisations have been by far the most active in preventing and responding to conflict, Asian organisations (e.g. ASEAN) have proved most reluctant, despite significant conflict in the region.³ Organisations engaged in conflict management participate in some activities more than others. For example, Barnett (1995) argues that, aside from electoral activities, regional organisations are relatively inactive in peace-building. Their varying willingness to participate in different conflict management activities appears to be influenced by the interplay of different factors, including a preference for non-interference, lack of capacity or geographical reach and political differences within regional organisations (Wulf and Debiel, 2009: 2). The institutional rhetoric and established principles of many regional organisations do not match the reality of their actions; as such, it is important to examine both policy and practice (Harvey, 2010).

3 'Despite the prevalence of conflict in South Asia, SAARC and ASEAN rarely, if ever, engage in conflict management' (Zyck, 2013: 24). Fan and Krebs (2014) argue that, in the case of ASEAN, this is because of its overriding concern for upholding the doctrine of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs.

5 Conclusion: making commitments and charting a way forward

Regional organisations, situated between the ‘international’ and the ‘local’, are often perceived to be closer to the needs of affected people, while also maintaining links with, and benefiting from the reach and technical expertise of, the international humanitarian system – NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and the UN. As demonstrated above, this perception does not always match the reality on the ground. In addition, shortcomings of the current system, such as applying ‘a one-size-fits-all’ response and not adequately integrating aid recipients in the humanitarian response (SOHS, 2015), are all gaps that regional organisations might be expected to fill. However, the degree to which the logic in favour of regional organisations is manifested in their operations in disasters and/or conflict requires a new framework of engagement that emphasises sustainable and strategic complementarity.

While it is important to acknowledge, study and learn from notable past and more recent experiences of regional humanitarian action, it is also worth asking why regional organisations have generally played a minor role in responding to major emergencies, and why they have been selective in their responses. This paper has taken a sober look at what has been achieved with regard to regional humanitarian action, what has not materialised and the barriers that have prevented regional organisations from playing a larger humanitarian role.

Ultimately, this paper does not argue for or against regional organisations’ growing role in humanitarian action. It is apparent that the humanitarian system needs regional organisations as part of an increasingly inclusive range of stakeholders. Instead, the question is how regional organisations can complement other humanitarian actors (including the governments of affected states and the UN) and what can be done to develop proper systems for collaboration and coordination to maximise their contribution to the

wellbeing of crisis-affected communities. While regional organisations have advantages, such as a (perceived) better understanding of context, they also have disadvantages that need to be taken into account – such as their restricted mandates and low levels of resourcing.

As noted above, it will be crucial for regional humanitarian institutions to complement rather than compete with their international (and national) counterparts, while also developing roles that their member states are comfortable with. The following recommendations for regional humanitarian institutions emerge from this study as a whole, and are particularly influenced by in-depth discussions with regional organisations’ humanitarian leaders during HPG’s ‘Regional Humanitarianism in Action’ conference in Dubai in 2015. Each suggestion does not necessarily apply to the same extent to each regional humanitarian body, and it is important to note that several of these tasks have already been tackled by particular regional entities. These are the priorities for action, in addition to a number of recommendations and observations within the report:

For regional organisations and their member states

- The roles of intermediary, interlocutor and intervener all have their place in the activities of regional organisations depending on context. What is crucial is that each regional organisation defines its role and sets clear and realistic agendas for what it can and cannot do – and pushes back against outsized expectations in the short term from political leaders, member states and others in the international community. This will require a degree of humility among regional organisations, which are increasingly portrayed as a crucial part of the international architecture despite often having few personnel and limited programmable resources for humanitarian action. Setting more

realistic expectations for regional humanitarianism is crucial in ensuring that regional bodies do not take on responsibility for objectives well beyond their capacities. At present the risk is not that regional humanitarian institutions will take on too little – it is that they will take on core humanitarian functions and prove unable to deliver meaningful resources or results for crisis-affected communities.

- Member states must provide greater support to regional organisations' humanitarian institutions, rather than leaving this financial responsibility primarily to Western donor governments. Such financial support must be predictable and sufficient to enable regional humanitarian departments to undertake the tasks that their members expect of them; funds should also be flexible rather than strictly earmarked for specific activities or crises.
- It will be crucial for regional organisations' humanitarian institutions to build a network that enables their senior leaders and technical experts to learn from one another and share information, documents, good practice and lessons. The establishment of the Regional Organisations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) after the 2015 conference in Dubai has demonstrated the value of such peer networking. It is primarily technical in nature given the difficulty of attempting to develop inter-regional humanitarian agreements. Regional organisations should identify specific activities where this network can add value to their programmes of work, and dedicate

sufficient capacity to support the continued functioning of the network.

For the UN and other international aid agencies

- International organisations should work with regional organisations to develop complementary frameworks defining respective roles and relationships. For example, the UN system and others should help progressively identify a specific place for regional organisations' humanitarian institutions within the global aid architecture (e.g. the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) or Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) Advisory Group) and within particular forums, such as the World Humanitarian Summit. UN and regional organisations' member states should then support the steps required to formalise the location and role of regional organisations within the architecture.
- UN agencies and major international NGOs should consider twinning and secondment arrangements to build relations with regional organisations' humanitarian institutions. These could involve welcoming regional humanitarian staff members into UN structures in order to learn about the UN system and to educate UN colleagues about how regional organisations operate; likewise, UN personnel could gain first-hand understanding of regional humanitarian institutions by working within them for periods ranging from several weeks to a year. Such exchanges would help to build mutual awareness and capacity and foster the interpersonal relationships necessary for humanitarian action.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
E-mail: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: <http://www.odi.org/hpg>

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