"Trends We Cannot Ignore"
Dr. Catherine Bragg
Adjunct Professor, Centre for Humanitarian Action
University College Dublin

Open Seminar
Changes in the Humanitarian Landscape: Implications for Policy and Practices
University of Copenhagen
February 4, 2014

Good morning!

I am very grateful to University of Copenhagen for inviting me to join this Open Seminar on Changes in the Humanitarian Landscape. I come here as an Adjunct Professor from a fellow university in the NOHA Network, University College Dublin. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to be part of mutual contribution and collaboration between the two universities.

The topic you have invited me to speak on requires me to put on another hat, to draw from my background as the former ASG for Humanitarian Affairs in the UN. My tenure there afforded me a wonderful vantage point to survey the changes that have taken place in the past little while.

The topic of today's Seminar is, "Changes in the Humanitarian Landscape; Implications for Policy and Practices". When we talk about "changes", we are talking about what is different from the past. The term "implications" hints at the future, and more importantly, how we can shape the future. I'd like to take this discussion about the past, present and the future of humanitarian action through the lens of some of the prominent trends. While it is important to look at what we have done, and learn the lessons to do better in the future, I think it is just as important to understand what are some of the bigger forces at play that may have even larger impact on what we could do in the future, irrespective of how much we want to improve on our action.

A bit of history

International humanitarian action is fundamentally a form of **organized outside intervention.** From the battlefields of Solferino that started the Red Cross Movement, to North American farming cooperatives sending food aid to a starving Soviet Union, to the post WWII rise of multilateral and international aid agencies such as UNHCR or Oxfam, it has been about the extended the hand of "others" to those who are suffering because of natural disasters or conflict. From this history, the humanitarian community developed and adopted the notion of "the humanitarian imperative" (that is, the obligation of the international community to provide humanitarian assistance, even overriding all other considerations) as justification for this outside intervention.

The post-Cold War era gave room for the creation of a more organized "international humanitarian system" under the auspices of the UN. With the fall of the Soviet Union and before the rise of China, it was possible to envision a world and a business model, simplistically put, in which rich, mostly Western, countries funded multilateral organizations, and their sub-contractors, to work in poor and fragile states with humanitarian situations. I am sure you are all familiar with the contours of this system that began with the UN General Assembly Resolution (46/182) in 1991 and it is still, broadly speaking, the official structure today. I will refer to it as the IASC-system hereon, in reference to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee that is at the core of it. It is noteworthy that the IASC is primarily about UN agencies and the major international NGOs. National and community-based non-governmental organizations, while increasingly more involved with IASC in the twenty years since, still operate largely at the periphery of the system. The ICRC and IFRC are standing invitees to the Committee, but remain independent of it.

Today's Crises

Let's fast forward to today's crises, and take Syria and the Philippines as examples to compare with the original intent of Resolution 46/182 and the subsequent related resolution.

(1) Syria

The Syrian Crisis is today's biggest humanitarian crisis. 9.3 million people needing urgent assistance, 6.5 million internally displaced. The number of

refugees today is over 2m and is projected to reach 4m by the end of this year. The multilateral agencies have reached about 3.8 million people inside Syria.

In 2013, donors contributed a total of $4.4B. Amongst them, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar were part of the top 15 donors, together totalling more than $500m toward the Syrian Appeals. However, it is said that much larger amounts of aid and aid funding have been provided by these Gulf donors, and Turkey, through non-IASC channels, to well connected or powerful individuals and organizations for distribution in vulnerable communities, particularly in Opposition-held areas. There does not appear to be a separation of military, political and humanitarian objectives in their aid provision.

From the beginning of the Crisis, the Syrian government has tightly controlled the international humanitarian operation and access. Even as it fights a civil war in the past three years, it has continued to insist on its sovereign right to let in, or not, aid from UN agencies and international NGOs, and to require them to work under the auspices of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). The Syria Government has refused cross-border operations, which would have given access to many Opposition-held areas in the Northern part of the country bordering on Turkey. It is widely known, though, that cross-border operations are carried out by some NGOs, both international and national.

(2) Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines

Typhoon Haiyan was one of the strongest cyclones to make landfall, if not the strongest ever. 14 million people were affected, with 4 million displaced. The Government of Philippines welcomed international assistance the day after the typhoon has passed. Despite having a very capable national disaster management structure, and national strength in preparedness and early warning, the scale of the destruction exceeded the country's ability to cope. The UN RC/HC launched a Typhoon Action Plan 4 days after the cyclone, and a $788m Strategic Response Plan for one year was launched one month later. The IASC response to the disaster benefited from the Transformative Agenda, a system reform initiative started two years prior, with much better coordination, deployment and leadership. In the first weeks, 20 countries sent military assets, which were

indispensable to overcome the initial logistical constraints from the infrastructure destruction, and allowed civilian humanitarian efforts to begin. Through it all, the Government led, and continue to lead, the relief and now the recovery operation.

Typhoon Haiyan response was not just a better version of the Haiti earthquake response. There were three distinctive differences between the Haiyan response and response to all other major natural disasters before.

First, cash transfer programs have become mainstream, comprising 20% of the programming. Cash transfer programs also fostered significant programmatic partnerships with private sector financial institutions, and with the government's social protection programs. For the first time, OCHA deployed a CTP coordinator.

Second, both aid providers and the affected people used and are using technology and social networking in the disaster response. I confess to be a techno-peasant, I don't really understand, nor can I use well, today's technology. So I am relying on what I am told, and probably have little understanding of the true significance of what is going on. But we know that crowd sourcing methods are used to assess damage and needs. Social media are used for communication between the aid providers and communities and affected people. They are also used by individual Filipinos, without going through any organized bodies, for family tracing and search for help. I have even heard anecdotal account of direct appeal for money on Twitter.

Third, Typhoon Haiyan response saw the largest deployment of foreign militaries to a single country and OCHA set up its largest sustained CMCoord operation ever. Civil-military coordination has been highly effective, and even innovative, at the hub level with the individual foreign military components operating in the special geographic areas of responsibility. For example, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, along with foreign militaries, collaborated in using advanced technology to increase the transparency and predictability of cargo movement. At the same time, at the national level, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) maintained military-to-military multi-national coordination, in which OCHA participated only in an information-sharing basis.

Are these two crises indicative of certain global trends?

I will touch on a few illustrative ones from these two crises. They are by no means the only significant trends.

Trend #1
The role of Governments

The Response to Typhoon Haiyan is quite instructive on the changing role of Governments. A fundamental canon of international humanitarian assistance, embodied in UNGA Resolution 46/182, is that it is called on if and when State authorities are unable or unwilling to address the humanitarian needs within its borders. Over the years, study after study have shown, however, that the oft-repeated mantra of "there only to support the government" is seldom manifested in reality, and awkwardly implemented when attempted.

International relief effort had often been criticized for ignoring, sidelining or actively undermining local capacities, with the problems leading to tense and dysfunctional relationship between states and international agencies. There are many well-documented examples, including a particularly striking example of the crisis of Pakistan floods in 2010. In fact, in Asian and Latin American countries, one can observe an increasing reluctance to call on international assistance, preferring to turn to mutual assistance from neighbouring countries when needed. For example, the 2012 State of the Humanitarian System reported that out of six members of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) hit by hydrological or meteorological disasters that year, none had requested Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) or flash financing through regular channels. Bilateral assistance in disaster response rely significantly on civil protection, civil defence and military assets rather than civilian humanitarian organizations.

In the case of Typhoon Haiyan, the scale of the disaster presented the Government with little choice. It is also very UN-friendly. But even as it accepts international assistance, the approach of the Filipino Government to the whole response illustrates the ever-increasing assertiveness of host countries as a function of their substantially strengthened disaster management capacity, especially in middle income countries. The Government of the Philippines and its National Disaster Management Council led and continues to lead the disaster response and remains the

chief coordinator. Significantly, neighbouring countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei all deployed military assets to support the Government and its armed forces. These deployments are managed and coordinated centrally by the Government, and not through the multilateral system.

Trend #2
Cash, technology and enabled self-help

The use of cash transfer programs (CTP) in the Typhoon Haiyan response confirms the progress in the past few years towards institutionalizing it in disaster response. Not only can cash address multi-sectoral needs, it also puts more decision-making in the hands of the recipients. As mentioned, CTP is now 20% of multilateral programming in the Philippines. At the same time, its use is still very much determined by individual agencies, addressing needs associated with the agencies' mandates, rather than being truly cross-sectorally. CTP seems to be well embraced by mid-sized agencies, as this change from in-kind distribution allows for smaller staff and broader reach. I am told, as observed in the Philippines, that the bigger agencies find the adaptation a little bit more difficult.

The "mainstreaming" of CTP in the Philippines is also a function of technology and private sector partnership. While distribution of actual cash was used in the hardest areas, such as Talcoban, in the early weeks, electronic transfers are possible in a country with deep financial engagement penetration (in the form of banking accounts held, remittance services, availability of ATMs etc.) and general ease with e-commerce and other e-traffic.

While CTPs are not entirely dependent on a high level of financial engagement or electronic penetration, increasing technological adoption, not just in middle-income country, will accelerate the change from in-kind distribution of relief goods and services to cash transfers instead.

CTP is not the only major change to humanitarian action as a result of the confluence of technological advances and partnership with the private sector to give those caught in humanitarian disasters the ability to influence and shape how they cope with their survival and recovery. I think it will

take a much longer lecture and more sophistication than I have to do the topic justice. But I think the trends here should be apparent.

Trend #3
Who are today's humanitarian actors?

A trend that is often cited in current discussions is the proliferation of actors, particularly those who do not subscribe to all of the humanitarian principles, or who appear to have "limited capacity". Surveying the field, this proliferation refers to "emerging" donor countries, governments who are not just hosts or recipients (for example, governments who send military and national civil protection assets internationally) and aid implementing organizations.

I cannot but help notice that this reference to "proliferation" is really about "people not like us", that is, people who do not fit neatly into the business model I mentioned earlier. As recently as 2012, the respected ALNAP group used a slide in its State of the Humanitarian System presentation with a diagram of three categories of "core humanitarian actors":

- the providers: donor governments, foundations
- the recipients: host governments, affected population
- the implementers: the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), national non-governmental organizations (NNGOs) and United Nations agencies.

The list of "implementers" are conspicuously short. Host governments are depicted as passive.

Allow me to speak briefly of 6 groups of actors who are changing the humanitarian landscape.

(1) So-called emerging donors

The multilateral Syrian Crisis response benefited from the generosity of the Gulf States. While they fit the "rich countries as donors" part of the IASC business model and are disparagingly referred to as the "emerging donors", their role as donor are more significant than contributions to the

Appeals. As mentioned, these donors are reported to also give much larger donations of funds and direct supplies to communities in Syria, generally without distinguishing between military, humanitarian or other purposes.

(2) Parties providing legitimate cover to the IASC system

The multilateral actors, that is, the UN agencies and a limited number of international NGOs are required to work through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Though SARC is part of the Red Cross Movement, until the beginning of the conflict, it was generally seen as an extension of the ruling regime. Since the conflict, it has laudably maintained sufficient neutrality to be one of the few organizations that can go cross-line, between government-held and Opposition held areas.

In fact, the phenomenon of actors from the multilateral system needing to work through a party outside of the IASC is not new. That was the case in the Cyclone Nargis response in Myanmar, when ASEAN provided the cover for the UN in the face of a highly suspicious national government. Humanitarian access in the border states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile between Sudan and South Sudan was being negotiated under the auspices of the Tripartite Plan of Action sponsors – the United Nations, the African Union and the League of Arab States. All this illustrates the precariousness of the multilateral agencies' ability to operate in many areas of the world.

(3) Increasing number of Islamic aid organizations

In the Syrian Crisis response, as in other more recent humanitarian crises taking place in predominantly Muslim countries, there are now more and more Muslim aid or charity organizations from other Muslim countries on the scene. Most are not within the orbit of the international NGO community. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation has played a role in coordinating Muslim NGOs, as is the case in Somalia, and coordinating with IASC. In the case of Syria, it has not been active on the humanitarian front, perhaps because of the sectarian nature of the conflict.

(4) Coordinating bodies

Because of the trend of countries turning to neighbours for mutual assistance, regional organizations such as the African Union and its subsidiary Regional Commissions, OIC, ASEAN, and many of the Carribean and Latin American regional organizations have taken to develop humanitarian coordination capacities. It is quite foreseeable in the future that OCHA will not be the chief coordinating body in any major humanitarian operations. Many country governments, as in the case of the Philippines, already claim that role. With the emergence of regional bodies wishing to undertake regional coordination, it will add another layer to the coordination picture.

(5) the Private Sector

From the beginning of modern humanitarian action, the private sector has contributed to disaster response through philanthropic initiatives. The response to Typhoon Haiyan is no different. If private individual and organizations are counted as one donor, it would be the top donor, having contributed 24% of all financial donations so far, ahead of all governments in contributing to the Consolidated Appeal. Typhoon Haiyan also involves many private sector entities as operational partners in many of the clusters, notably logistics and IT. The Cash Transfers Programs also is utilizing the capability of the Filipino financial sector.

From the business sector point of view, the evolving thinking in terms of business engagement in the communities where they operate has moved from straight philanthropy to corporate social responsibility to a new concept of "shared value" where companies aim to advance profitability and social impact simultaneously. Western Union, a member of the Share Value Initiative that is now a movement involving household-name companies such as Intel, Nestle, and InterContinental Hotel Group, cut its transaction fees for financial transfers to communities hit by Typhoon Haiyan. Increasingly, the engagement of the private sector in humanitarian response is no longer only about donations, or pro bono services, nor even as sub-contractors to aid agencies. They now incorporate responsibility for community welfare, including where there are humanitarian disasters, as an integral part of their corporate aim.

(6) The military

The significance of the level of foreign military intervention in Typhoon Haiyan response is not just in the high number of troops-sending countries or in the shear size of personnel and military assets involve, even though those are indeed impressive. It is in the "inter-operability" between the military and civilian actors. All military-sending countries recognize the Oslo Guidelines (I assume you all know what those are) and are in compliance with the Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines for the Use of Foreign Military Assets in Natural Disaster Response. A large number of military and civil protection personnel involved, both from the Philippines and from deploying countries had undergone common civil-military coordination training with their multilateral civilian counterparts. It is this level of "inter-operability" that has allowed humanitarian agencies to optimally benefit from their assets. This is quite a contrast from previous mega natural disaster response, such as the Haiti earthquake or the Pakistan floods, where considerable tension existed between the military and civilians.

What do all these trends tell us?

Last week, I read a foreign affairs column about the Syrian Conflict. It was not on the humanitarian crisis, but on what it says about today's geopolitics. The Syrian civil war has dragged on for three years. Yet no international body or country or even bloc of countries has been able to intervene in any decisive way. The "cacophony of actors" in the conflict is seen as emblematic of what some have termed the "G-Zero" or "G-X" world, a world devoid of powerful anchors such as the G8 or the G-20. Big treaties and world bodies have declined, and the still-powerful states are relying more and more on regional organizations, so-called "minilateral" cooperation among relevant states and partnership with non-government actors. An interesting quote in the column is, "The hallmark of this "G-X" world is temporary coalition of strange bedfellows."

From the humanitarian trends we just discussed, I think that this description of the G-X world could just as easily have been applied to the humanitarian world. The proliferation of actors is not just about numbers. Many of the new types of actors in the humanitarian sphere, whether we are talking about the private sector, regional organizations or the military, do not have humanitarian action as their core mandate. They are assuming humanitarian engagement as part of the evolution we see in all sectors,

towards willingness to incorporate multiple aims and forming "coalition with strange bedfellows".

The sum total of the trends towards more capable and assertive governments, more and newer players who are not exclusively mandated for aid purposes, and more enabled beneficiaries, points to an inescapable conclusion about humanitarian effectiveness

- ***in the current multipolar world, improvement to humanitarian effectiveness cannot be achieved only through reliance on, or improvement to, a core or dominant international system, such as the IASC system, and one that is organized primarily for aid distribution.***

(By effectiveness, I use a very simple measurement, and that is, whether we have maximized the chances of someone caught in a disaster being able to access help.)

What are the implications of this conclusion for policies and practice?

I would like to offer the following at the systemic level:

(1) First, I think we need to shift the focus away from agencies to the affected people.

While the humanitarian community has always professed that our raison d'etre is centred on the affected people, we all know that in practice, this is far from the truth. For example, the Transformative Agenda of the IASC identified leadership, coordination and accountability to affected population as three priorities. Much progress was achieved in the first two, and it was evident in the Typhoon Haiyan response. However, the third pillar regarding affected people has met with the least progress. In short, the current system is still very much turned inward to itself.

That must change, as the affected people are now much more enabled by technology. This is more than the inconvenience of a country director receiving a cell-phone call from a camp occupant complaining about bad food or torn tents. Technology will allow recipients to have more control

and choices as end-users, but could also exacerbate the gender inequality in accessing help because of digital inequality. I would encourage all humanitarian actors to seek technological innovation for humanitarian effectiveness from the point of view of the people and not the programs or the agencies.

(2) Second, I think we need to change the fundamental construct of humanitarian action from aid distribution to facilitation of access to needed help.

Future aid operations will require many fewer aid distributors. The cash transfers program have already started the trend, and aid agencies need to adapt accordingly. The new phenomenon of "enabled self help" should spur agencies to redefine "access" as not their access to the affected people, but how to help the affected people to acquire the goods and services that are needed for survival and human dignity.

(3) Third, in the "cacophony of actors", we should seek "inter-operability" and not dominance.

I think it should be apparent by now that we cannot cling to the traditional business model of the IASC system. The different actors will coalesce into different networks, with the IASC system being but one. To maximize humanitarian effectiveness, we need to make the different networks "inter-operable". (I have borrowed the term "inter-operability" from the IT world, where the goal is for the end-user to have maximum access to different systems, with the systems themselves being inter-operable.) In the humanitarian world, inter-operability means common norms, standards and modus operandi, regardless of the differences in organizational mandates or aims.

In the Typhoon Haiyan response has provided an excellent model of "inter-operability" between the military and civilian actors. This has come about following over a decade of dedicated efforts on both parts. So I do not have illusions that it will be easy with other actors, such as the private sector. But we must try.

(4) Lastly, I think we need to adapt to the changing role of governments in the humanitarian enterprise.

In my field visits in the past ten years, I had often been struck in many meetings involving governmental and humanitarian representatives, how they talk past each other. This is only symptomatic of the larger issue we have been talking about. But I think a good place to start the change is for humanitarian workers to develop the skills to interact with governments, the same way we provide training for how to interact and negotiate with non-state belligerents in conflicts. We must recognize that it is no longer possible to assume the posture that acceptance of "organized outside intervention" permits the international community to take over the leadership, control and coordination of a disaster response.

Conclusion

Every opportunity I have, I remind people that those affected by disasters are helped first and foremost by family, friends and neighbours, long before organized outside help kicks in. So we should be humble about the limits of humanitarian action. We should also always remember that international humanitarian actors are essentially "outsiders". We cannot hide behind the justification of the "humanitarian imperative", if "access" is about the people's rights and action, and not those of the agencies.

The humanitarian landscaped is changing fast. For the sake of those caught in disasters, we need to change with it.

Thank you.