Today, a large and complex ‘global humanitarian response system’ with local, national, and international actors attempts to help tens of millions engulfed in wars and catastrophes. Understanding how this frontline of and for humanity works, succeeds, and fails is the core focus of this book. With their impressive background as experts, academics and practitioners, Daniel Maxwell and Kirsten Gelsdorf are uniquely qualified to highlight the origins, growth, and challenges to contemporary humanitarian action. They outline the historical roots of the system, outline the main actors and explore how humanitarian work succeeds and fails under the extreme circumstances where it takes place. Interrogating the reasons why humanitarian operations, as well as actions undertaken in its name, remain the subject of so much controversy, they describe how humanitarian work is undertaken today and the ways it may develop in the future.

This book is therefore a much needed introductory text on how and why the United Nations agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and hundreds of international and national non-governmental organisations do what they do in times of crisis and conflict. It will be essential reading for students and practitioners, and others with an interest in humanitarian action, international humanitarian and human rights law, disaster management and international relations.

Understanding the Humanitarian World is an informed and intelligent analysis of the complexities of humanitarian action today. Dan and Kirsten have done an excellent job in providing a resource that is equally valuable for students who aspire to humanitarian careers, whether academic or operational, as well as for experienced practitioners and policy makers who work at the sharp end of humanitarian response.

Since Dan Maxwell and I published Shaping the Humanitarian World the humanitarian world has gotten a whole lot closer, as the end point of unsustainable development floods cities, forces communities to migrate, renders farmland barren and replaces coexistence with conflict. Understanding these crises, and how to respond to them to reset development in a more sustainable direction, is now a vital part of mainstream politics and economics. Whether you are teaching, learning or practicing, Understanding the Humanitarian World is the go to text to move from compassion to effective action.

Peter Walker, Falk School of Sustainability and Environment, Chatham University, USA
Understanding the Humanitarian World

Conflict and disaster have been part of human history for as long as it has been recorded. Over time, more mechanisms for responding to crises have developed and become more systematized. Today a large and complex “global humanitarian response system” made up of a multitude of local, national, and international actors carries out a wide variety of responses. Understanding this intricate system, and the forces that shape it, are the core focus of this book.

Daniel Maxwell and Kirsten Gelsdorf highlight the origins, growth, and specific challenges to, humanitarian action and examine why the contemporary system functions as it does. They outline the historical underpinnings of the system through specific crisis case studies, outline the main actors, and explore how the ways humanitarian action is carried out. Interrogating major contemporary debates and controversies in the humanitarian system, and the reasons why actions undertaken in its name remain the subject of so much controversy, they provide an important overview of humanitarian action today and the ways it may develop in the future.

This book serves as a valuable introductory text to the way humanitarian action operates in the twenty-first century. It will be essential reading for students and practitioners or anyone with an interest in humanitarian action, international humanitarian and human rights law, disaster management and international relations.

Daniel Maxwell is the Henry J. Leir Professor in Food Security at the Feinstein International Center and the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, at Tufts University. He teaches humanitarian action, humanitarian policy, and food security in crisis situations. His recent research is on the re-emergence of famines in the 21st century, as well as food security in crises and livelihood systems under stress. He is the author, with Nisar Majid, of Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures (Oxford University Press, 2016). Prior to joining the faculty at Tufts in 2016, he was the Deputy Director for Eastern and Central Africa for CARE International, and spent 20 years working in Eastern, Central and West Africa. He holds a B.Sc. from Wilmington College, a Master's degree from Cornell University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin.

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The “Global Institutions Series” provides cutting-edge books about many aspects of what we know as “global governance”. It emerges from our shared frustrations with the state of available knowledge—electronic and print-wise—for research and teaching. The series is designed as a resource for those interested in exploring issues of international organization and global governance. And since the first volumes appeared in 2005, we have taken significant strides toward filling many conceptual gaps.

The series consists of two related “streams” distinguished by their blue and red covers. The blue volumes, comprising the majority of the books in the series, provide user-friendly and short (usually no more than 50,000 words) but authoritative guides to major global and regional organizations, as well as key issues in the global governance of security, the environment, human rights, poverty, and humanitarian action among others. The books with red covers are designed to present original research and serve as extended and more specialized treatments of issues pertinent for advancing understanding about global governance.

The books in each of the streams are written by experts in the field, ranging from the most senior and respected authors to first-rate scholars at the beginning of their careers. In combination, the components of the series serve as key resources for faculty, students, and practitioners alike. The works in the blue stream have value as core and complementary readings in courses on, among other things, international organization, global governance, international law, international relations, and international political economy; the red volumes allow further reflection and investigation in these and related areas.

The books in the series also provide a segue-way to the foundation volume that offers the most comprehensive textbook treatment available dealing with all the major issues, approaches, institutions, and actors in contemporary global governance. The second edition of our
edited work International Organization and Global Governance (2018) contains essays by many of the authors in the series. Understanding global governance—past, present, and future—is far from a finished journey. The books in this series nonetheless represent significant steps toward a better way of conceiving contemporary problems and issues as well as, hopefully, doing something to improve world order. We value the feedback from our readers and their role in helping shape the on-going development of the series. A complete list of titles can be viewed online here: https://www.routledge.com/Global-Institutions/book-series/GI.

**Negotiating Trade in Uncertain Worlds**
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*by Clara Weinhardt*

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*by W. Pal Sidhu*

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*by Daniel Maxwell and Kirsten Heidi Gelsdorf*

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*by Mathis Lohaus*
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Almost ten years ago, Peter Walker and Dan Maxwell wrote *Shaping the Humanitarian World*. That book proved to be an essential addition to an expanding field of scholarship on the global humanitarian system. However, increased research, shifting policy priorities, altered political landscapes, and the rapid growth of humanitarian action worldwide have all rendered that book outdated. While the underlying institutional architecture of the humanitarian system remains largely the same, the expanding needs of populations caught in crisis, the duration of humanitarian crises, a more fraught operating environment, and a redefinition of who is a humanitarian actor and what defines humanitarian action have transformed how our humanitarian world is understood and what it may look like in the future.

In the ten years since *Shaping the Humanitarian World* was published, the number of people in need of formal humanitarian assistance globally has increased fivefold. The global humanitarian budget has increased by over 400 percent over the course of the decade. Yet the gap between assessed need and the ability of the traditional humanitarian system to respond has widened nearly every year since 2007. Furthermore, the majority of the 135 million people assessed as in need in 2018 also live in a state of protracted crisis—“short-term” and “emergency” are no longer synonymous with “humanitarian.”

The operating environment has also become more complex. Today, most people displaced by conflict and disaster are no longer in camps, but in urban environments—thus challenging long-standing response protocols. Changes in the nature of armed conflict, particularly in light of the Global War on Terror and the greater association of traditional humanitarian actors with donor-government foreign policy, have tightened restrictions on Western actors working to gain humanitarian access and have led to deteriorating conditions in staff safety and security requiring the rise of remote management and new operational
protocols—but also bringing greater attention to local actors. The nature of response has shifted away from in-kind material assistance to market-based programs, protection has become a more urgent priority, and enormous efforts have been made to make programs and policy more accountable and driven by evidence.

Finally, the humanitarian world is now recognized as comprising more than the traditional formal system of actors, activities, and policies established in the aftermath of World War II. It encompasses a much wider set of actors and changing policies and humanitarian practices, some of which may not be exclusively or even primarily humanitarian. All these factors have significantly changed the content and challenged old assumptions about humanitarian action, and have led to major reforms and innovations. But many familiar challenges remain, and more have been added. Perhaps the greatest challenges facing the humanitarian world are to learn from its own mistakes and successes and to adapt to an operating environment and policy context that is constantly in flux.

*Understanding the Humanitarian World* is our attempt to come to grips with the changes in what constitutes the humanitarian system. But it is also our belief that the reality of the “humanitarian world” is a complex set of institutions and may always be in flux. Indicative of this is that throughout the book, we have decided to use the term “humanitarian actor” or “humanitarian action” without narrow definition. We recognize that much of the complexity in understanding today’s humanitarian world is compounded by the fact that there is no single accepted definition of what “humanitarian” means or what constitutes “humanitarian action.” To some, it simply means a “concern for the person in need.” To some, it implies the notion of working in a conflict- or disaster-affected context. To others, it implies operating under the auspices of International Humanitarian Law and the core humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, or adherence to accountability practices and contemporary minimum standards. To still others, it implies an ethos not only of assistance, but also of solidarity, of witness, and of advocacy for rights. To us, it is all these things, but it is also constantly evolving and difficult to pin down in a single, right definition. Understanding the humanitarian world requires a wide analysis.

In this book we first review some of the critical historical case studies that contextualize the origins of global humanitarian action, and then provide a synopsis of the contemporary system of humanitarian actors, architecture, and action. Finally, we outline the major operational and policy changes happening in today’s crisis response contexts.
This book is not a comprehensive history of humanitarianism, a training manual, or an in-depth analysis of all of policy issues currently being debated; rather, it is a nuanced portrait of the trends affecting humanitarian action today that must be understood to continue to drive change and make improvements.

Both of us are teachers and researchers. But, first and foremost, we are also both practitioners. So our objective in this book is to provide an introduction to the humanitarian world—mostly for students, but also for new humanitarian aid workers or even experienced field workers who have never had the opportunity to step back and consider the overall humanitarian endeavor. We believe that humanitarian action has to be understood as a phenomenon in its own right, but ultimately it is a practice that urgently needs to be reformed and improved to meet the growing demands made on it every day.

We hope that readers—whether scholars, practitioners, or students, both formal and informal—will gain a more nuanced understanding of humanitarianism from this book. As such, readers will be able to see beyond daily news headlines from crisis zones to become more critical consumers, thoughtful donors, and engaged citizens helping to improve the global humanitarian system.

The Authors
September 2018

Notes
1 Many terms are used to describe the context of humanitarian action. These terms are often used interchangeably; sometimes they connote a hierarchy of severity and frequently simply remain ill defined. In this book, we use the term “crisis” as the over-arching term. Crises can be driven either by natural hazards (in which case we refer to them here as “disasters”) or by conflict. Frequently of course, crises are driven by multiple factors, in which case we just refer to them as crises. The term “emergency” is used only in reference to relatively short-term, acute crises; in today’s context, most crises are long lasting or “protracted”—although they still exhibit “acute” symptoms. (Particularly in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification or IPC framework, “crisis,” “emergency,” and “catastrophe” are presumed to have a hierarchical relationship, with each successive term implying greater levels of severity. We imply no such hierarchy here. Rather these terms mean qualitatively different things.)

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this book and the ideas or debates that are addressed here. The most important acknowledgement is to the millions of people caught in crisis, helping their neighbors, and recovering from human tragedies happening around the world. The unspeakable misfortunes and the unrecorded triumphs of those who have been devastated by, but survived and overcame crisis are, and continue to be, an inspiration.

This book would not have been written without the incredible research assistance of several students and former students whom we have been lucky enough to teach, mentor, and learn from. They include Peter Hawes, Lauren Jackson, Makayla Palazzo, Maria Wrabel, Allison Hawkins, and Janet Kim. We would especially like to thank our editors Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, who oversee the Global Institutions Series, for their detailed review of the draft manuscript; and Ella Halstead, Nicola Parkin and Robert Sorsby at Routledge for their support throughout the process. We are particularly grateful to the co-author with Dan of *Shaping the Humanitarian World*, Dr. Peter Walker, for permitting the reuse of some of the historical material from that book. We would like to thank Joyce Maxwell for her careful copy editing of the draft manuscript. We would also like to thank all of the readers of drafts, as well as all the researchers and practitioners whose work we have cited throughout this book.

We would very much like to acknowledge many colleagues and mentors who have encouraged us over the years and whose views and contributions have profoundly shaped our own understanding of the humanitarian world. These include (for Kirsten) Sue Lautze, Patrick Webb, Joanne Sandler, Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, Norah Niland, Ahunna Eziakonwa, Oliver Lacey-Hall, Christina Bennett, Allan Stam, Craig Volden and David Leblang; and (for Dan) Fikre Nigussie, Dawelbait Mohamed, Geoffrey Chege, Afurika Juvenal, Jon Mitchell, James
Darcy, David Rieff, Joanna Macrae, Antonio Donini and Margie Buchanan-Smith.

We also of course thank our spouses and families: (for Kirsten), Mark, Cash and Sabina, you are my greatest source optimism and love; (for Dan) Joyce, Patrick and Clare, likewise! We also thank you for putting up with a project like writing this book, which always requires some sacrifices in time and attention.

Finally, this book was motivated by the ambitions and potential of the students who enrolled in our humanitarian action classes. These students inspire us and give us hope that some of the challenges outlined here may be better addressed by the next generation. We thank you.

Daniel Maxwell and Kirsten Heidi Gelsdorf
September 2018
### List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAP</td>
<td>Accountability to Affected Populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AHA</td>
<td>ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALNAP</td>
<td>Action Learning Network for Accountability and Performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARA</td>
<td>America Relief Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC</td>
<td>American Red Cross</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of East Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaLP</td>
<td>Cash Learning Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Consolidated Appeals Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARE</td>
<td>Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (original name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>community-based organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBPF</td>
<td>country-based pooled funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCCM</td>
<td>Camp Coordination and Camp Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDAC</td>
<td>Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERF</td>
<td>Central Emergency Response Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERP</td>
<td>United States Commander’s Emergency Response Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>Core Humanitarian Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Comprehensive Peace Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTP</td>
<td>cash transfer programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DART</td>
<td>Disaster Assistance Response Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEC</td>
<td>Disasters Emergency Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFID</td>
<td>United Kingdom Department for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPA</td>
<td>Darfur Peace Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECB</td>
<td>Emergency Capacity-Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECHO</td>
<td>European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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ELRHA  Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance
ERC  Emergency Relief Coordinator
EU  European Union
FAO  Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAR  Forces Armée Rwandaise
FEWS NET  Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FFP  Office of Food for Peace (USAID)
FSNAU  Somalia Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit
FTS  Financial Tracking Service
GAHI  Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation
GDP  gross domestic product
GWOT  Global War on Terrorism
HAP  Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
HC  Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT  Humanitarian Country Team
HDX  Humanitarian Data Exchange
HIF  Humanitarian Innovation Fund
HNO  Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP  Humanitarian Response Plans
HRR  Humanitarian Response Review
IASC  Inter-Agency Standing Committee for Humanitarian Response
ICRC  International Committee of the Red Cross
ICT  information and communications technology
ICVA  International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IDMC  Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP  internally displaced person
IFI  international financial institution
IFRC  International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IGAD  Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IHL  International Humanitarian Law
INGO  international non-governmental organization
IOM  International Organization for Migration
IRC  International Rescue Committee
ISIS  Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JCA  Joint Church Aid
JEEAR  Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda
JEM  Justice and Equality Movement
KSC  King Salman Center for Humanitarian Aid
M&E  monitoring and evaluation
List of abbreviations

MONUC United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
MSF Médecins sans Frontières
MYP multi-year planning
NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEAR Network for Empowered Aid Response
NGO non-governmental organization
NNGO national non-governmental organization
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA official development assistance
ODI Overseas Development Institute
OECD Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFDA Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance
OIC Organization for Islamic Cooperation
OLS Operation Lifeline Sudan
R2P Responsibility to Protect
RC Resident Coordinator
ROHAN Regional Organisations Humanitarian Action Network
RPF Rwandese Patriotic Front
SARC Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCF Save the Children Fund
SCHR Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response
SDF Syrian Democratic Forces
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals
SLM/A Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army
SPLA/M Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM-IO Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-In Opposition
TFG Somali Transitional Federal Government
TIKA Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency
TPLF Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front
UAV unmanned aerial vehicle
UK United Kingdom
UN United Nations
UNAMID United Nations Africa Mission to Darfur
UNAMIR United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund
UNIDO Universal Intervention and Development Organisation
UNMISS United Nations Mission to South Sudan
UNPROFOR United Nations Protection Force
UN Women United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women
UOSSM Union of Syrian Doctors
USA United States of America
USAID United States Agency for International Development
VOICE Voluntary Organizations in Cooperation in Emergencies
WASH water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP World Food Programme
WHO World Health Organization
WVI World Vision International
WWI World War I
WWII World War II
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Introduction

- The world of crisis
- What is the “humanitarian world”?
- Overlapping agendas
- Humanitarian foundations
- Conclusion: Overview of the book

In 2011, a terrible famine struck Somalia caused by a triple whammy of back-to-back failures of seasonal rains, a global spike in the price of food that hit food importing countries like Somalia very hard, and intensified conflict between Al-Shabaab—an Islamist armed group—and the African Union forces propping up the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Later, a man from Baidoa district recalled the worst of it:

Our family kept cattle, some camels, and we farm. Before the [crisis] of 2011, livestock numbers increased … but reduced to almost zero because of the drought, especially for cattle. I had invested to buy ten good-looking cows [and] we had a relatively good amount of sorghum reserves. Things were well and in order. Unfortunately the 2010–11 [short rains] failed. From February to April 2011, there was a very hot [dry season]. The cattle we had and the goats had nothing to feed on. We had to give part of the sorghum we had and share it between people and livestock. When the sorghum was out of stock we started giving the livestock the grass roof that was on our huts.

But things only got worse.

Cattle started dying by February 2011 and by the end of April almost all were finished. By May people started getting displaced,
moving to different places. For our case, we divided the family in three groups: One group went to Dollo Ethiopia refugee camp, one group went to Baidoa, especially the weaker ones, and one group stayed or moved with the camels and few goats. I went to some clan members in Baidoa to assist me and save my family. All my family members are in Baidoa District and I don’t have any family members in other countries that can [help], there are some clan members in Baidoa town that I can cry to for some assistance.¹

Nearly 260,000 people died in the famine in Somalia in 2011 (see Chapter 3). But so much of what happened in that crisis is captured by this one story: the worsening crisis, the desperate attempts people made to protect themselves and their assets (livestock in this case) in the face of multiple threats, the displacement, the splitting of families, and the search for some kind of employment or assistance. As in so many cases today, humanitarian actors faced extreme constraints in reaching affected populations caught in areas controlled by armed groups like Al-Shabaab, and as a result, people relied first and foremost on their own resources and those of their neighbors, their kin, and local actors. International assistance eventually arrived, but too late to save many people. Access had been blocked both by armed groups and by donor-government policies. Much of the international aid effort had to be managed remotely and implemented on the ground by local Somali organizations. Humanitarian action had to adapt to changed circumstances, and local communities caught in the crisis had to look out for each other.

Conflict and disaster have been part of human history for as long as it has been recorded. Those who survive have had to deal with the consequences, pick up the pieces, and move on. Over time, more mechanisms for responding to crises have developed and become more systematized. Today a large and complex “global humanitarian response system” comprised of a multitude of local, national and international actors carries out a wide variety of responses. Formalized frameworks and normative structures aim to define action—like humanitarian principles, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). Organizations may have strict mandates that focus on food assistance or refugee protection. But as the story above notes, individuals and local communities still help each other, and wider networks of responders ranging from volunteer efforts to local organizations to government-led initiatives continue to aim to not only meet humanitarian needs but also to put an end to these needs.
Understanding the complex “global humanitarian system” that has developed over time, and the forces that shape it, are the focus of this book. The humanitarian system is not a logical construct. It grew by accretion—no one “designed” it. It serves many purposes and continuously has to adapt to changing contexts, different drivers of crisis, inconsistent resources, and new modes of response. Some of these changes may be driven by national interest and the projection of soft power, some by ideological interest, and some by a genuine concern for human suffering in the context of wars and disasters.

The world of crisis

Taking a global snapshot of the scale and scope of this human suffering is bleak. In many countries, brutal conflicts span decades; violent extremism, terrorism, and transnational crime exacerbate the effects. Entire generations live only with devastation and loss. The destruction doesn’t stop with the loss of life or livelihoods or schooling but with violations of the worst kind that include chemical attacks and bombing campaigns in populated cities. Natural hazards and climate-induced disasters are becoming more frequent and intense. Pandemics, epidemics, and other global health threats emerge more frequently. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is further marginalizing the most vulnerable people, undermining resilience and recovery. All of these shocks leave millions of people in life-threatening conditions. People driven from their homes by violence or disasters are in search of safety or opportunity—and the willingness of neighboring countries to accept or assist these people is decreasing. In 2017, the number of people forcibly displaced by violence worldwide reached a record high of 12 million people in one year, almost double the number displaced the year before. And in over 135 countries, disasters—mostly floods and tropical storms—caused another 18.8 million people to leave their homes.2

Over 136 million people, predominantly women and children, were formally assessed in 2018 to be in need of humanitarian assistance (many more were not counted but are suffering). Local communities, national institutions, and even regional and international actors are forced to make triage-like decisions on who gets assistance and who does not. And not enough is done to find—and act on—solutions that can prevent such an affront to global humanity. And sadly these trends—and the issues they raise—have existed for years.

Table I.1 shows that the number of people formally assessed to be in need of humanitarian action—from protection to material assistance—has grown exponentially in the past decade. From 2007 to 2017, the
Table I.1 UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)* appeals: People in need, funding requests, and gaps

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People in assessed need (millions)</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>125.0</td>
<td>128.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total CAP appeal ($ billions)</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total CAP funded ($ billions)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary gap ($ billions)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessed needs funded</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>61%</td>
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Note: * Now renamed UN Humanitarian Needs Overviews.
number of conflict- or disaster-affected people increased fivefold, from 26 million to 128 million. The formal request for funds by the United Nations (UN) and other international actors increased fourfold, from $5.5 billion to nearly $22 billion, while actual funding rose from about $4 billion to just under $12 billion.

Of concern in this picture is that the funding gap is growing, preventing formally designated humanitarian actors from assisting all of the people around the world in need. These trends and others are pushing systems to make “working differently” a priority, foreshadowing that over the next decade, the needs of vulnerable populations—and humanitarians’ scramble to respond—will continue to change.

**What is the “humanitarian world”?**

There is no simple definition for humanitarianism, humanitarian action, or the humanitarian system. These terms are often used interchangeably but actually imply different things: a philosophy or belief system (-ism), an activity (action) or an institution, of sorts (system). These are made up of so many different actors, with diverse motivations, a range of resources, and differing perspectives that recently scholars and practitioners have begun referring to a humanitarian “eco-system” or wider network of humanitarian actors to capture the notion of interactive diversity as opposed to an organized construct. Nonetheless, a generally shared understanding of humanitarian action is activities that save lives, protect livelihoods, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of crisis, as well as prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations.

No doubt when members of the current generation think of the “humanitarian system,” they think of a UN-led process, funded by donors from Western countries, staffed by earnest-looking young (and probably fair-skinned) aid workers clad in multi-pocketed vests and t-shirts festooned with agency logos, transported in the ubiquitous white Toyota Land Cruisers (also adorned with logos), and helpless-looking and often visibly malnourished “victims,” displaced from their homes and livelihoods—and with the international media capturing and packaging the whole spectacle for television consumption that is, of course, linked directly to fundraising efforts. That may have been a partially accurate portrayal of the formal humanitarian system in the 1990s, but who and what comprises the system, or “eco-system,” has evolved rapidly since then and, in any case, the caricature above represented only the visible tip of the iceberg even decades ago.
Humanitarian action then and now may equally be represented by another (and often neglected) perspective of neighbors helping each other in the aftermath of an earthquake, keeping each other safe in the face of conflict and predatory armed groups, or helping each other find some kind of employment when livelihoods have been crushed by famine or war. Or it may be represented by broader social networks, linking people outside of a crisis to those affected by it. These may be linkages of kinship and lineage, religious bonds, or other forms of solidarity shown through partnerships or, in some cases, simply transfers of funds via one cellphone to another. In many instances, these forms of assistance or protection actually comprise the majority of aid. Even in large-scale and well-funded emergency responses, the organized formal “system” may be late to arrive, may be harassed or prevented from gaining access, or may be severely constrained by authorities or armed groups. Despite the traditional view of the established humanitarian system as a predominantly Western construct, in today’s world, the agencies—and certainly the actual humanitarian aid workers—are much more likely to be from the affected country or from somewhere in the Global South. In addition, many other actors are engaged in humanitarian response, such as militaries (including armed non-state actors), the private sector, and traditional development actors like the World Bank. Many of these actors do not have traditional humanitarian mandates or objectives but are now involved in some part of global humanitarian action.

One important reality is that the world of crisis is larger than the world of humanitarian response. Figure I.1 represents a simplistic view of this. Risk and hazards like earthquakes, drought, and even conflict are ever-present, but only sometimes do these amount to shocks that affect vulnerable people enough that their needs outstrip their coping capacities—putting them in need of humanitarian assistance. While governments have the main responsibility for addressing these needs, in many contexts they are either unwilling or unable (and sometimes are even the ones driving the need). In these cases, it is often the global humanitarian response system that takes action. This book is mainly about that system (the right side of the figure). It includes humanitarian actors of all stripes (from local actors to UN organizations), the actions they take to protect the lives and dignity of affected populations, the outcomes they seek to achieve, and how those outcomes affect populations and the risks they face. All this is done in the context of an “enabling environment”: the policies of governments and organizations, the politics of crisis, IHL as well as principles and
standards, global funding and coordinating mechanisms, and local networks of response and mutual aid.

**Overlapping agendas**

Humanitarian action is always situated in a context of global agendas, and it is often unclear where humanitarian action ends and some other kind of action begins—whether that action is more explicitly political, developmental, economic, or human rights-oriented. This question also tugs at the very meaning of “humanitarian”—and is by no means resolved. Figure I.2 depicts where humanitarian action overlaps with other agendas.

Today’s understanding of what constitutes “humanitarian” action emerged from a 1990s vision that expanded the definition from a “life-saving” emergency agenda to one that is more encompassing. This definition sought not only to deal with the symptoms or outcomes of crises, but also with their causes; not only with human needs, but also with human rights; and, perhaps most controversially, to engage directly with other forms of action (political, economic, even military) so as to bring all resources to bear on the problems at hand. And it acknowledged that all this meant being more unequivocally political than humanitarians classically had been. For example, the new definition includes the whole element of disaster risk reduction—of intervening to make populations less vulnerable or preventing hazards from actually resulting in humanitarian crises.
This expanded definition of humanitarianism faded from popularity a bit in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the advent of the Global War on Terrorism, when it became clear that humanitarian action could be coopted to embrace security outcomes as well as to serve humanitarian objectives. But in many ways, this broader definition of humanitarian action re-emerged with the contemporary focus on resilience and attempts to determine how the development and humanitarian communities can work together in the age of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). So while the core mission of humanitarian action remains the protection of human life and dignity, in many cases humanitarian action overlaps with myriad other agendas, from poverty reduction and good governance to peace building and human rights. But protecting human life and human dignity endure as humanitarian action’s core focus.

Ultimately, different actors see the boundaries of humanitarian action in diverse ways, and policy agendas still struggle to gain consensus. For some, maintaining that central focus and keeping humanitarian action deliberately separate from other agendas is important; for many, the “ring fence” no longer exists around the core of humanitarian action in today’s operational context. And for all, a larger question remains as to the power of the foundational concepts
and norms that originally defined humanitarian action. The next section reviews these.

**Humanitarian foundations**

Four core principles form the ethical framework of much of contemporary humanitarian action: *humanity, impartiality, neutrality*, and *independence*. Though Western in origin (and indeed rather Swiss, given their close connection to the Red Cross movement) these principles are subscribed to by most contemporary humanitarian actors, who attempt to use them to guide their actions on the ground. With the changing nature of contemporary conflict and humanitarian actors on the ground, these “classic” principles are by no means any longer the sole ethical underpinning of humanitarian action. Nevertheless, most if not all humanitarian actors embrace some semblance of these principles, at least in theory—they are exceedingly difficult to adhere to completely in all circumstances.

At the core, the over-arching principle is *humanity*—sometimes referred to as the *humanitarian imperative*: the fundamental inviolability of human life, and the basic human impulse to protect the life of a fellow human being who is suffering or caught up in crisis. Some refer to this principle as the imperative to give and the right to receive assistance, an expression of the universal value of solidarity between people and a moral imperative. But the humanitarian imperative always comes with caveats in a world of finite resources and contradictory agendas. All suffering everywhere cannot be addressed instantly.

The second core principle is *impartiality*, which evolved specifically to address this problem. Impartiality, as used in the humanitarian context, encapsulates two concepts. First, suffering is addressed without discrimination: nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions make no difference. But second, because resources are finite, priority is given solely on the basis of need. Humanity and impartiality are considered the two fundamental principles of humanitarian action.

To protect humanity and impartiality, two operating principles have evolved—the notions of *neutrality* and *independence*. To alleviate suffering, humanitarian actors must have access to those in need (or conversely, people in need must have access to assistance). This often means reaching people in the midst of a conflict, war, or politically fraught situation. Belligerent parties waging war or driving a political agenda need to be confident that humanitarians are motivated only by a desire to alleviate suffering and are not going to “interfere” in the
conflict or political competition. This is the principle of neutrality. It is a means to an end, a way to bolster impartiality and maximize the possibility of reaching those who are suffering. However, it comes at a price: Access to one “side” may explicitly preclude access to other “sides”—especially if one is a powerful state. And of course, neutrality in the face of mass atrocities can be morally indefensible even if it allows access. Working through such dilemmas is an increasingly demanding agenda for humanitarians.

The notion of independence seeks to support both impartiality and neutrality by ensuring that humanitarian action is free from the coercion of states and political actors. Like neutrality, this is increasingly difficult to put into practice. If humanitarian action is funded by government donors, can it be independent? If the majority of humanitarians are of one nationality, religion, or political persuasion, are they still independent?

These four core principles have been the source of considerable debate and controversy since their adoption by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1965. While the principle of humanity is generally considered above reproach as a principle (even though it is frequently totally undermined in practice on the ground), independence and neutrality are routinely criticized, both from within and outside the humanitarian community. External critics even attack impartiality—which at face value would seem above reproach as well. The following chapters delve into the challenges of the principles of humanitarian action in many different cases.

The other main foundational piece is International Humanitarian Law (IHL)—the codified “laws of war” specifically restricted to violent conflicts, whether between states, civil wars, or insurgencies within a given state. IHL is an entire subject in its own right. Some of IHL is about restrictions on weapons and their use. Much of the concern here is about the Geneva Conventions, which govern who is and who is not a legitimate target in warfare, and the specific protections afforded to some categories of people. The first three Geneva Conventions focus on wounded soldiers, shipwrecked sailors and prisoners of war—in the context of international armed conflicts. The Fourth Geneva Convention focuses on civilians and other protected categories of people, and the Additional Protocols to the Fourth Convention extend IHL to non-international armed conflicts—the civil wars or armed rebellions that characterize most of contemporary armed conflict. As with the principles, IHL often has to be interpreted in many contemporary contexts that are very different from those for which it was invented.
Other treaties or international law address other elements of humanitarian action: The 1951 Refugee Convention defines who is a refugee (a person who is outside if his or her home country in fear of persecution or being killed because of who they are or what they believe), what their rights are, and the obligations of states to protect those rights. No international treaty specifies the rights of internally displaced people, who now significantly outnumber refugees worldwide. But the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, written in the late 1990s, established a normative framework for protection of people displaced in their own countries. The Refugee Convention is now considered part of “customary” IHL.

Finally, in the past two decades, a series of minimum standards and accountability practices to improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance have been developed. They include efforts to increase accountability, defined as “the process of using power responsibly, taking account of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power.”

Although controversial, IHL and the four principles have consistently been re-enshrined as the core ethos of humanitarianism and humanitarian action by nearly every major humanitarian initiative in recent history, including the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 (see Chapter 6) that was attended by humanitarians of nearly all backgrounds and perspectives. Accountability standards, while not codified, are increasingly important and viewed as critical. All of these foundational concepts are deeply rooted in the history of what humanitarians have actually done, the problems and issues they confronted, and how they sought to address these challenges. However, many in the humanitarian world do not necessarily subscribe to them, and some may have never heard of them.

**Conclusion: Overview of the book**

So, understanding the humanitarian world is clearly a complex topic. The next three chapters provide historical case studies that highlight the origins and growth of, and specific challenges to, humanitarian action. They set the stage for understanding why the contemporary system functions the way it does. Chapter 1 returns to the very origins of humanitarian action and traces its development through the end of World War II (WWII) and its immediate aftermath. Through these developments, the core “agendas” of contemporary humanitarian action emerge.
Chapter 2 traces humanitarian action through the Cold War and into the 1990s. Although some recall this as the “golden era” of humanitarianism, a close look at historical events strongly challenges that perspective. With a focus on seminal case studies from Biafra, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and the Rwanda genocide and its aftermath, this chapter notes the ways that the humanitarian world has sought to learn from its mistakes and build mechanisms to prevent politicization and ensure accountability.

Chapter 3 picks up the storyline after the attacks of 11 September 2001, and examines some of the crises that have shaped the current context. These include not only the “Global War on Terror” and its humanitarian ramifications, but also the Darfur crisis, Somalia and the re-emergence of famine in the twenty-first century, the horror of Syria, and the Mediterranean displacement crisis.

The book then shifts to provide an overview of the contemporary humanitarian system. Chapter 4 outlines the main actors and the world in which they operate. Referring back to Figure I.1 above, this refers to the local communities (“responders of first resort”); governing authorities; the “traditional humanitarian system,” including the main donors and agencies (the Red Cross, UN, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)); and the wider cast of actors engaging with the humanitarian system.

What these actors actually do comprises the core of humanitarian action. Chapter 5 describes how these actors are organized and examines what humanitarian action looks like. What are the coordination structures that govern formal humanitarian action? What are the actions being carried out by the local, national, and global community to support the needs of people affected by crisis around the world? How do humanitarian actors plan and carry out their operations? What in concrete terms is humanitarian aid?

Chapter 6 then examines some of the most critical policy and operational adaptations in the past decade that are defining humanitarian action and the enabling environment today. This chapter gives the reader a working knowledge of at least the major contemporary debates and controversies in the humanitarian system.

Chapter 7 concludes the book with an analysis of some of the unresolved challenges in humanitarian aid, and outlines reasons why the humanitarian system and the actions undertaken in its name remain the subject of so much controversy and debate. It also sketches some of the likely directions of humanitarian change in the foreseeable future.
Together these chapters provide the reader a more nuanced understanding of the way humanitarian action operates in the twenty-first century.

Notes


7 These four—humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence—are considered the core principles. The International Committee of the Red Cross embraces seven “humanitarian principles”—the other three being universality, unity (of the Red Cross movement) and voluntary action.


Preface

1 Many terms are used to describe the context of humanitarian action. These terms are often used interchangeably; sometimes they connote a hierarchy of severity and frequently simply remain ill defined. In this book, we use the term “crisis” as the over-arching term. Crises can be driven either by natural hazards (in which case we refer to them here as “disasters”) or by conflict. Frequently of course, crises are driven by multiple factors, in which case we just refer to them as crises. The term “emergency” is used only in reference to relatively short-term, acute crises; in today’s context, most crises are long lasting or “protracted”—although they still exhibit “acute” symptoms. (Particularly in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification or IPC framework, “crisis,” “emergency,” and “catastrophe” are presumed to have a hierarchical relationship, with each successive term implying greater levels of severity. We imply no such hierarchy here. Rather these terms mean qualitatively different things.)


Introduction


7 These four—humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence—are considered the core principles. The International Committee of the Red Cross embraces seven “humanitarian principles”—the other three being universality, unity (of the Red Cross movement) and voluntary action.


Chapter 1

1 This chapter reuses edited segments from the original book, Shaping the Humanitarian World, with permission from the authors of that book (Walker and Maxwell).


For a good discussion of this early history, see Michael Bonner, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XXXV, no. 3 (1 January 2005): 391–406.


18 Ibid.


Chapter 2

1 This chapter reuses edited segments from the original book, Shaping the Humanitarian World, with permission from the authors of that book (Walker and Maxwell).

2 Two US-based humanitarian agencies, American Friends Service Committee and Mennonite Central Committee, both the humanitarian and service organizations of pacifist churches, had programs in Vietnam that were humanitarian in content but that tended to be political statements about the war. Another American NGO with religious roots, Catholic Relief Services, pulled out of Vietnam when radical members of the church denounced CRS for its attempt to be “neutral.” USAID had a large “hearts and minds” program in South Vietnam but, again, its objectives were political, not humanitarian, and it was this program that CRS was seen to be a part of. For details, see Scott Flipse, “The Latest Casualty of War: Catholic Relief Services, Humanitarianism, and the War in Vietnam, 1967–1968,” Peace and Change 27, no. 2 (2002): 245–270.


6 The term “famine” and the powerful images it evokes, is a humanitarian case study in itself. Though thoroughly addressed analytically in Sen’s work, it remained curiously undefined for decades—in terms of magnitude and severity on the one hand and manifestation on the other. Sen clearly defined famine as a problem of starvation brought about by a failure of consumption, though he recognized manifestations other than mortality by outright starvation. The seminal work of Alex de Waal in the 1980s on destitution and the impact of famine in terms of health rather than simple...


12 Devereux, “Goats before Ploughs.”


14 Glenzer, “We Aren’t the World.”


17 Glenzer, “We Aren’t the World.” 124.


19 de Waal, Famine Crimes.


21 de Waal, Famine Crimes.

22 de Waal, Famine Crimes.


24 The song was titled “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” and came out in time to raise funds during the Christmas season. A later similar attempt, “We
Are the World,” co-written by Michael Jackson and performed by an all-star cast of musicians that called themselves U.S.A. for Africa, tried an approach to raising funds through music in 1985. Both songs raised awareness about the famine as well as a lot of money for famine relief.


29 The *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* was adopted in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in 1948, and has been ratified by 149 countries. It specifies genocide as “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (Article 2). Countries signatory to the Convention are obliged to intervene to prevent or stop genocide when it is occurring.


32 Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide*.


38 Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*.


Chapter 3


MONUC operates under a “Chapter 7” mandate in the Congo, meaning that it is not just there to monitor an existing peace agreement, but can engage in enforcement.


12 Donini et al., Humanitarian Agenda 2015, 3.


21 Young, “Diminishing Returns,” 89.


23 Telford and Cosgrove, Joint Evaluation.


25 Telford and Cosgrove, Joint Evaluation.

26 BBC News, “Timeline”.

29 Telford and Cosgrove, *Joint Evaluation*.
31 DesRoches et al., “2010 Haiti Earthquake”.
45 Maxwell and Majid, *Famine in Somalia*.


68 Howe, “No End in Sight.”


72 Ma, “Europe’s Tragic Refugee.”


74 Kingsley, “Migration to Europe.”


Chapter 4


4 Kent et al., *Planning from the Future.*


Notes 207

7 Kent et al., *Planning from the Future*.
8 Kent et al., *Planning from the Future*.
9 Paul Harvey, “International Humanitarian Actors and Governments in Areas of Conflict: Challenges, Obligations, and Opportunities,” *Disasters* 37, no. s2 (22 July 2013): 158.
14 Kent et al., *Planning from the Future*.
16 Kent et al., *Planning from the Future*.
17 Bourne and Alexander, *Leaving No One Behind*.
19 Bourne and Alexander, *Leaving No One Behind*.
21 Burns, “General Assembly Resolution 46/182.”
27 OCHA, “International Humanitarian Architecture.”
44 OCHA, “International Humanitarian Architecture.”
50 Kent et al., Planning from the Future.
57 OECD, OECD Development Co-Operation Peer Reviews.
61 Kuhn, “Emboldened.”
62 Kent et al., Planning from the Future.

81 Stirk, Humanitarian Assistance; Kent et al., Planning from the Future.


85 OCHA, “International Humanitarian Architecture.”


90 Bourns and Alexander, Leaving No One Behind.


95 Abby Stoddard, Humanitarian Alert: NGO Information and Its Impact on US Foreign Policy. (Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 2006).

Chapter 5


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8 Boon, *The Cluster Approach*.


10 Heath, “Managing the Republic of NGOs.”


nresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/af


ter.org/about-us.


rticle/us-yemen-security-aid/un-red-cross-call-for-protecting-civilians-after-c
oalition-attack-on-yemen-port-idUSKBN1J90O7.


elp.


44 Average funding by sector, 2013–2016 was calculated from Financial Tracking System (FTS) “Global Overview,” specifically from FTS, “Total Reported Funding 2013”; FTS, “Total Reported Funding 2014”; FTS, “Total Reported Funding 2015”; FTS, “Total Reported Funding 2016.”

46 Development Initiatives, “International Humanitarian Assistance: Volumes and Trends.”


56 OCHA, *Needs Assessment: Overview*.


Chapter 6


5 Ferris, “Haiti and Future Humanitarian Disasters.”


10 UNHCR, *Policy on Alternatives to Camps*.


17 Valente and Lasker, *An End in Sight*.


23 Fabre and Cabot Venton, *Multi-Year Humanitarian Funding*.


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31 High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, Doing Cash Differently.


35 High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, Doing Cash Differently.


38 Ali and Gelsdorf, “Risk-Averse to Risk-Willing.”


40 Hedlund et al., Final Evaluation.


46 Tan and von Schreeb, “Humanitarian Assistance and Accountability.”


56 Costello, “The Oxfam Scandal.”


61 Pantuliano and O’Callaghan, The “Protection Crisis.”


Niland et al., *Independent Whole of System Review*.


75 Global Alliance for Urban Crises, *Adapting Humanitarian Action to an Urban World*.
77 Gilert and Austin, *Review of the Common Cash Facility Approach*.

Chapter 7

1 Antonio Donini, to a meeting at Tufts University, November 2014.


12 Venton et al., the economics of early response and disaster resilience.

13 For example, see the famine early action mechanism (FAM) proposed by the World Bank in 2018.


Finally, there is a host of influential policy briefs and reports by humanitarian actors and think tanks. Specifically, these include the ALNAP’s *State of the Humanitarian System* reports found at https://www.alnap.org/our-topics/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system; the Development Initiatives *Global Humanitarian Assistance* reports found at http://devinit.org/post/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2018/; and the wide ranging work by the Humanitarian Policy Group on humanitarian history, civilian security and protection, localization, displacement, and much more can be found at http://www.odi.org/our-work/programmes/humanitarian-policy-group.