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Cultures of Humanitarianism: Perspectives from the Asia-Pacific

Workshop Summary Paper

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With complex humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters occurring with greater severity and frequency in various parts of the world, questions of humanitarianism – particularly how it should be conceived and practised – have become increasingly important. Given the inherently heterogeneous nature of contemporary international society, how humanitarian actors operate within a multicultural world order presents both challenges and opportunities. Conventionally, humanitarianism is understood as constituted by 'universal' values that transcend both time and context. But there are, in fact, diverse interpretations of this complex concept; and as a consequence, its meanings are far from uncontested and uncontroversial. In addition, the socio-cultural context of any given situation in which humanitarian action is taking place can oftentimes accentuate and complicate tensions arising from diverse interpretations of the humanitarianism. This is particularly the case for complex humanitarian emergencies, which tend to be intrinsically 'political'. The mismanagement of socio-cultural sensitivities can lead to disastrous outcomes despite good intentions.

The 'Cultures of Humanitarianism: Perspectives from the Asia-Pacific' workshop sought to address these issues. This two-day workshop was organised by Dr Jacinta O'Hagan from the Australian National University (ANU) and Dr Miwa Hirono from the University of Nottingham in August 2011. It was hosted by the Department of International Relations in the School of International, Political and Strategic Studies, ANU, with generous funding from the Australia–Japan Foundation, Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA), ANU and the University of Nottingham. It included a range of speakers and participants from the academic and practitioner fields. The academics ranged from senior scholars, such as ASSA Fellows Professor William Maley and Professor Tessa Morris Suzuki, to emerging scholars such as Sarah Teitt, Hiroko Inoue, Pichamon Yeophantong and Paul Zeccola. International speakers included Professor Yukie Osa from Japan, Dr Sigit Riyanto from Indonesia, and Dr May Tan-Mullins and Yanhong Ge from China. The workshop was further enriched by the participation of speakers and discussants from the practitioner community, including Jeremy England of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Tanvir Uddin from Muslim Aid Australia.

Aims and guiding questions

The purpose of this two-day workshop was essentially to problematise this often 'taken-for-granted' idea that humanitarianism is understood the same way in all societies. In particular, we sought to interrogate the extent to which different cultures share similar understandings of humanitarianism; and how diverse and varied understandings of humanitarianism inform the way distinct societies and cultures respond to humanitarian imperatives and challenges. We sought to achieve this by comparing and contrasting how actors' understandings of the humanitarian imperatives are expressed in responses to the following three questions.

Who acts for whom in response to humanitarian crises?

We considered the diverse forms of agency involved in the provision of humanitarian goods within the Asia-Pacific region (including the agency of state and non-state actors, transnational actors, military and local community), as well as the relationships that currently – and ought to – exist between them. Our task was to explore who exactly are perceived as the *legitimate* providers and recipients of humanitarian assistance, and the politics involved in the 'representation' of these actors. Speakers for this session were: Yanhong Ge (International College of Nanjing University), Yukie Osa (Rikkyo University/Association for Aid and Relief [Japan]), Hiroko Inoue (ANU), Jeremy England (ICRC) and Brian Cox (Australian Army Reserve).

Why do they act?

We examined the traditions and principles of moral obligation and assistance that impel humanitarianism in culturally- and religiously-distinct societies. The aim was to investigate whether it is, indeed, possible to talk about *cultures* of humanitarianism, and if so, to uncover possible convergences and divergences in understanding between them. Focus was given specifically to the cases of China, Japan and Indonesia, and included views from a transnational Muslim NGO, Muslim Aid Australia. Speakers included Pichamon Yeophantong (ANU), Sigit Riyanto (Universitas Gadjah Mada), Tanvir Uddin (Muslim Aid Australia) and Mark Deasey (independent consultant).

How do they act?

We addressed this question in relation to two issues. The first concerned the importance of 'context' in shaping humanitarian responses at the local, national and international levels. Specifically, comparisons were drawn between the assistance provided in complex emergencies and that in disaster situations. These issues become all the more prominent in humanitarian crises in such areas as Aceh and Sri Lanka, where the nature of the crisis is 'mixed'. This leads to the question: how is 'humanitarian' action implemented in such contexts and conceived of by humanitarian actors themselves and by those affected by the crisis? Speakers included Sarah Teitt (University of Queensland), Hidehiro Ikematsu (Japanese Embassy), Paul Zeccola (ANU) and Christopher Roberts (ANU).

The second issue related to relationships among the variety of 'humanitarian' actors involved in the provision of relief and aid on the ground. The difficulties in effective coordination and multifaceted cooperation among these actors were highlighted. The discussion was further deepened by touching on two major divides inherent in humanitarian efforts: the civil/military divide and the international/national/local divide. Not only did perceptions of humanitarianism between these actors vary within different societies, but variations in *technical* and *policy* cultures also proved to be significant at different operational levels. Speakers included May Tan-Mullins (University of Nottingham Ningbo), Yukie Osa, Sigit Riyanto and Gavin Mount (Australian Defence Force Academy).

These questions provided the structure and focus of workshop discussions. A number of recurring themes emerged. The following is the summary of such themes and reflects on some of the key findings of the workshop discussions.

Major themes and findings

1. Universalism versus particularism

A key tension in conceptualisations of humanitarianism is between the universality of the concept and cultural and contextual contingencies. Humanitarianism necessarily contains elements of both universality and particularity. The contradiction intrinsic to this is brought out clearly in one of Yukie Osa's comments, in which she noted that 'humanitarianism is a universal language, but when it comes to the Asian region, [the meaning of] humanitarianism is not universal'.

Attempts to discern common standards of humanitarian conduct, or 'core principles of humanitarianism' as expressed by the ICRC, exemplify this desire to uncover the 'essence' of humanitarianism that can transcend time and context. The question, however, is whether such principles as 'humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence' are viewed as essential by all humanitarian actors irrespective of their varying socio-cultural backgrounds.

Three key trends emerged in the Workshop discussions. **First**, **cultures and contexts generate multiple interpretations of humanitarianism.** This is important because particular 'understandings of what "humanitarian" means can lead to very different actions and patterns of behaviour' (Maley). Understandings of the working of civil society actors are also affected by a particular political, social and cultural context (Nell Kennon, World Vision). Humanitarian advocacy groups in Indonesia and China are a case in point. Practices of humanitarian advocacy in these states tend to differ greatly from their Western counterparts, being much more low-key and, in certain cases, more dependent on the 'good graces' of the state. At issue, then, is whether these divergences can be reconciled to form a more common basis of understanding.

Second, while cultural difference matters a lot to the conception of humanitarianism, **such difference is not always irreconcilable**. In the case of Indonesia, the philosophical basis for understandings of humanitarianism is embodied in both Indonesian traditions and the *Pancasila* (five principles). As an example of this thinking, Sigit Riyanto raised the principle of '*Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab*' (just and civilised humanity), which requires that all human beings be treated with due regard given their dignity as God's creatures. However, whilst the sentiment of 'humanity' expressed here is drawn from Islamic traditions and thought, it resonates deeply throughout Indonesia, traversing religions and cultures within that society.

That said, the application of such principles can vary across states and societies. Local political cultures can shape and even impede the application of these principles. For instance, in Indonesia conflicts of interest between the central and local governments, and the complex relationship that exists between the state and civil society, continue to complicate the allocation of aid and the granting of access to people in need of assistance. This suggests that even when there are strong commonalities in interpretations of humanitarian principles, these may be obscured by the way local political contexts affect and shape the application of these principles.

Muslim conceptions and practices of humanitarianism both of assistance and protection are very much embedded in traditions of Islamic thought. However, they are ultimately based on concepts of obligation and need that are compatible with broader humanitarian principles. The origins of these ideas can be traced back to the Islamic faith and Divine Law, which have subsequently come to inform the operation of Muslim faith-based organisations. Although these organisations are heterogeneous in operational terms, they are 'homogeneous in inspiration' (Uddin).

Third, **'cultures' of humanitarianism transform over time**. As Pichamon Yeophantong emphasised, 'humanitarianism is not static, nor monolithic. It *has* evolved and it *is* influenced by a variety of historical and political factors'. This holds true not just for humanitarianism as a broad concept, but also for humanitarianism within different cultures and societies. In Japanese and Chinese societies, a 'communitarian ethic of obligation' – which sees one's ethical obligations as expanding in concentric circles – has long been the predominant mode of thinking on humanitarianism (Pichamon). Today, China, in particular, continues to harbour this attitude in its foreign policymaking, where its responsibility is conceived to be first and foremost to its own people. Nevertheless, the conception of humanitarianism in China continues to grow as China evolves as an international actor. As Sarah Teitt observed, China is making a gradual shift in its attitudes towards international peacekeeping and the provision of disaster relief, with increasing engagement with faraway regions, such as in Africa. A similar change can be observed in Japan. Here, the first Iraq War in 1991 was a catalyst, generating mounting popular pressure to push the government to become more active in international humanitarian activities.

2. Ethical obligations versus political imperatives

Another tension that surfaced in discussions was that between humanitarianism based on a sense of ethical obligation, and humanitarianism based on political imperatives. In practice, humanitarian actions often blend elements of both. It is rarely possible to clearly segregate so-called 'ethical' and 'political' imperatives in humanitarianism. But the question of how the balance between the two is achieved is a critical issue facing humanitarian civil society actors in many societies in the Asia-Pacific region. In Japan, China and Indonesia, civil society actors often have to address primarily state-led humanitarian agendas. Osa illustrated this tension of attempting to balance between state prerogatives and a (non-state)

humanitarian agenda in her discussion of the Association for Aid and Relief's (AAR) efforts to provide famine relief to North Korea. Officially, Japan cannot provide assistance in North Korea – a stance which, by extension, applies to the majority of humanitarian agencies in Japan. This created an obstacle for AAR's proposed assistance. But as an 'independent' humanitarian organisation, AAR is expected by its constituencies to provide assistance to those in need regardless of their political suasions. These tensions are perhaps not unique to Asia-Pacific cultures or societies. Indeed, they highlight the fact that all humanitarian actions are located within broader political contexts and necessarily interact with these contexts. As Gavin Mount argued, it is essential to understand the politics of any crisis, for only then can we begin to understand the power-based human relations that underlie the 'politics of humanitarianism'. This is as much the case in the Asia-Pacific as elsewhere. An awareness that both elements co-exist is a necessary prerequisite for the deployment of effective humanitarian activities.

The tension between political and ethical motives is also evident when we compare governments' responses to complex emergencies and natural disasters. There was a consensus among the participants that responses to disaster events tended to be less 'politicised'. As a consequence, governments proved to be more willing to extend assistance. In the Chinese case, conducting disaster relief operations is less controversial than providing assistance in complex emergencies, because the Chinese government can avoid the controversy surrounding issues such as *a priori* consent often involved in 'humanitarian intervention'. Assistance in the case of natural disasters is often requested by the host state. For instance, in the wake of the devastation following the tsunami in Aceh in December 2004, the Indonesian government was more willing to accept international disaster assistance than in the context of conflict, viewing the natural disaster matter in relatively 'de-politicised' terms.

3. Building trust and facilitating communication between technical/policy cultures and social/indigenous cultures

The importance of communication with local communities was emphasised throughout the workshop. The key issue is the extent to which, and ways in which, local agencies and networks are acknowledged and integrated into humanitarian operations. This involves both an acknowledgment of the significance of local agencies and networks but also ensuring that effective communication is established between external and local actors to build trust and cooperation. This speaks to the challenge of negotiating 'humanitarian space'. As Jeremy England argued, 'humanitarian space' is not a constant and can never be taken for granted. In order for external agencies to gain access to the humanitarian space, they need to negotiate and re-negotiate such space with a variety of actors on the ground 'day-by-day through trust and cooperation'. He stated, 'you earn [trust] through years of hard work, but you can lose it in an afternoon'. Effective communication is critical not only to effective coordination but also to building the trust that facilitates access.

Effective communication requires careful attention to the dangers of **divisive language** that can plague humanitarian activities**.** Humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and academics have their own unique language, standards of expectations and ways of thinking. In a sense, these organisations have their own 'culture' with their own technical and professional language. Technical and policy language is often not readily comprehensible to local populations. This does not mean that humanitarian practitioners are ill intentioned. Their goal is to develop frameworks and approaches that are neutral and can be applied across all cultural contexts. But the result can be sterile, and technical approaches become a barrier rather than a bridge to communication and understanding. Hiroko Inoue demonstrated this in the context of East Timor, where such language has given an impression to the East Timorese that humanitarians lack knowledge of East Timor culture. This can result in unintended consequences that undermine trust, acceptance and the effective provision of humanitarian assistance in the culturally and politically complex situations within which humanitarian actors are working. In addition, the language used in humanitarian assistance can often depict beneficiaries as 'victims' and 'passive' recipients of aid, rather than 'active' agents who form an integral part of humanitarian processes. As Inoue noted, this 'has a significant impact on how both the local population and humanitarian actors come to understand who they are and what is expected of them'.

Conclusion: the way forward

This workshop brought to the fore a complex range of issues and challenges that we face in pursuing humanitarianism in a multicultural world. The overarching challenge, however, is how we move beyond the mere recognition of cultural specificity and difference to **actual humanitarian policies that embrace difference and diversity**. Meeting this challenge means developing the capacity to balance culturally diverse conceptions of humanitarianism, with the imperative to create and disseminate a 'common' humanitarian language that all can refer to, irrespective of their differences. Only by recognising the contested nature of understandings of humanitarianism and the existence of alternative conceptions can the barriers that currently inhibit effective cross-cultural communication be gradually taken down.

To do this, it is imperative for humanitarian agents to be 'self-reflexive'. Actors need to be aware of their own cultural subjectivities and be clear about their motives. At the same time, self-reflection must be balanced by **the willingness and capacity to listen to the perspectives and priorities of others**. This is arguably one of the most difficult tasks, as it requires all humanitarian workers to look beyond their own understandings of humanitarianism, and to be open to alternative perspectives.

Given that trust is the 'most important humanitarian commodity' (England), there is a need to build and maintain 'trust' between those affected by disasters and humanitarian actors

by constantly keeping channels of communication open. This entails the need for training to include the development of **cross-cultural communication** as well as the technical skills required for humanitarian emergency response. This would help to strengthen capacities for external humanitarian practitioners to build relationships and networks with beneficiaries, local practitioners and each other, enhancing mutual understanding, trust, acceptance and access.

The workshop also highlighted the need to enhance deeper engagement between state (including military), non-state and transnational humanitarian actors, whilst recognising that the relationships among these actors vary across societies. The specific expertise – whether technical, policy or cultural – of these actors are complementary, and as such, partnerships between them can not only help to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive humanitarian space, but can also facilitate humanitarian efforts in the field.

More research needs be conducted on the variety of cultural approaches to humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific. This must include not only discussion of the broader conceptual dimensions of humanitarianism but also focused research on particular issues and case studies. Such a balanced agenda would provide us with rich empirical insights into continuity and variation in conceptions and practices of humanitarianism in the region. This is crucial to enhancing the quality of design and implementation of humanitarian assistance in the multicultural world.

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