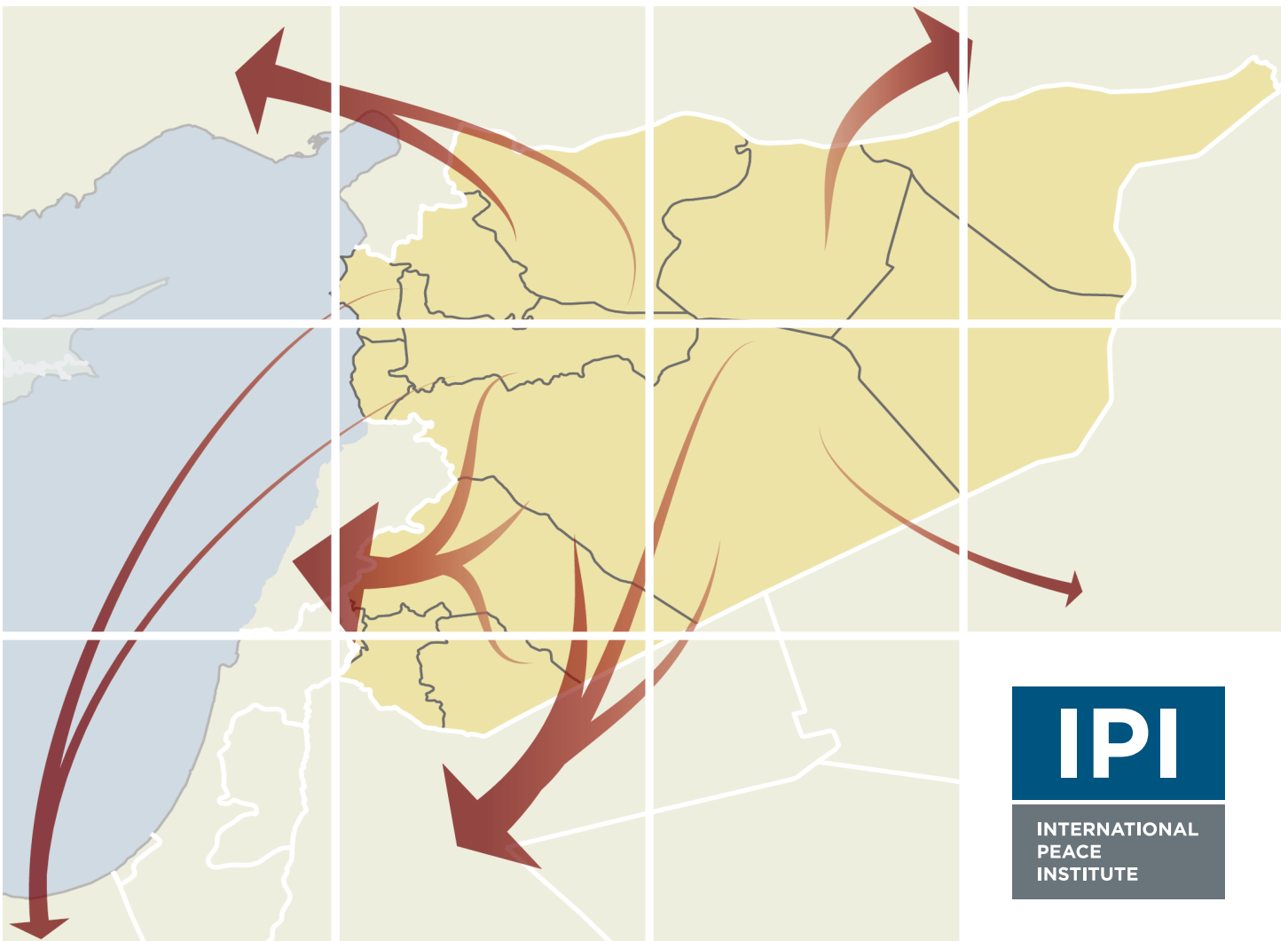


Cooperation from Crisis? Regional Responses to Humanitarian Emergencies

JÉRÉMIE LABBÉ, LILIANNE FAN, AND WALTER KEMP



Cover Image: Artist's rendering of refugee flows from Syria to neighboring countries. Design by Chris Perry.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

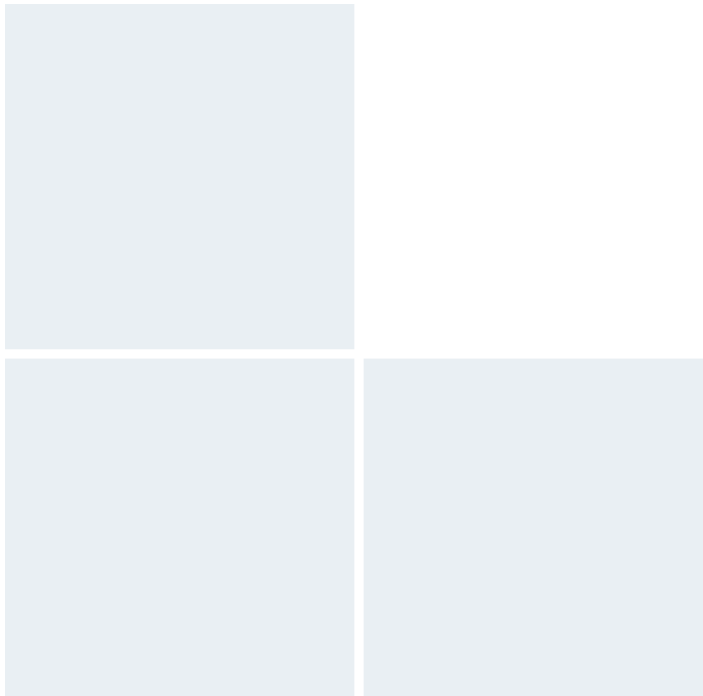
JÉRÉMIE LABBÉ is a Senior Policy Analyst at the International Peace Institute working on humanitarian affairs.

LILIANNE FAN is a Research Fellow at the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute.

WALTER KEMP is Director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Peace Institute.

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Executive Summary

With the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria and the broader Middle East in mind, this report investigates how past examples of regional responses to humanitarian crises have succeeded or failed to meet humanitarian objectives, in order to inform responses to contemporary crises. Second, and as importantly, it assesses whether such regional responses contributed to strengthening regional integration and cooperation, paving the way for increased regional stability and an improved capacity to respond to emergencies.

The report looks at two very different humanitarian crises: the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, respectively. It explores the ways in which countries in each region and regional organizations addressed humanitarian needs. The last section then draws lessons from these past experiences that could be applied in contemporary crises, especially the one in Syria.

The case study focusing on the Balkans examines how four countries in the region—namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia—worked together to address the long-term consequences of population displacement, almost fifteen years after the end of the conflict in 1995. It finds that external factors, primarily the pull factor of integration into the European Union, were crucial for triggering and fostering closer regional cooperation on displacement. In addition, once the process began, regional cooperation for dealing with the humanitarian crisis was in and of itself an important confidence-building measure. By working together constructively, the parties reestablished trust and normal working relations. Furthermore, the process generated political goodwill and a positive spirit that could be channeled into other outstanding regional issues, like missing persons and borders.

The Cyclone Nargis case study focuses on the role that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) played in opening up humanitarian access and organizing the humanitarian response in Myanmar—a country highly suspicious of any international interference. It concludes that ASEAN played a crucial role as a diplomatic bridge between the government and the international community, and facilitated trust building and problem solving

at a regional level. The regional response to Nargis—which benefited from a preexisting, albeit nascent, disaster management structure and an emerging humanitarian consciousness—arguably contributed to the Myanmar government’s increased openness toward the international community, the country’s greater integration into the region, and a strengthening of ASEAN’s institutional disaster management framework.

These case studies of regional responses to humanitarian crises offer a number of lessons that can be usefully applied to contemporary emergencies. While not always straightforward, particularly when addressing the humanitarian impact of conflict, these experiences demonstrate that regional cooperation can contribute to efficiently addressing some immediate humanitarian needs and, as importantly, may set in motion a virtuous circle of greater trust and mutual understanding between regional stakeholders. Greater regional cohesion, made possible through the establishment of working relationships aimed at addressing urgent and concrete needs, has the potential to strengthen regional integration, which in turn might benefit responses to crises in the future.

Four useful lessons can be drawn from the case studies that could help interested parties overcome initial obstacles to regional cooperation, especially in politically charged situations of conflict:

- Regional stakeholders’ ownership over the response through leadership and direct involvement is crucial, but not necessarily spontaneous. External actors can usefully contribute through a balanced mix of pressure and technical support, while being cautious to leave the necessary room for a regionally owned process to develop.
- Preexisting regional organizations can provide an institutional framework on which to build the response, particularly where there is an emerging humanitarian consciousness and a nascent disaster management structure.
- A vulnerability-based approach that focuses on concrete and specific issues can contribute to depoliticizing discussions by addressing the least controversial issues first, while strengthening trust and mutual understanding among regional stakeholders.
- Complementarity between a high-level policy process and an expert-level process is key to

equipping the response with both the vision and political commitment necessary. It also facilitates the development of working relationships aimed at addressing tangible needs.

The paper concludes with an attempt to apply some of these lessons to the crisis in Syria and the neighboring countries, suggesting that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation could provide a useful institutional framework for addressing the increasing needs of refugees. Past cases show that constructive engagement on concrete and compelling humanitarian needs may then set the ground for strengthened regional cooperation on the political front, a highly desirable outcome given the numerous challenges the Middle East now faces.

Introduction

The humanitarian impact and consequences of natural or man-made disasters are rarely contained within national boundaries, as the current crisis in Syria illustrates. More often than not, humanitarian emergencies have regional implications—whether in terms of impact or in terms of response—even when the original event triggering humanitarian needs happens strictly within national borders.

With the dramatically deteriorating situation in Syria and the broader Middle East in mind, the first aim of this report is to investigate how some previous regional responses to humanitarian crises have succeeded or failed to meet humanitarian objectives, in order to inform responses to contemporary crises. Second, and as importantly, the report aims to assess whether such regional responses contributed to strengthening regional cooperation and integration, paving the way for increased regional stability and an improved capacity to respond to emergencies.

The report looks at two very different humanitarian crises: the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, respectively. It explores how countries in each region or regional organizations addressed

humanitarian needs. Both case studies then assess whether these regional responses have helped strengthen cooperation and political integration within the region. The last part of the report, while acknowledging the different contexts of the two case studies, draws lessons from these past experiences that could be applied in contemporary crises, especially the one in Syria.

Dealing with Displacement in the Western Balkans¹

Armed conflicts, ethnic cleansing, and foreign intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s led to the displacement of approximately 4 million people within and beyond the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia.² Lives were turned upside down; homes were damaged and destroyed. This was the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Indeed, at the end of the twentieth century, the Balkans was listed as one of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) five priority refugee situations.

According to UNHCR, in Croatia in 1991 alone some 20,000 people were killed, more than 200,000 refugees fled the country, and some 350,000 became internally displaced. By the end of April 1992, as the war had spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 95 percent of the Muslim and Croat populations in the major urban areas in the east “had been forced from their homes and Sarajevo was under daily bombardment. By mid-June, Serb forces controlled two-thirds of Bosnia and Herzegovina and approximately 1 million people had fled their homes....By the time the war ended in December 1995, over half the 4.4 million people of Bosnia and Herzegovina were displaced.”³

From 1991 to 1995 the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and parts of Croatia resulted in 250,000 direct casualties and more than 2 million refugees and IDPs—about one-third of the total population of Bosnia and Croatia. Even after the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, political

¹ This section draws heavily on observations and conclusions from Walter Kemp, “Rebuilding Lives: Regional Solutions to Displacement in the Western Balkans,” New York: International Peace Institute, October 2012.

² International Center for Transitional Justice, “Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia,” Fact Sheet, January 1, 2009, available at <http://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-FormerYugoslavia-Justice-Facts-2009-English.pdf>.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 218–219.

tensions related to the humanitarian crisis continued, triggered by the slow return of refugees and problems in institution building.

Images of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the move, and the “CNN effect” of highlighting the human suffering that was taking place, spurred the international community into action. Concerned about the refugee and humanitarian crisis in the Balkans—particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina—the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 743 in February 1992 creating the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).⁴ A subsequent Security Council resolution in October prohibited unauthorized military flights in Bosnian airspace, creating the potential for a no-fly zone enforced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁵ NATO activities gradually expanded to include airstrikes, particularly to protect safe havens. This eventually developed into a full air campaign, until the signing of the Dayton Agreement in December 1995.

International humanitarian actors, like UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization were present and active on the ground during and after the crisis. In the early 1990s, the European Union (EU) committed close to €1.2 billion in humanitarian aid for the region, with food and basic needs accounting for almost 60 percent of the budget.⁶ The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deployed a mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in late 1995, and was active, *inter alia*, in addressing humanitarian issues. An OSCE mission was established in Croatia in April 1996 to, among other things, support the government in dealing with the reintegration of the former Serb-controlled areas and the tasks of reconciliation. The OSCE had little room for maneuver with Serbia, since Yugoslavia was suspended as an OSCE participating state in July 1992 (until November 2000).

LIMITED REGIONAL COOPERATION

The legacy of the war in Yugoslavia made it very difficult to promote joint responses to the humanitarian disaster. After the Dayton Agreement, the

international community—particularly the OSCE and UNHCR—worked with the governments of the region (particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and what was then Serbia and Montenegro) to ensure durable solutions for refugees and IDPs in the Western Balkans, either by enabling the safe return of refugees to their homes or by integrating them into the communities they had fled to during the war. In the postwar period, hundreds of thousands of displaced persons returned home, and tens of thousands of dwellings were rebuilt. Yet, a decade after the war, many people (estimates range as high as half a million) were still living in limbo: unable to return to where they came from and not at home where they were. Furthermore, the issue remained a bone of contention within and between states in the region, straining interethnic and bilateral relations.

The outbreak of war in Kosovo in 1999 created new displacement problems, compounding the human misery and the challenges faced by the affected states and the international community. In order to make the caseload manageable, it was agreed by the parties (at the suggestion of international humanitarian actors) that in the context of relations between Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia the issue of refugees and IDPs would include only those who had been displaced in the period between 1991 and 1995, thereby excluding Kosovo. When Montenegro became independent in June 2006, it was agreed that an exception would be made to include IDPs in Montenegro from 1999.

Despite bilateral disagreements between Croatia and Serbia, as well as simmering tensions within Bosnia and Herzegovina, the three countries agreed to meet in Sarajevo at the end of January 2005 to try to make progress on the refugee issue. In the Sarajevo Declaration of January 31, 2005, the ministers responsible for refugees and IDPs of the three countries said they would solve the remaining displacement issues by the end of 2006. But this did not occur due to disagreements over occupancy and tenancy rights (particularly regarding compensation for those whose rights had been terminated) and over pensions and social security, and even due to arguments about the very number of persons

4 UN Security Council Resolution 743 (February 21, 1992), UN Doc. S/RES/743.

5 UN Security Council Resolution 781 (October 9, 1992), UN Doc. S/RES/781.

6 European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), “ECHO in the Balkans: 12 Years of Humanitarian Action 1991–2003,” October 2003, p. 4.

affected. Furthermore, there was little coordination of national action plans in a joint, regional implementation strategy. As a result, in 2008 UNHCR still listed the Balkans as one of its five priority refugee situations (namely, situations that had lasted longer than five years involving more than 20,000 people). The Sarajevo Process, which followed on from the *Sarajevo Declaration*, was failing.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS FOR A COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE

The role of intergovernmental organizations was vital for moving the parties toward a coordinated and durable regional solution to the humanitarian crisis in the Balkans. The OSCE, the EU, and UNHCR all encouraged the parties to work together, and provided support and incentives to do so.

That said, it took time—almost fifteen years—and a lot of persuasion from the international community. On March 25, 2010, the foreign ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia (the “partner countries”), as well as representatives of the European Commission, UNHCR, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, met in Belgrade. In their joint communiqué, the four foreign ministers acknowledged that “the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons has not yet been fully resolved in any of these states and therefore it is necessary to intensify regional cooperation in order to achieve just, comprehensive and durable solutions, primarily for the most vulnerable ones, aware that it would contribute to the further promotion of good-neighbourly relations and stability in the region, including mutual support in the European integration process.”⁷

To spur the four countries into action, the EU, the OSCE, and UNHCR issued a “joint discussion paper” at the Belgrade meeting. It identified some of the outstanding issues, and listed five actions that should be carried out. Among the outstanding issues mentioned were disagreements over statistics; civil status; employment and socioeconomic integration (particularly of minorities); occupancy and tenancy rights; housing and property; and the

validation of years of service for pension purposes. As next steps, the international community stressed the need for intensified technical cooperation on data in order to measure the magnitude of the problem and the scope of the assistance necessary; parameters and criteria for a comprehensive needs assessment in all countries; the creation of bilateral and regional working groups to address the outstanding issues; an action plan addressing the specific needs to be resolved (including timelines, budgetary commitments, and methodologies); and a joint information campaign to inform remaining refugees on conditions for durable solutions.

Multilateral organizations contributed to the success of this humanitarian initiative through their activities on the ground as well as their diplomacy. The OSCE (particularly through its field missions) was active on the ground in all four countries of the region, working to help defuse tensions and to promote reconciliation. UNHCR provided the normative framework for dealing with displacement and the expertise to help the governments live up to their commitments.

But in terms of a game changer that could provide the leverage to move the parties closer to a solution, the prospect of EU accession was clearly the strongest pull factor. Croatia, which applied for EU membership in 2003, knew that as part of its accession process it would have to live up to the EU *acquis*, including in relation to the judiciary and fundamental rights.⁸ Serbia, which applied for EU membership in December 2009, also wanted to demonstrate goodwill and to cooperate with the international community. This was manifested, *inter alia*, by delivering Ratko Mladic to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague on May 31, 2011 (which was one of the preconditions for becoming an EU member state). In short, the parties realized that it was in their self-interest to work toward a regional solution both as an end in itself and as part of the European integration process.

Another important factor was that the international community spoke with one voice, thanks to the appointment of a personal envoy of the UNHCR in February 2011. Anne Willem Bijleveld

⁷ *Joint Communiqué*, Belgrade, March 25, 2010, available at www.mhrr.gov.ba/izbjeglice/Donatorska_konferencija/Joint%20Communique.pdf.

⁸ The *acquis*, also known as the *acquis communautaire*, is the “body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states.” See the European Commission’s online glossary on enlargement policy, available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/acquis_en.htm.

of the Netherlands managed to coordinate the position of the UNHCR, the EU, and the OSCE, and gain the backing of bilateral donors, which enhanced his authority and leverage.

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

Trust and confidence was built through several expert-level working groups. Two bilateral working groups, involving Serbia and Croatia, focused on the thorny issues of data exchange and pensions. One regional working group covered the issues of the civil status of documents; another developed a public information campaign (to explain the process to the public, particularly the beneficiaries); a third was responsible for drafting the joint ministerial declaration; while a fourth worked on the Joint Regional Multi-Year Program. A fifth group, which was eventually merged with the fourth, looked at how to set up a trust fund mechanism for managing the funds that would be provided at the donors' conference. Each working group was chaired by one of the four countries.

The international community steered the process and provided advice (for example, on drafting the joint declaration and the multiyear program), but it also left the parties to themselves. They were responsible for convening and running the meetings. This gave them a strong sense of ownership and made them stakeholders in the process. As a result of these meetings, positions were articulated, proposals were made, and needs were identified. In the process, the negotiators got to know each other better and gradually toned down political rhetoric and point scoring in favor of seeking joint solutions to concrete (and often shared) problems. They truly became partner countries.

The incentive to reach compromise was strengthened by the prospect of a donors' conference to discuss the creation of a multidonor fund to assist in the process of return or local reintegration of refugees and IDPs. This was a sizeable carrot that kept the parties working together. It also created time pressure. Furthermore, the four governments had to work together to ensure complementarity between their national strategies and to devise a joint proposal. This began to work well, to the point that the parties were soon drafting common

funding requests. The fact that the four countries conveyed such requests together made a favorable impact on the donors.

An important breakthrough in promoting regional cooperation came when the parties agreed on the need to protect the most vulnerable. This needs-based approach depoliticized the issue by shifting the focus from the interests of ethnic groups to the humanitarian needs of individuals. Individuals who fulfilled one or several of the vulnerability criteria drawn up by UNHCR (for example, households that had a low income or were living in undignified conditions, old people living on their own, people with disabilities, women or young people at risk, single parents with dependents) were to be prioritized for assistance programs.

A CATALYST FOR COOPERATION

Eventually the parties came to an agreement that not only addressed some of the humanitarian consequences of the crisis but also served as a catalyst for greater regional cooperation. At a meeting in Belgrade on November 7, 2011, the foreign ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia agreed on a *Joint Declaration on Ending Displacement and Ensuring Durable Solutions for Vulnerable Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*. In it, the ministers declared their conviction that “achieving just, comprehensive and durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons in the region will contribute in a crucial manner to deepen our good-neighbourly relations and stability in the region.” They recognized that “the successful resolution of these issues is vital to the further enhancement of positive and productive relations among our countries and citizens and the underpinning of our respective bids to join the European Union.”⁹

They recalled the principles that had been made in past agreements (the *Sarajevo Declaration* of 2005 and the *Belgrade Joint Communiqué* of 2010), “in particular full respect for the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons and the mutual obligation to closely cooperate and synchronize our activities in order to ensure durable solutions for them, either through voluntary return and reintegration or local integration.”¹⁰

⁹ *Joint Declaration on Ending Displacement and Ensuring Durable Solutions for Vulnerable Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*, Belgrade, November 7, 2011, para. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 2.

The four ministers announced that they had developed a regional working plan outlining the actions being taken to remove remaining obstacles and to achieve durable solutions. Among the issues that they listed as being resolved were ensuring adequate housing for all refugees accommodated in collective centers; a regional framework for addressing the housing needs of vulnerable persons; accelerated procedures for civil documentation, including recognition of genuine documents already in the possession of refugees and IDPs; and ensuring continued regional data exchange to avoid duplication of assistance and to ensure that no one was excluded. The ministers also declared that they had agreed to a Joint Regional Programme on Durable Solutions for Refugees and Displaced Persons. This was presented to the international donors' conference in Sarajevo on April 24, 2012. Around €300 million was pledged at the international donors' conference.

The parties continue to work together to implement the Regional Housing Programme, which is designed to provide durable and sustainable housing solutions to some 74,000 individuals, or 27,000 households. The money is being disbursed through a fund managed by the Council of Europe Development Bank. The program is expected to last for five years.

External factors, like the pull factor of EU integration, fostered closer regional cooperation for addressing the humanitarian crisis in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, once the process began, regional cooperation for dealing with the humanitarian crisis was an important confidence-building measure. By working together constructively, the parties reestablished trust and normal working relations. Furthermore, the process generated political goodwill and a positive spirit that could be channeled into other outstanding regional issues, like missing persons and borders.

TRANSFERABLE ELEMENTS FROM THE BALKAN EXPERIENCE

The experience of the Western Balkans in dealing with displacement after the wars of 1991 to 1995 can be considered a success story, although it took more than fifteen years to get the parties to work together. Is this experience transferable to other parts of the world, like the Middle East? Among the lessons learned are the following:

- Despite tragic failures in protecting civilians, the engagement of the UN Security Council and the deployment of UNPROFOR, backed up by NATO, demonstrated the concern and resolve of the international community regarding the humanitarian crisis.
- The presence of international and humanitarian actors on the ground—like the ICRC, UNHCR, and OSCE—was vital for monitoring the situation, collecting information, responding to the needs of IDPs and refugees, and working with the parties for durable solutions.
- The pull factor of the EU was essential, although this could be substituted by the leverage of conditional donor support from development banks, international financial institutions, and individual states working under the umbrella of a like-minded group of international and regional organizations.
- An important lesson from the Western Balkans is that it is essential to ensure complementarity between a high-level political process, expert-level negotiations, and a set of clear and shared objectives which, if fulfilled, will result in tangible benefits (for the countries concerned and the people in need).
- The regional approach was important in order to defuse bilateral tensions, address the concerns of a wider pool of refugees, and potentially create momentum for resolving other outstanding issues.
- Taking a vulnerability-based approach proved successful. Similar vulnerability criteria could be applied elsewhere, albeit adapted to the local conditions. The challenge is to identify who is vulnerable and how many of them there are. Agreeing on the numbers can be contentious, but this should not derail the process. As in the case of the Western Balkans, an independent third-party evaluation, drawing on existing data, can help to depoliticize the issue.
- It is important for the parties themselves to take ownership of the process—through their participation in working groups, drafting of joint political statements, the elaboration of a regional plan of action, and unified requests for funding.
- The prospect of a donors' conference created a major incentive and time pressure that obliged

the parties to work together.

- The example of the working groups could be replicated. However, if the parties speak different languages and are less cooperative than the countries of the Western Balkans turned out to be, then it will be necessary for the international community to play a more intrusive role in the process. This runs the risk of reducing the sense of ownership among the parties and makes it easier for them to blame those trying to facilitate the process rather than being forced to take responsibility themselves. It also makes it harder for the negotiators to socialize (which is also a vital element for improving trust and confidence).
- The key is to get the parties to focus on (and try to resolve) specific issues. Focusing on specific issues strips away political and nationalistic arguments and obliges the parties to identify and resolve concrete problems. This can also help to de-politicize the process.
- The mixture of incentives and pressure that was used in the Western Balkans is a valuable model that could be followed elsewhere.
- It is vital that the international community speaks with one voice. The example of appointing a humanitarian coordinator (i.e., personal envoy of the UNHCR) could be replicated elsewhere.
- Through the process of working together, the parties of the region got to know and understand each other better, narrowed their differences, and developed joint strategies. Such an approach not only helps to deal with the specific issue of displacement, it can also build confidence among the parties that can facilitate progress in other areas.
- Is it essential for the conflict to be over before displacement issues are addressed? Perhaps not, but it certainly helps since people need to feel that they have somewhere safe to return to. That said, the voice of displaced populations should be heard in the settlement process. Indeed, trying to resolve displacement issues can promote cooperation and contribute to peace.

Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the ASEAN Response

Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on May 2 and 3, 2008, causing widespread destruction and devastation across the Ayeyarwady Delta. The cyclone was the deadliest ever recorded in the North Indian Ocean Basin and the second-deadliest named tropical storm of all time.

According to the government of Myanmar's figures, Cyclone Nargis left more than 140,000 people dead or unaccounted for, 800,000 homeless, and more than 20,000 injured.¹¹ An estimated 2.4 million people—one third of the entire population of the Ayeyarwady and Yangon divisions—were affected.

The cyclone devastated fishing and farming communities across the affected area, destroyed some 700,000 homes, and caused severe damage to critical infrastructure. More than 75 percent of the hospitals and clinics were destroyed; power lines were severed; roads and bridges were destroyed; three-quarters of the livestock was killed; and half of the region's fishing fleet was damaged.¹² More than a million acres of rice paddy in the region known as the country's "rice bowl" were destroyed by seawater.¹³

Damage from the cyclone was estimated at \$4 billion, with \$1 billion needed for recovery until 2012. Total economic losses amounted to approximately 2.7 percent of Myanmar's projected gross domestic product (GDP) in 2008.¹⁴

Following the cyclone, the government of Myanmar accepted aid from a limited number of bilateral donors but was reluctant to allow broader access to international aid and aid workers. This led to an outcry from the international community and pressure mounted significantly, even resulting in some diplomats calling for urgent international assistance to be delivered without the consent of the government of Myanmar under the principle of a "responsibility to protect." This impasse generated early expectations from international donors and the broader international community that the

11 Trócaire and Myanmar Marketing Research & Development Co. Ltd (MMRD), "The Private Sector and Humanitarian Relief in Myanmar: A Study of Recent Practices of Business Engagement in Humanitarian Relief to Assess the Potential, Modalities and Areas for Future Cooperation," October 2011.

12 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), "Charting a New Course: ASEAN-UN Post-Nargis Partnership," ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, 2010.

13 Trócaire and MMRD, "The Private Sector."

14 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Joint Assessment," July 2008.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should play some kind of role in pressuring its member state to urgently grant humanitarian aid workers unfettered access to the delta.¹⁵ As the evidence of the scale of devastation started to trickle out to the world, these expectations grew and ASEAN took on a progressively proactive stance.

Less than three weeks after the cyclone, ASEAN member states, including Myanmar, came to an agreement that ASEAN would assume a leadership role in the post-Nargis response. This marked the first-ever mission in which the regional organization played a coordinating role. It set an important precedent for ASEAN's potential role in crisis management in the region and also in acting as a diplomatic bridge between its member states and the wider international community.

COORDINATION MECHANISM FOR POST-NARGIS RECOVERY

ASEAN's engagement began soon after the cyclone. On May 5th, ASEAN's then secretary-general, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, called on all member states to provide urgent relief assistance through the framework of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. On May 8th, the government of Myanmar agreed to work in coordination with the ASEAN Secretariat to assemble and deploy an emergency rapid assessment team, comprising government officials, disaster management experts, and NGOs from member countries. In the first-ever such mission for ASEAN, the Emergency Rapid Assessment Team was deployed to Myanmar from May 9th to 18th. Its report was submitted to a special ASEAN ministerial meeting on May 19th.

At the ASEAN ministerial meeting, ASEAN foreign ministers agreed to establish an ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism to "facilitate the effective distribution and utilization of assistance from the international community, including the expeditious and effective deployment of relief workers, especially health and medical personnel."¹⁶ ASEAN had never played such a role before. Over the next week, the ASEAN Secretariat, in consultation with

experts from member states, worked on designing an appropriate mechanism, drawing on Indonesia's experience in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami recovery effort. The result was a two-tiered structure, consisting of the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF), a diplomatic and policy-level body chaired by the ASEAN secretary-general, and a Yangon-based Tripartite Core Group (TCG), consisting of ASEAN, the Myanmar government, and the United Nations, to facilitate day-to-day operations and coordinate the management and planning of the relief effort. The AHTF-TCG mechanism was granted a mandate for a two-year period.

The AHTF comprised twenty-two members: two from the ASEAN Secretariat (including the ASEAN secretary-general as chair) and two officials (one senior diplomat and one technical expert) from each of the ten ASEAN countries. The mandate of the task force was to supervise and advise the TCG, including on broad strategic planning, priorities, and targets. The TCG's role was to oversee the coordination of resources, to facilitate operations, and to coordinate the monitoring and evaluation of the recovery effort in the Nargis-affected areas. The ASEAN component of the TCG comprised a senior ASEAN member (i.e., an ambassador based in Yangon), an official from the ASEAN Secretariat, and an expert on disaster management. The Myanmar component of the TCG was made up of a senior member from the government, appointed by the Central Coordinating Board, and two others. The United Nations component comprised the UN humanitarian coordinator, the resident coordinator, and the head of one of the UN operational agencies, on a rotating basis. Additional technical experts were invited to provide technical support as required.

After the special ministerial meeting, the decision to establish an ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism for Cyclone Nargis was communicated immediately to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. On May 21st, Mr. Ban met then prime minister of Myanmar Thein Sein in Yangon. Two days later, he succeeded in securing a breakthrough

15 ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization in Southeast Asia with a current membership of ten member states. It was founded on August 8, 1967, by the five member states of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The membership of the regional organization has since expanded to include Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam. ASEAN's aims include the maintenance of regional stability and peace, the acceleration of economic growth and regional integration, and the protection of social and cultural wellbeing for all ASEAN citizens.

16 ASEAN, "ASEAN-led Mechanism," Post Nargis Knowledge Management Portal, available at www.aseanpostnargiskm.org/response-to-nargis/asean-led-mechanism.

agreement with then president General Than Shwe to allow access to all aid workers. On May 24th, Mr. Ban and Dr. Pitsuwan jointly launched the ASEAN-UN partnership at Don Mueang airport in Bangkok and then returned to Yangon for a pledging conference held the next day. Donors who attended the conference made two main calls to the government of Myanmar: to permit unfettered access to cyclone-affected areas and to conduct a credible needs assessment in cooperation with the international community, both of which were addressed through the TCG mechanism.

The TCG is recognized to have achieved early successes with a number of key issues. The first was the facilitation of unimpeded access for humanitarian workers through the granting of nearly 4,000 visas during the emergency relief period. Second, ASEAN worked with the government of Myanmar and international partners to establish benchmarks to regularly monitor progress in the recovery effort.

One of the first tasks of the Tripartite Core Group was to conduct a credible needs assessment. To carry out this task, the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) was launched by the TCG on June 8, 2008, involving the government of Myanmar, ASEAN, the UN, international financial institutions, and international NGOs. More than 300 people, divided into thirty-two teams, spent ten days touring the cyclone-affected areas—places that had previously been effectively closed to foreigners.

Following the joint assessment, the TCG adopted a results framework and monitoring system to track progress of the humanitarian and recovery response. Community monitoring was conducted through a series of post-Nargis periodic reviews; complementary qualitative monitoring of social and socioeconomic impacts of the disaster and the aid effort were also tracked through post-Nargis “social impacts monitoring” exercises. Indicators for social recovery included an analysis of gender-disaggregated data from affected communities and also social relations within communities, including gender relations. For example, the third social impacts monitoring exercise, or SIM 3, was published in April 2010 and found that gender

relations were good overall, and that women had more awareness of aid affairs than before, but that women, especially widows, faced increasing burdens from economic stress.¹⁷

The TCG also facilitated the development of a post-Nargis recovery and preparedness plan, outlining a three-year strategy from 2009 through 2011 to consolidate progress and promote durable recovery in the affected areas. As it was realized that coordination was needed not just in Yangon but closer to the affected communities, an in-country mechanism was established in June 2009 consisting of a recovery coordination center and recovery hub offices in four townships as a joint UN-ASEAN mechanism to support all recovery partners. This followed the phasing out of the UN “cluster coordination” system that functioned during the emergency and early recovery period. The TCG would convene regularly to discuss and make decisions on key issues and was perceived by aid agencies in Myanmar to be generally effective.¹⁸

A NEW MODEL OF HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIP

ASEAN’s post-Nargis engagement was critical in building a bridge between the government of Myanmar and the international community to facilitate humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. It helped to open up an unprecedented level of humanitarian space in the country. In the words of then UN emergency relief coordinator John Holmes following a visit to cyclone-affected areas in late July 2008, “Nargis showed us a new model of humanitarian partnership, adding the special position and capabilities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to those of the United Nations in working effectively with the government.” ASEAN leadership, Holmes continued, was “vital in building trust with the government and saving lives.”¹⁹

The decision to establish the ASEAN-led mechanism was driven by ASEAN’s emerging humanitarian consciousness and concern with disaster management, as well as a concern that its own credibility was being challenged by Myanmar’s reluctance to grant wider access to international

17 Tripartite Core Group, “Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010,” July 2010.

18 Katherine Baldwin, “Myanmar: ASEAN Finds New Purpose with Cyclone Nargis Response,” AlertNet, May 4, 2009, available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-asean-finds-new-purpose-cyclone-nargis-response>.

19 See Yves-Kim Creac’h and Lilianne Fan, “ASEAN’s Role in the Cyclone Nargis Response: Implications, Lessons and Opportunities,” *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 41 (December 2008).

aid. ASEAN’s secretary-general, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, recounted how Myanmar’s choices were presented plainly by then foreign minister of Indonesia, Hasan Wirayuda:

There are three options available to Myanmar. First is for Myanmar to resist the call and the world will barge in, based on the principle of “responsibility to protect.” Second, Myanmar will have to deal with the United Nations alone because the world will not helplessly tolerate the suffering of millions. And the third is ASEAN and Myanmar facing the world together and conducting an orderly flow of personnel and materials for the rescue effort and the recovery later on.²⁰

Faced with these scenarios, Myanmar accepted ASEAN’s offer of support in facilitating international assistance and coordinating the post-cyclone recovery effort.

For ASEAN, the role was unprecedented and a test for its relevance. Dr. Pitsuwan defined the humanitarian mission as a double challenge: first, to “build back better for both of us, for Myanmar and for ASEAN,” restoring Myanmar to “its traditional role as the rice bowl not only of Myanmar but of Southeast Asia,” and second, to prove ASEAN’s relevance at the same time by forging of “a new model of humanitarian partnership” for the Southeast Asia region. ASEAN, in the words of Secretary-General Dr. Surin, was being “baptised” by Cyclone Nargis.²¹ The crisis also occurred at a defining moment for ASEAN, just months after member states had adopted the first ASEAN Charter. Nargis thus provided ASEAN with “a window of opportunity to make meaningful progress on the goals of the Charter.”²²

EVOLVING REGIONAL COOPERATION

ASEAN’s engagement in Cyclone Nargis took place in a context where regional cooperation had been evolving from cooperation based on the principle of non-interference in the domestic matters of neighboring states and a focus on regional stability, to one defined by a common set of principles and a growing sense of mutual responsibility—not only

for peace and security but also for the social wellbeing for all ASEAN citizens. ASEAN had been established in the context of decolonization and the Cold War, during which many newly independent countries in Southeast Asia faced multiple challenges associated with transitions, including internal conflict, interstate tensions, and invasions by big powers. Thus, the objective of ASEAN at its founding was “to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South-East Asian Nations.”²³

The organization was founded on a set of core principles, including non-interference in its members’ internal affairs, consensus, the non-use of force, and non-confrontation. These principles governed ASEAN’s approach to dealing with its member states affected by crisis, including Myanmar. This approach favored “quiet diplomacy,” “constructive engagement,” and “confidence building” to more confrontational means of peacemaking.

By the 1990s, some ASEAN leaders claimed the body had one of the most successful models of regional cooperation in the world—the “ASEAN Way”—which emphasized informality, organizational minimalism, inclusiveness, consultations and consensus, and dispute resolution.²⁴ Some of the harshest criticism of ASEAN’s “constructive engagement” approach came, in fact, from its position on Myanmar since the 1990s. Following the country’s accession to ASEAN, however, some members began to speak more openly about the need to bring about change and reforms in Myanmar. ASEAN’s strongest and most united criticism of the Burmese junta came in the wake of the latter’s brutal crackdown on civilian protesters in September 2007, during which some ASEAN members questioned the degree to which they should uphold the principle of non-interference in relation to Myanmar. The decision to play a major

20 See Surin Pitsuwan, “From Baptism by Cyclone to a Nation’s Fresh Start,” *Bangkok Post*, February 17, 2012.

21 ASEAN, “Welcome Remarks by H.E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN as the Chairman of ASEAN Task Force at the ASEAN Roundtable on Post Nargis Joint Assessment for Response, Recovery and Reconstruction,” Yangon, Myanmar, June 24, 2008.

22 ASEAN, “Charting a New Course.”

23 ASEAN, “The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration),” Bangkok, August 8, 1967, available at www.asean.org/news/item/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration.

24 Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).

role in the Cyclone Nargis response gave ASEAN an opportunity to forge a common position on this country.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

ASEAN's role in Cyclone Nargis must also be seen in the context of the development of the organization's framework and mechanisms on disaster management. The Nargis response took place when ASEAN was in the process of ratifying the *ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response* and establishing its disaster management institutions, including the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), which was officially inaugurated in December 2010 in Jakarta.²⁵ ASEAN leaders also maintain that the Nargis response allowed the regional organization to draw lessons and institutionalize the knowledge gained in managing disaster response in the region. At the final meeting of the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force, then foreign minister of Singapore George Yeo suggested that the Nargis response "has helped shape ASEAN today." Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegwa stated, "with the lessons learnt, we feel assured that ASEAN will be in a better shape to respond to future disasters."²⁶

ASEAN's efforts to institutionalize its disaster management framework began in the early 2000s. In early 2003, ASEAN established the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, consisting of heads of national agencies responsible for disaster management in ASEAN member states. It has overall responsibility for coordinating and implementing regional activities on disaster management and is governed by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management. The disaster management committee developed the ASEAN Regional Programme on Disaster Management to provide a framework for cooperation on disaster management for the period of 2004–2010. It sought to promote concerted regional cooperation on disaster management in the ASEAN region and outlined ASEAN's regional strategy, priority areas, and activities for disaster

reduction.

The regional disaster management program was also used as a platform for cooperation and collaboration with ASEAN Dialogue Partners and relevant international organizations. Ongoing partners of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management include, among others, the United States Department of Agriculture–Forest Service, the Pacific Disaster Centre, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNHCR, UNICEF, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre. Among the regional program on disaster management's priority projects was the establishment of the ASEAN response action plan. This evolved into the aforementioned *ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response*.

This agreement was signed by ASEAN foreign ministers in July 2005 and was ratified by all ten member states, entering into force on December 24, 2009. It seeks to provide an effective mechanism for substantial reduction of losses due to disasters and a joint response to disaster emergencies through concerted national efforts and intensified regional cooperation. The agreement is a legally binding regional policy agreement to support member states' ongoing and planned national initiatives, and to support and complement national capacities and existing work programs.

Under the agreement, programs are developed at the regional level but the primary responsibility for the agreement's implementation rests with the ASEAN member states. The agreement sets in place regional policies and operational and logistical mechanisms to enable ASEAN member states to seek and extend assistance in times of disaster and to carry out collaborative undertakings on disaster mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and rehabilitation. The agreement contains provisions on disaster risk identification, monitoring and early warning, prevention and mitigation, preparedness and response, rehabilitation, technical cooperation and research, mechanisms for coordination, and simplified

25 The head of the AHA Centre, Said Faisal had served as an advisor to the ASEAN special envoy on post-Nargis recovery, Dr. William Sabandar, and both men had been directors in the government of Indonesia's Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency for Aceh and Nias between April 2005 and April 2009.

26 ASEAN, "ASEAN Post-Nargis Humanitarian Mandate in Myanmar Concludes," July 20, 2010, available at www.asean.org/communities/asean-political-security-community/item/asean-post-nargis-humanitarian-mandate-in-myanmar-concludes-ha-noi-20-july-2010.

customs and immigration procedures.

However, while ASEAN countries had realized the importance of developing a more comprehensive framework for disaster management, the regional organization itself had never before been engaged in managing and facilitating disaster response. At the time of Cyclone Nargis, while some regional instruments for disaster management had been put in place, they had not yet been fully operationalized. Taking on the leading role in the coordination of the Post-Nargis response thus allowed ASEAN to test the effectiveness of some of its new modalities and procedures, and to institutionalize some of the innovative approaches that were developed through the Nargis recovery effort.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION

ASEAN's Nargis response has been acknowledged as an innovative approach to crisis management that ASEAN and other regional bodies can replicate in future emergency responses. It demonstrated ASEAN's critical role as a diplomatic bridge between the government and the international community, and the organization's success in facilitating trust building and problem solving at the regional level. It also showed that regional organizations can serve as a nexus for the transfer of knowledge from international and regional levels to specific national and local contexts, and vice versa.

In the years immediately following the Nargis recovery period, ASEAN's disaster management institutions have become more institutionalized. The AHA Centre is now fully operational and is actively supporting governments in the region in disaster response and management. Recent examples include support following Typhoon Bopha in the Philippines in 2012 and the earthquake in Central Aceh in 2013.

At the same time, Myanmar has undergone a profound opening up and has embarked on an ambitious process of political and economic reform. While these reforms are a product of political changes within Myanmar and the resulting shift in relations with international governments, ASEAN's engagement in Myanmar undoubtedly

contributed to trust building between the international community and the government of Myanmar, and also to the opening of humanitarian space in the country. Since Cyclone Nargis, the government of Myanmar has become more accustomed to working with the international community in responding to humanitarian crises. It is currently collaborating with international aid agencies on several humanitarian situations, including the Rakhine State crisis²⁷ and humanitarian needs in regions affected by long-running armed conflict, such as Kayin and Kachin. In 2014, Myanmar will assume the chair of ASEAN, a responsibility that demonstrates its growing integration into the region—one which could not have been imagined only five years ago.

In addition, ASEAN has started to look beyond its current framework for disaster management to discuss the importance of developing a framework and institutions for dealing with conflict in the region, including peacebuilding, reconciliation, and addressing humanitarian needs caused by conflict. Such a development would be a significant step for the regional organization in realizing the principles of the ASEAN Charter and the hopes of the ASEAN community.

TRANSFERABLE ELEMENTS FROM THE NARGIS EXPERIENCE

ASEAN's role in the response to Cyclone Nargis has been praised as a new and innovative humanitarian partnership between a regional intergovernmental organization, a host government, and the traditional humanitarian system, including the United Nations and international humanitarian agencies. Among the lessons learned are the following:

- The political will of ASEAN member states to become proactively involved in the post-Nargis response was based both on a strengthened humanitarian commitment by ASEAN and concern for ASEAN's credibility as a regional organization committed to the principles of the ASEAN Charter.
- ASEAN's proactive role created a bridge between a defiant country—wary of any interference in its

²⁷ Two waves of deadly violence in Rakhine State in June and October 2012 left more than 100,000 displaced. This displacement crisis occurred on top of a protracted statelessness problem faced by the Rohingya, who are not recognized as citizens under the 1982 Citizenship Law and are subject to multiple forms of systematic discrimination, including limitations on freedom of movement, rights to family life, and access to health and education services.

internal affairs—and the international community, thus enabling an efficient humanitarian response.

- The leadership of particular member states was the driving force behind the ASEAN-led effort. The government of Indonesia played a particularly important role: officials who had been involved in the post-tsunami reconstruction effort in Aceh and the island of Nias supported ASEAN in the design of its Humanitarian Task Force and Tripartite Core Group, and in developing the framework for the post-Nargis recovery effort. Indonesia also ensured that ASEAN's role in the Nargis response was not only technical but also diplomatic, as embodied in the ASEAN secretary-general's appointment of a special envoy for post-Nargis recovery.
- The creation of a two-tiered structure consisting of the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force and Tripartite Core Group allowed both the necessary diplomatic traction that steered the response and the establishment of a working relationship between the various stakeholders at technical and field levels.
- Innovative cooperation between ASEAN, donor governments, international financial institutions, the UN, and humanitarian agencies was critical to the success of the ASEAN-led Nargis response. Agencies and ASEAN member states seconded experts to the ASEAN-led coordination mechanism for key tasks, such as recovery planning. Assessments and monitoring were conducted through multistakeholder processes under the umbrella of the Tripartite Core Group, with experts from a variety of international agencies and organizations.

Lessons for Current and Future Humanitarian Crises

Before delving into lessons that can be learned from the case studies and discussing their relevance to contemporary crises, one should first acknowledge important differences between these two examples. The humanitarian crisis in the Balkans resulted from a conflict that, from the outset, had a strong

sectarian character. In that respect, it bears similarities with the conflict in Syria. In addition, the Balkans war stemmed from the breakup of a state—the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—and led to the creation of several new countries and a radically transformed regional landscape. As for Myanmar, the crisis was triggered by a natural disaster, the humanitarian impact of which was compounded by the authoritarian nature of a regime highly suspicious of any international interference. However, unlike the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Cyclone Nargis did not happen in a regional institutional vacuum. Myanmar was already part of the ASEAN, a well-established regional organization that, as we saw, played a key role in the humanitarian response. In that sense, it carries some similarities with the situation in Syria insofar as the latter has been a member of preexisting regional organizations, such as the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.²⁸

These two main differences—the nature of the crisis and the preexistence of a regional institutional framework—have to be kept in mind when drawing lessons from these experiences that may be applicable to other contexts. In particular, humanitarian crises resulting from conflict are arguably less conducive to spontaneous regional cooperation due to the political polarization the conflict creates. This is illustrated by the fact that ASEAN, despite the level of integration it has achieved, is only just starting to look at how it can address humanitarian needs caused by conflict.

However, despite these differences, it is clear that a regionally driven and coordinated response allowed both regions to address important humanitarian needs—although this happened years later in the case of the Balkans. In addition, coordinated regional responses have seemingly contributed to better understanding and higher levels of trust among key regional stakeholders, paving the way for enhanced regional integration and cooperation, although it might be a bit premature to affirm this with certainty. There are a number of factors that made these initiatives relatively successful, which are worth highlighting if one aspires to replicate them in different contexts.

²⁸ It should be noted that the League of Arab States granted Syria's seat in the organization to the Syrian National Opposition in March 2013, after a period of suspension, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation suspended the country from the organization in August 2012.

First, the direct involvement and leadership of national and regional stakeholders in both cases created a sense of ownership over the process that was crucial for an efficient response. The participation of regional actors in working groups and operational coordination fora, the elaboration of plans of action, and the drafting of joint political statements and unified requests for funding all created a positive dynamic that gradually reinforced regional ownership over the process. The importance of leadership and direct involvement might sound obvious, yet both cases show it is not necessarily spontaneous and external actors might have to play a role to make it happen.

Following Cyclone Nargis, international donors and the broader international community expected ASEAN to resolve the humanitarian impasse in Myanmar, and this challenged the credibility of the organization and pushed its members to act. In the Balkans, the EU played a unique role in convincing the parties to sit together by dangling the “carrot” of membership in the regional body. External actors, like international financial institutions, aid agencies, regional organizations, and individual states can therefore play a key role in incentivizing regional response by applying moderate pressure and offering technical support, while leaving enough room for a regionally owned process to develop.

Second, the existence of a well-established regional organization like ASEAN gives an institutional framework within which a regional response can be designed and implemented. However, the mere existence of ASEAN is not enough to explain the success of the response to Cyclone Nargis, which was largely due to some sort of emerging humanitarian consciousness within the organization and a mounting interest in disaster management. In the case of Syria, most countries in the region are part of the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation—both of which have developed a humanitarian arm in recent years.²⁹ These organizations could provide an institutional framework for discussions among the affected states.

For instance, states hosting a staggering number of Syrian refugees, like Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq, could effectively use the framework

established in recent years within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to design joint responses, coordinate, and speak with one voice concerning their needs vis-à-vis the international community. Although addressing the humanitarian consequences of conflict is more politically sensitive than addressing the relatively uncontroversial impact of natural disasters, the existence of a developing disaster management structure and an emerging shared humanitarian consciousness provide foundations on which to build the response, starting with the less controversial aspects of the crisis.

This brings us to a third key lesson, which is to focus the response on specific issues—possibly starting with the less contentious ones—and to adopt a vulnerability-based approach informed by a thorough and evidence-based assessment of needs. In both the Balkans and Myanmar, an approach that focused on a few concrete issues and needs, informed by hard facts and from which tangible results could be expected, contributed to depoliticizing sensitive issues. In contexts of sectarian violence, like in Syria, an approach that primarily addresses the vulnerability of particular groups—women, children, the elderly, low-income households, or single parents with dependents—is arguably less contentious than discussions based on, for instance, the geographic location of groups, which is often distributed along sectarian lines or divided into government- and opposition-controlled areas.

By way of example, states in the region could kickstart discussions on relatively uncontroversial issues like how increasingly strained national systems can address poor urban refugees’ health needs or ensure access to education for hundreds of thousands of school-aged Syrian refugees. Such a vulnerability-based approach, focusing on specific issues, would allow for the development of a working relationship between the various regional stakeholders and increase trust and understanding, which in turn can help address more sensitive issues at a later stage.

Finally, in both cases, there was an important complementarity between a high-level political or policy-level process and, in parallel, expert-level negotiations and discussions. High-level political

29 Abdul Haq Amiri, “The Humanitarian Challenge in the Middle East,” *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 51 (July 2011): 2-4.

engagement is necessary to set broad strategic priorities, objectives, and planning, and to ensure political leadership and commitment to the process, without which expert-level negotiations might just remain an empty shell. Conversely, frequent working-level discussions and coordination facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships and trust between the main stakeholders by focusing on tangible issues and can further help to depoliticize discussions.

Conclusion

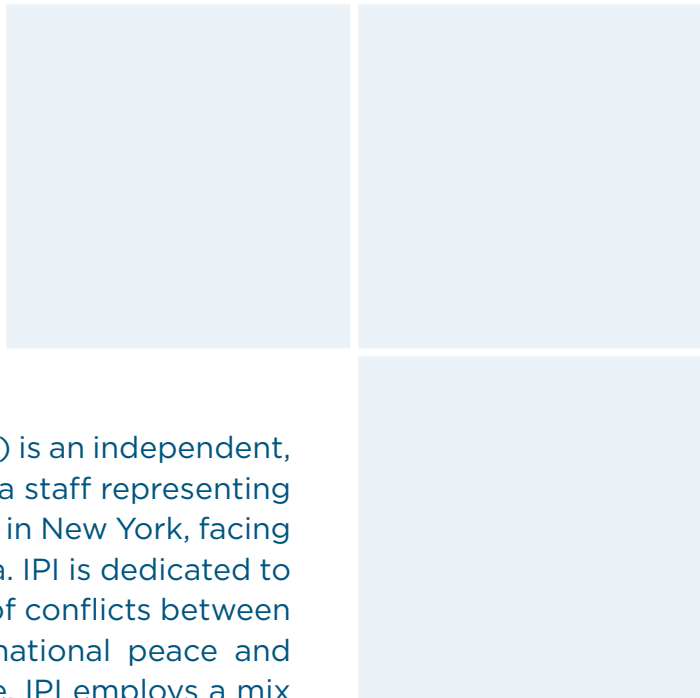
Past examples of regional responses to humanitarian crises offer a number of lessons that can be usefully applied to contemporary emergencies. While not always straightforward, particularly when addressing the humanitarian impact of conflict, these experiences demonstrate that regional cooperation allows some immediate humanitarian needs to be addressed efficiently and, as importantly, may set in motion a virtuous circle of greater trust and mutual understanding between regional stakeholders. Greater regional cohesion, made possible through the establishment of working relationships aimed at addressing urgent and concrete needs, has the potential to strengthen regional integration, which in turn might benefit responses to crises in the future.

Four useful lessons can be drawn from the case studies examined in this paper that could help interested parties to overcome initial obstacles to regional cooperation, especially in politically charged situations of conflict:

- Regional stakeholders' ownership over the response through leadership and direct involvement is crucial, but not necessarily spontaneous. External actors can usefully contribute through a balanced mix of pressure and technical support, while being cautious to leave the necessary room for a regionally owned process to develop.
- Preexisting regional organizations can provide an institutional framework on which to build the response, particularly where there is an emerging humanitarian consciousness and a nascent disaster management structure.
- A vulnerability-based approach that focuses on concrete and specific issues can contribute to depoliticizing discussions by addressing the least controversial issues first, while strengthening trust and mutual understanding among regional stakeholders.
- Complementarity between a high-level policy process and an expert-level process is key to equipping the response with both the vision and political commitment necessary. It also facilitates the development of working relationships aimed at addressing tangible needs.

In the case of Syria, these lessons could be used to develop a more unified regional approach to address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. For instance, the regional response could build on the existing institutional framework provided by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which includes not only Arab states but also key regional players like Turkey and Iran. Given that Syria has recently been suspended from the OIC, and due to the highly polarizing nature of events occurring today inside the country, discussions could first focus on the humanitarian needs of refugees in neighboring countries and aim to alleviate this growing burden for host states. Addressing refugees' needs early, before problems become more deeply entrenched and increasingly contentious, might preclude the need for even more difficult discussions in ten or fifteen years, as was the case in the Balkans. Finally, such a constructive engagement on compelling humanitarian needs may lay the groundwork for strengthened regional cooperation on the political front, a highly desirable outcome given the numerous challenges the region is bound to face.³⁰

³⁰ For an overview of existing regional organizations and other political and economic cooperation mechanisms in the Middle East, see Matteo Legrenzi and Marina Calcutti, "Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East: Options and Challenges," New York: International Peace Institute, March 2013.



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777 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017-3521
USA
TEL +1-212 687-4300
FAX +1-212 983-8246

Freyung 3, 1010
Vienna, Austria
TEL +43-1-533-8881
FAX +43-1-533-8881-11

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