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Reflecting upon a decade of disasters: the evolving response of the international community*

RANDOLPH C. KENT†

Between 1967 and 1970, the Nigerian civil war resulted in at least one million deaths and affected a further four-and-a-half million people. In 1970, a cyclone ripped across the flat deltaic plains of East Pakistan, leaving 300,000 dead in a matter of eight hours and disrupting the lives of 3,648,000. To escape the horrors of civil war, ten million East Pakistanis sought refuge between March and November 1971 in the impoverished border states of India. Late in the evening of 8 July 1971, an earthquake lasting for over three minutes killed eighty-five people and left a further 2,348,522 homeless in central Chile.¹

What all these incidents had in common was that they were regarded as 'disasters'. Each, in other words, reflected a condition in which the lives and very pattern of existence of a group or community were directly threatened by at least one of three types of 'disaster agents': natural (such as earthquakes, floods, droughts); man-made (such as civil strife); or technological (such as chemical poisonings, plutonium leaks).² Each, by definition, resulted in 'loss or suffering on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected area or community'.³

What these four disasters also had in common was the way the international community responded to the plight of the afflicted. Governments, international governmental and non-governmental organizations provided over \$533,079,909 worth of aid to the four stricken countries.⁴ And yet, despite this volume of seeming generosity, the overall response was random, ad hoc and only too often inappropriate to meet the needs of the disaster victims. What this vast outpouring lacked was some form of systematic response, providing not only predictability but appropriate types and levels of aid.

The emergence of a system

In too many instances, disaster victims continue to be dependent upon an international response that bears all the hallmarks of the early 1970s. However, this

* This general overview of international disaster relief is drawn from research for a project on 'Disasters, disaster relief and the international system'. Funds for this project have been provided by the Social Science Research Council.

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1. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, Summary Tables, FY1964-FY1982, *Disaster relief assistance and related data*, March 1983. Prepared by Evaluation Technologies, Inc.

2. Morris Davis has commented that 'no one definition is able to capture the full range of phenomena that have been traditionally included under the rubric of "disaster". The overall meaning involves the idea that some agent produces a change in the environment by creating possible physical and social impacts'. M. Davis, 'A few comments on the political dimensions of disaster assistance' in Ian Davis, ed., *Disasters and the small dwelling* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981). For a good description of 'disaster agents' see Turner's comments on Western's 'Etiologic classification of disasters' in B. A. Turner, *Man made disasters* (London: Wykeham, 1978), pp.8-14.

3. B. Brown, *Disaster preparedness and the United Nations; advance planning for disaster relief* (Oxford: Pergamon for UNITAR, 1979), p. 5.

4. *Disaster relief assistance and related data*, March 1983.

impression has to be tempered by the fact that significant changes have occurred over the past decade in the manner in which the international community is able to respond to disasters. Indeed, to the extent that both donor and recipient governments, international governmental and non-governmental organizations have developed more sophisticated methodologies, institutions and coordinating mechanisms for dealing with disasters, one can point to an emerging 'international disaster relief system'. Certainly this is so if one accepts that the term 'system' implies the potential to respond effectively and efficiently in a coordinated and predictable manner to disaster mitigation and relief.

Nevertheless, the emergence of such a system is best understood in the perspective of what did *not* exist a decade before rather than solely in terms of what exists now. For despite the very positive developments to which one can point, there remain profound structural constraints upon the functioning of an effective international disaster relief system. The very nature of disaster phenomena, as well as organizational and bureaucratic imperatives and political dynamics, mean that the emerging system even now cannot guarantee that random, ad hoc and inappropriate responses will not greet the pleas of the afflicted. As this article will conclude, these constraints are too fundamental to succumb to the more obvious and direct solutions which have been proffered to date. To some extent, however, they can be circumvented by a more concerted effort at pre-disaster planning, more sensitivity to the institutional framework of the affected state, continued functional expansion of the international agencies and the creation of what will be called 'regional policy coordinators'.

... in a relative sense

When the earthquake rocked Chile and the cyclone ripped through the flat delta of East Pakistan, when the Western press was filled with pictures of dying Biafran children and the squalor of refugee camps in West Bengal, not one single international governmental organization had within it a permanent body that dealt with disasters or disaster preparedness. As the Davidson report on *Special economic, humanitarian and disaster assistance* rightly points out, there had been growing concern from 1968 onwards that the United Nations should establish a more permanent focal point for dealing with disaster relief, but even as late as October 1970 it was noted that disaster relief was not a function with which the United Nations had 'been entrusted by the community of nations'.⁵

Before 1971, voluntary agencies (with few exceptions) maintained little contact during disaster relief operations, and certainly did not seek to coordinate funding arrangements or logistic facilities either prior to or during relief work.⁶ The League of Red Cross Societies did provide information on disasters to the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, a general 'clearing house' for voluntary agencies,

5. G. F. Davidson, *International efforts to meet humanitarian needs in emergency situations: summary report (E/1981/16)* (Geneva: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1981). While agencies in the UN system have clearly been heavily engaged in disaster relief work—indeed, some were initially conceived to deal with disasters (e.g. UNRRA, UNHCR, UNRWA, UNICEF)—the general trend was to move into the direction of what Davidson calls 'longer term planning'. Davidson points to the fact that UNHCR actually sought the abolition of its Emergency Fund in the early 1960s (p.14).

6. There are certainly a few important exceptions to this rule, one being the Disasters Emergency Committee which meets at the headquarters of the British Red Cross Society. To a lesser extent the US American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service also attempts to bring some cohesion into its members' responses. However, its main purpose is to lobby Congress on behalf of the charities.

but neither had units that dealt with disasters *per se*.⁷ On the governmental level, potential donors—except in very rare instances⁸—had no offices which dealt on a permanent basis with the complexities of overseas disasters; and links between non-governmental donors and governments were generally casual if not non-existent. Recipient governments—and certainly those of the particularly ‘disaster prone’ states⁹—could rarely boast of disaster or emergency plans, let alone ‘disaster units’ within the government that could deal with the present or prepare for the next inevitable disaster. And if there was any single feature that symbolized the relatively random and unpredictable approach to disasters, it was the paucity of manuals and specialized literature on the actual running of relief operations or refugee camps.

To a certain extent this generally unstructured and unsystematic approach to disaster relief was sustained by three prevalent and interrelated assumptions. The first of these is the long-standing tendency to regard disasters—man-made or natural—as fundamentally unpredictable and short-term phenomena; hence, difficult to prepare for or control. This assumption was often sustained by a sense of fatalism or cultural or religious beliefs¹⁰ and, according to Barry Turner, even disaster researchers have remained ‘preoccupied with a “bolt-from-the-blue” hypothesis about the emergence of disasters . . . Amongst the studies available, very few indeed offer any degree of assistance to the study of the nature, origins and pre-conditions of disaster. . . .’¹¹ This ‘bolt-from-the-blue’ hypothesis, as well as various cultural factors, inhibited attempts to study the phenomena, let alone to establish institutions to deal with what was regarded as essentially unpredictable and of short duration. Secondly, if there was any single assumption which reflected a general ignorance about the nature of disasters, it was the prevailing attitude towards the needs of victims, namely that anything which could be eaten, anything which could provide warmth and shelter would be utilized (with gratitude) by the afflicted. No matter where the disaster occurred, survival would determine usage no matter what culture, religion or experience might previously have determined.

The final assumption concerned the supposed inherent resilience of the afflicted nation-state, and rested upon a fundamental distinction between disaster relief and development aid. Generally speaking, it was recognized that the cost of development was an expense which many developing countries could not bear on their own. Disaster relief, however, did not entail the high costs of fundamental social or structural change; its objective was at best to restore a portion of the population to its pre-disaster situation, a burden far less onerous, it was assumed, than the popular capital-intensive projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Nation-states were supposed to have the social resilience to reabsorb the afflicted. Furthermore, it was the responsibility of the government of the stricken state to deal with the victims of

7. Traditionally, the League of Red Cross Societies would inform its members about the emergency needs requested by a Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in an afflicted state. However, there was no particular unit that advised member societies specifically on disaster measures *per se*.

8. The most important exception is the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance within the US Department of State.

9. In using the term ‘recipient government’, the reader should bear in mind that what the term does not properly reflect is the fact that normally governments of the disaster-stricken states provide the major contribution to relief activities in their countries. The term is used here only to indicate the focus of the international community’s assistance. ‘Disaster-prone’ states are significantly also the least developed countries.

10. Brown, *Disaster preparedness and the United Nations*, p. 33.

11. Turner, *Man made disasters*, pp.33–4.

disasters. Members of the international community, as one commentator noted after the Japanese earthquake of 1923, would compete with each other to provide demonstrations of goodwill and concern, but 'it seemed quite natural that, after receiving due messages of sympathy or even gifts on a more or less generous scale, all the afflicted country had to do was to repair the loss and devastation by its own unaided efforts'.¹²

Increasingly these assumptions collided with the reality of the late 1960s in a variety of ways. Certainly science and technology opened the way towards not only predicting but preparing for natural disasters, remote sensing from space satellites being but one example.¹³ The emerging challenge to the 'bolt-from-the-blue' hypothesis is reflected in the Intergovernmental Typhoon Committee's 1968 declaration of objectives: 'to mobilize scientists and resources to discover ways of mitigating the harmful effects of these storms and of removing or minimizing their destructive potential'.¹⁴ However, other challenges to traditional assumptions about disasters were less positive. It became more and more obvious both that disasters were not necessarily short-term and that disaster agents were not readily divisible into man-made and natural phenomena. Disasters had a much longer incubation period than had been assumed, and they were often generated by forces far more complicated than had been previously realized. The too often interrelated factors of poverty, population growth and political instability were generating what eventually came to be called 'complex disasters'. Examples of this cruel interrelationship abound. Increased agricultural needs lead to deforestation which in turn increases the likelihood of floods. Famine in a country governed by an unstable regime leads to civil disturbances which in turn provoke a man-made disaster; or a man-made disaster triggers off a flood of refugees, leaving the country without farmers willing to plant and harvest, which in turn threatens the onset of a famine. (Specific examples of this type of disaster are given below.)

The ethnocentric assumption that survival needs were universally similar was also increasingly challenged as stockpiles of culturally unacceptable goods, sent with the best of intentions, went unused in relief operations. The C-130s filled with tins of tuna fish and fur-lined coats for rice-eating Bengalis, the 'standard universal shelters', the mobile hospital units; all reflected what donors were willing to offer but not necessarily what the victims required. Also becoming more evident was a clear correlation between poverty and disaster impact. The experiences of the late 1960s showed plainly that the nations most affected by disasters were only too often the poorest;¹⁵ and this brought into question the above-mentioned assumption that nation-states had the inherent resilience and ultimate responsibility for dealing with disaster relief. While the government might have the ultimate responsibility,

12. Camille Gorgé, *The International Relief Union: its origins, aims, means, and future* (Geneva: International Relief Union, 1938), p. 13.

13. Ironically, satellite warnings were issued before the cyclone struck East Pakistan in 1970. The problem of getting this information to the agricultural workers in the outlying delta areas, however, meant that the warning was less than useful.

14. The Typhoon Committee was organized by the World Meteorological Organization and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in 1968.

15. 'Although two-thirds of the world's populations live in developing countries, it has been estimated that 95 per cent of the disaster-related deaths occur in these countries'. Brown, *Disaster preparedness and the United Nations*, p. 10. See also L. Sheehan and K. Hewitt, *A pilot survey of global natural disasters of the past twenty years*, (Natural Hazard Research Working Paper No. 11) (Boulder, Col.: University of Colorado, 1969).

all too often the financial cost of dealing with a serious disaster could wreak havoc on the entire annual budget of a developing country.¹⁶

The challenges to these assumptions gained particular momentum as the international community faced the implications of a series of large-scale disasters as well as a real increase in the numbers of disasters between 1968 and 1971.¹⁷ This spate of extremely severe disasters made only too apparent how totally unsophisticated and unprepared were the responses of the components of the international community.

By 1971 intense pressure was being felt by donor governments from domestic interest groups and the media to devise more systematic means of dealing with foreign disasters. Criticism was rife over the supposed politicization of relief, the 'junk closet' approach to donations, the lack of domestic coordination, and the slowness of governmental responses.¹⁸ Recipient governments, too, actively sought improvements in the ways disasters were handled, both domestically and from outside. They looked for means of receiving aid without having to contend with the disjointed disgoring of international relief that too often overwhelmed their administrations and clogged their countries' infrastructures. They wanted means to neutralize, through international governmental organizations, some of the less acceptable implications of bilateral assistance.

The momentum towards a more effective approach to disaster relief also affected the voluntary agencies. As one of the doyens of emergency relief operations later remarked, the activity on all fronts in 1971 'obliged us [the voluntary agencies] to get our own houses in order'.¹⁹

At the heart of many proposals to improve the international community's response to disaster relief was the United Nations system. The UN generally and the Secretary-General more particularly had been the butt of frequent criticism for failing to mobilize the offices and prestige of the UN family to provide an umbrella under which more organized approaches to disasters could be developed.²⁰ However, those more familiar with the internal workings of the system knew only too well how constrained the UN was, not only by the restrictions of Article 2, paragraph 7,²¹ but also by the fact—as the Soviet Union never failed to remind U Thant during the East Pakistan emergency of 1971—that there was no authority which allowed the Secretary-General to mobilize or coordinate the resources of the UN family or those even of willing member states to deal with disaster relief

16. Interview with Ghulam Ishaq Khan, in 1971 Chief Secretary to the Cabinet, Government of Pakistan, concerning his role in the November 1970 cyclone relief operation in East Pakistan; 25 April 1983.

17. Stephen Green, *International disaster relief: towards a more responsive system* (New York: McGraw-Hill for 1980s Project/Council on Foreign Relations, 1977), pp. 15–21.

18. In Dole, France, more than a hundred people marched through the town every night for a week to protest about the small amount the French government was providing to the East Pakistan relief operation! 'Rally in French town: cyclone', *Dawn*, 27 November 1970.

19. Interview with Stanley Mitton, Director for Emergency Response, Church World Service of the National Council of Churches, 15 December 1981.

20. Those who worked close to U Thant during this period knew how sensitive the Secretary-General was about these criticisms, and how he sought means to mobilize the system without violating his relatively conservative interpretation of the Charter. Based on interviews with Diego Cordovez, UN Under-Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs, and Ismat Kittani, in 1971 Assistant Secretary-General for Inter-Agency Affairs of the UN.

21. Article 2 paragraph 7 of the UN Charter prohibits UN intervention in matters essentially within the jurisdiction of a state.

operations.²² By 1972, however, the UN's role and authority in disaster relief work had changed. New institutions, new machinery for coordination, new approaches to the mitigation and control of disasters were all under way, as part of a general trend affecting many areas of concern to the international community.

Institutions, coordination, preparedness and prevention

Between May and August 1980, floods in China's Hubei province destroyed millions of tons of crops and left thousands homeless. The Beijing government, through the offices of the Residential Representative of the United Nations Development Programme, contacted the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization in Geneva for assistance. A joint UN inter-agency assessment team inspected the area and determined the types of requirements the international community could usefully provide. An international appeal was subsequently launched, coordinated by UNDRO.²³

On 10 October 1980 tremors reaching 7.3 on the Richter scale in the area of El Asnam in Algeria were first reported to UNDRO's Giles Whitcombe by the Swedish Seismological Institute. A Special Unit for Disaster Relief of the Swedish Stand-by Force was sent to assist an UNDRO-led UN coordinating team and the Algerian government. UNDRO's first situation report was issued on Saturday, 11 October. Although the scale of the disaster was extensive (11,000 killed or injured, 300,000 homeless), many observers were impressed with the speed with which the Algerian government was able to determine what it required in the way of assistance from abroad.²⁴

At the end of March 1982, the influx of refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador into Honduras greatly increased just at the time when the Honduran refugee coordinating agency, for internal reasons, had broken up. At the request of the Honduran government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees took the unusual step of acting as its own operating agency and temporarily coordinating its own assistance programmes. These programmes ranged from appointing 'roving officers' responsible for protecting the refugees near border areas to assisting a group of voluntary agencies to purchase land for the use of refugees.²⁵

When compared to the responses of the international community a decade before, these cases suggest a real potential for a more organized and systematic approach to disaster relief. National and international institutions have been created to deal specifically with the management of disasters; increased coordination amongst these new institutions has reduced much of the duplication and haphazardness of bilateralism; and certainly levels of expertise in fields of preparedness and prevention have greatly increased since the beginning of the 1970s. From 1972 onwards there was a concerted attempt by many international governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as by many donor and recipient states to create focal points

22. The Soviet reaction concerning the authority of the UN as relief coordinator before the creation of the UNDRO is illustrated in T. W. Oliver, *The United Nations in Bangladesh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 46.

23. Information concerning this case is based on interviews conducted by Charles L. Kent with representatives of the UNDP, Beijing, and Mme Jia Lusheng of the Ministry of Economic Relations with Foreign Countries (Wai Jing Bu).

24. Information concerning this case comes from the BBC broadcast by Ted Harrison, *A friend in need*, and from UNDRO *News*, January 1981.

25. Information concerning this case comes from *Refugees Magazine*, September 1982, pp. 11-13 and 'Salvador refugees prefer danger of border to new camp', *New York Times*, 5 March 1982.

for disaster relief. While the functions and effectiveness of such 'emergency units', 'disaster agencies', or 'relief cells' spanned a broad spectrum, the overall institutional development has provided several benefits to victims as well as to donors.

In the first place these disaster institutions are obviously designed to regard disaster work as a primary consideration, and not merely a tertiary concern in a general home affairs or development portfolio. Secondly, they are often mandated to initiate relief work and need not necessarily await authorization from officials outside the unit's own hierarchy. Related to this, they generally have emergency funds with which at least to launch a relief operation. Lastly, but equally important, these institutions provide a focal point for the receipt, assessment and coordination of relief assistance.

Since 1972 not only the United Nations but most of the major international agencies in the UN family have instituted departments or offices that deal solely with disaster relief, preparedness and prevention.²⁶ Of these the single most important development has been the creation of the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization in December 1971 'to mobilize, direct and coordinate the relief activities of the United Nations system and to coordinate the assistance with that given by other inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations'.²⁷ The importance of UNDRO should not necessarily be judged at this stage by its achievements to date but more by the evolution of its mandate; for it is the latter which best demonstrates the degree of growing commitment to a more coherent international approach to disaster assistance. From a relatively undernourished start, UNDRO has fought a running battle to gain not only adequate manpower and resources, but also clarification of what had been an intentionally vague mandate. This vagueness reflected the ambivalence in the early years of the member governments towards such an overall disaster organization as well as a weak compromise with other already well-established UN agencies. The looseness of the mandate frequently meant that UNDRO found itself at loggerheads with many of its more established sister organizations. What was meant by 'to direct'? Did UNDRO's responsibilities include man-made disasters normally handled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees? Would UNDRO's appeals clash with those of agencies such as UNICEF? Was UNDRO intended to have an 'operational role', that is, to get involved in the actual running of relief work, or merely a non-operational, coordinating role?

By 1976 UNDRO had been strengthened by a special trust fund; but it was not until it was made the subject of a highly critical evaluation in October 1980 that the international community had to decide what to do with this floundering experiment in disaster relief organization.²⁸ A UN resolution of December 1982 at least officially resolved the ambiguity, when it was decided that UNDRO would, on behalf of the Secretary-General, be the central coordinator to develop concerted

26. For example, emergency units over the past decade have been instituted in UNICEF, FAO, WFP, UNHCR, WHO and PAHO.

27. United Nations General Assembly, 14 December 1971 (A/Res/2816).

28. United Nations General Assembly, 29 November 1974, (A/Res/3243), provided UNDRO with a special trust fund that went into operation by 1976. The importance attested by key donor states to a single UN coordinating body for relief can be seen in, for example, 'Need for an international disaster relief agency' (Washington, DC: Comptroller General of the United States, 5 May 1976). Nevertheless, the hopes of UNDRO remained unfulfilled as the Joint Inspection Unit, 'Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator' (Geneva: United Nations, October 1980) made only too clear.

relief programmes as a basis for united appeals for funds which UNDR0, in turn, would also be responsible for coordinating.²⁹ Even without this important clarification, UNDR0 had over the past ten years become increasingly recognized as an important focal point for the collection and dissemination of international disaster information. Its coordination centre in Geneva maintains contacts with over ninety potential donors, warns of disasters, informs about relief requirements and monitors, as far as possible, the flows of assistance being provided through bilateral and multilateral sources. UNDR0 is also the recognized focal point for organizing joint inter-agency missions to evaluate the needs of the disaster-stricken, and has undertaken a major role in the past few years in organizing disaster preparedness programmes.³⁰

In addition to UNDR0, the United Nations has also established an Office of the Coordinator for Special Economic Assistance Programmes, created for the purpose of assessing the most urgent requirements of a country facing economic disaster and arranging as far as possible the contribution by donor countries of the resources required to stave off economic collapse.³¹ In a recent report on such special economic assistance, the Secretary-General was able to state that at least seventeen African nations were provided aid to fend off disaster of one sort or another.³²

Many governments have also institutionalized the manner in which they either distribute assistance to others or deal with disasters within their own countries. Potential donor governments such as those of Sweden, West Germany and the United Kingdom have established 'disaster units' to deal with foreign disaster assistance; and the EEC has established three separate funds to deal specifically with disasters.³³ An increasing number of governments of disaster-prone countries have established organizations to deal with disaster relief operations. In a recent count of seventy-seven developing nations which have to deal with serious recurrent disasters, forty have national disaster organizations, the majority of which have been established over the past decade.³⁴ Non-governmental organizations have also followed the pattern of establishing more permanent focal points for disaster relief operations. Several of the big charitable organizations have established their own emergency units, including the League of Red Cross Societies;³⁵ but perhaps the most striking institutional development in the voluntary sector has been the creation of the Voluntary Agency Steering Committee, which seeks to pool information from both voluntary organizations and inter-governmental organizations.

The Voluntary Agency Steering Committee is as much a reflection of an increased willingness to coordinate as it is an example of institution building. Coordination

29. United Nations General Assembly, 17 December 1982 (A/37/144); for important background to this resolution, see (A/36/225).

30. See, for further examples, Reports of the Secretary-General A/36/259, 22 June 1981; A/35/228, 16 May 1980; A/34/190, 26 April 1979.

31. Davidson, *International efforts to meet humanitarian needs*, p. 14.

32. *Special economic and disaster relief assistance: special programmes of economic assistance*, 28 October 1982 (A/37/140).

33. There are at present three separate disaster relief funds in the EEC: aid to Africa, Caribbean and Pacific countries associated with the Community under the Lomé Convention; aid to developing countries that are not associated in this way; and aid to EEC member states.

34. These statistics are derived from material produced by Brown (see *Disaster preparedness and the United Nations*, pp. 113-20) and the US Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance in 1982, 'Disaster preparedness in developing countries', unpublished.

35. Francis Parakatil of the League of Red Cross Societies, Geneva, stated that 'most of the major voluntary agencies markedly increased their involvement in disaster relief over the past ten years, since 1972'.

both at headquarters and operational levels is a critical component of any relief effort. When, for example, the Indian border states found themselves inundated with refugees from East Pakistan in 1971, over a nine-month period sixty-seven countries provided assistance directly, over 600 non-governmental organizations became directly or indirectly involved, and nine major UN agencies undertook significant relief roles. All this did not include the sizeable contributions made to the relief operation of the Indian Central Authorities as well as the individual states of India. The magnitude of the operation was eventually understood and a relatively effective coordination structure was imposed. However, this was by no means typical of the attitude towards coordination prevalent at the time. Both machinery for coordination and the willingness to share information have developed over the past ten years—horizontally (between similar actors such as IGOs) and vertically (between different types of actors such as IGOs and NGOs). On the level of UN coordination, there has been a series of important understandings defining the roles of the respective organizations during relief operations and also regulating procedures for coordinating activities. Such memoranda of understanding have been signed, for example, between UNDRRO and all the principal agencies dealing with relief, including UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO; and in 1979 the United Nations Development Programme agreed that the Resident Representative in countries where the UNDP had an office would act *ex officio* as UNDRRO representative during natural disaster operations. Other agencies have followed suit, such as WHO and UNICEF, in agreeing 'to their respective roles in meeting the needs of children and other vulnerable groups in times of disaster'.³⁶

UNDRRO and the Office of the Coordinator for Special Economic Assistance Programmes rely increasingly upon 'joint inter-agency assessment missions' in which one or the other leads a team of experts from the operational agencies to evaluate disaster preparedness or relief requirements. In cases of large, complex disasters, it has now been generally accepted that the operational aspects of disaster relief will be handled either by a special representative appointed by the Secretary-General or by a 'lead agency' appointed by the Secretary-General. In either case, the underlying principle is to project a 'one voice' approach to disaster relief operations.³⁷

Instruments for coordination between voluntary agencies and international organizations have also increased as evidenced by the above-mentioned Voluntary Agency Steering Committee. In more and more instances, the IGOs are also showing an inclination to use the 'grass roots' knowledge of the voluntary agencies through joint arrangements, for example between CARE and UNICEF, UNDRRO and League of Red Cross Societies. Governments, too, have tended to involve voluntary agencies more and more in the planning of relief assistance activities; and Green has noted a trend by several governments to promote greater coordination amongst the voluntary agencies themselves.³⁸

Expertise: pre-disaster planning and prevention

The planning and organizing of relief operations, like so many aspects of disaster work, have seen many changes of attitude and many challenges to conventional

36. Davidson, *International efforts to meet humanitarian needs*, p. 27.

37. Interview with Sir Robert Jackson, Special Representative for the Secretary-General in the Kampuchean relief operation, 21 November 1980.

38. Green, *International disaster relief*, p. 39.

assumptions. As one commentator noted after the Guatemala earthquake in 1976, 'Victims are not always starving, naked or in need of blankets. Disasters rarely destroy food stocks, most victims usually have sufficient clothing and the experts have not been able to trace a single recorded death from exposure after a disaster—even in extremely cold conditions'.³⁹ While this commentator exaggerated the resilience of the afflicted, he did point to an increasingly accepted view that all aspects of relief work, even the criteria for determining malnutrition and the value of importing temporary shelters, needed to be re-evaluated.⁴⁰

The recent development of a more professional approach to disaster relief has taken a variety of forms. A body of practical literature and manuals is emerging which provides guidance on a wide variety of disaster issues such as setting up a refugee camp, assessment procedures and food distribution techniques.⁴¹ Conferences and seminars organized by intergovernmental organizations, voluntary agencies and universities are more readily available to enable discussion of new techniques and methods of planning and preventing disasters.⁴² Governments have tended to call much more frequently upon relevant UN agencies to review natural disaster plans and to help set up disaster units; and over the past few years meetings have been organized in South Asia, Latin America and South-east Asia to establish bases for coordinating work in cases of regional disasters.⁴³

Stockpiling, or pre-positioning supplies, has also increased. A good example is the International Emergency Food Reserve, established in 1976 as a supplement to the World Food Programme's own emergency food resources. UNICEF's Packing and Assembly Centre (UNIPAC) in Copenhagen is a further example. There, surgical supplies, cooking and shelter materials are made available at short notice for relief operations throughout the world. Early warning systems are increasingly available, as are systems such as *Landsat*, which technically have the capability to 'sense' droughts, floods, great storms and fires and to assess and monitor their impact.⁴⁴ There is no doubt that as yet few developing countries can utilize the data fully, since weak infrastructure and poor communication facilities too often mean that the information cannot be readily transmitted or interpreted in the areas where particular disasters might break. Nevertheless, increased availability means at least that the potential for the use of early warning systems, space satellites, and enhanced communication facilities is much greater.

Disaster prevention, too, has increasingly occupied the attention of governments, IGOs and NGOs. One example is earthquake risk reduction techniques which are

39. Philip Knightley, 'Disasters: how the helpers make things worse', *Sunday Times*, 25 June 1978.

40. For examples, see Ian Davis, 'Emergency shelter' in National Research Council, *The role of technology in international disaster assistance* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1978) and M. S. Lowenstein, 'The cyclone: nutritional assessment with the QUAC stick' in Lincoln Chen, ed., *Disaster in Bangladesh: health crises in a developing nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

41. For example, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees handbook for emergencies* was first issued in December 1982.

42. For example, from 6–10 March 1982 an international seminar on disaster preparedness and relief was held in Islamabad, and attended by representatives of seven south Asian countries, the LORCS, UNDRO and several other UN organizations.

43. For example, in November 1978, representatives of UNDRO, the government of Sweden, the LORCS and Pan American Health Authority met representatives of the governments of Guatemala, Costa Rica and Peru to discuss the use of the Swedish Stand-by-Force under UN auspices in the case of disaster striking those countries. (A/34/190, 26 April 1976).

44. David S. Simonett, 'Possible uses of space satellites for disaster warning, monitoring and damage assessment' in National Research Council, *Technology in international disaster assistance*.

being applied with increasing regularity to land-use planning and building codes and regulations.⁴⁵ Anti-pollution and conservation measures also fall into this category.

If one looks at the development of institutions, mechanisms for coordination, even the improved expertise in preparedness and operations, the signs of an enhanced responsive potential are hard to deny. There is indeed more than a glimmer of a systematic and predictable approach to disaster relief. Yet all these developments must be weighed against another kind of reality, that of structural constraints which affect, in one way or another, all the components of the international community.

Structural constraints on the system

The exact number of refugees that fled from the Ogaden to Somalia between 1979 and 1980 was difficult to determine; nevertheless there is general agreement that the number had been well over a million. The thirty camps were squalid, and supplies to them were complicated by the inadequacy of the port facilities. UNHCR had been severely criticized as essentially ineffectual in its role as 'lead agency', but at the same time it was recognized by many observers that it lacked the status to coordinate the work of more substantial agencies on the scene. Examples of insufficient coordination were legion: 'The leader of a volunteer medical team from one donor country said that he was prevented initially from setting up a needed health service at a refugee camp because another donor country regarded that camp as within the purview of its volunteer groups—even though no medical team from the latter country was on hand.'⁴⁶

The 4 February 1976 earthquake in south-east Guatemala that left 24,000 dead and 200,000 without homes was the 'start signal for another Great Disaster Relief Race'.⁴⁷ In the four days it took for international assistance to arrive, the local authorities had already organized emergency camps, slit trench latrines, and landing strips out of disused roads. The amount and type of aid which was sent by the international community was difficult for UNDR0 to coordinate, since much critical liaison was short-circuited by direct government-to-government contact. Whether or not UNDR0's coordinating efforts would have made much difference in this case is open to speculation for, as one observer noted, several of the agencies even refused to accept directions from Guatemalan officials. One official from a major voluntary agency remarked that 'we can take advantage of the earthquake to make an indentation into the lives of these people'.⁴⁸

To what extent the Ethiopian government in 1973 consciously ignored the impending famine which eventually cost the lives of approximately 100,000 people is a question which remains unresolved.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, few had any doubts that the government was more than a little insensitive to the possible repercussions that

45. UNDR0 was invited by UNDP, UNESCO and Habitat to coordinate the assistance required to carry out risk analyses for the reconstruction of Montenegro in 1979 (A/35/228, 16 May 1980).

46. Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, *Reports on refugee aid* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981) served as basic source of material for this case.

47. Paul Harrison, 'Disaster relief: relief or disaster?', *New Society*, 10 July 1980.

48. Knightley, 'Disasters'.

49. For the case against the Ethiopian government, see Jack Shepherd, *The politics of starvation* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1975). However, experts who know the area extremely well, such as John Seaman of Save the Children Fund, tend to discount conscious malevolence in the Ethiopian attitude towards the impending famine.

a famine might have upon the country's already precarious stability. The Ethiopian government's reaction to assistance from outside had much in common with that of many governments affected by the Sahel drought: namely, that links with traditional bilateral donors were more often preferred by the receiving governments to an overall coordinated operation.⁵⁰ Also, UN attempts to raise sufficient funds from member governments were proving disappointing.⁵¹

Despite the significant steps towards a more systematic approach to disaster control and mitigation, then, structural constraints—factors deeply engrained both in the problem itself and in the institutions which seek to deal with it—too often thwart the potential response. These can be grouped under four headings: (1) the nature of disasters and disaster relief; (2) organizational imperatives; (3) bureaucratic imperatives; and (4) political dynamics.

The nature of disasters and disaster relief

If any consistent theme has emerged from the efforts to understand disasters, it is the correlation between poverty and disaster impact. As F. C. Cuny succinctly put it, 'Disasters are disasters because the countries are underdeveloped.'⁵² Vulnerability to these events, as the statistical analysis of Sheehan and Hewitt also makes clear, arises out of a lack of sound infrastructure, proper housing and technological know-how.⁵³ All these issues bring one to the more politically sensitive and financially more costly issue of development aid; and, only too clearly, it is this artificial divide between development aid and disaster assistance which the international community is generally too reluctant to cross. Effective solutions need to be put into action either before disaster strikes, or during a rehabilitation period after the impact. To deal with the 'middle portion', the portion with which the newspapers are normally obsessed, is, as has been said so often, applying sticking plasters to problems that require surgery. This obvious point aside, the correlation with poverty also explains why certain types of disasters, for example famines, are frequently allowed to develop before any resolute action is taken either by home governments or by outsiders. A disaster has to be seen, a distinction between normality and threatened affliction has to be recognized. A disaster in a severely underdeveloped country can pose a perceptual problem: for example, at what point does subsistence at the margin become starvation in the eyes of authorities accustomed to poverty?⁵⁴

Forecasting certain types of natural disasters poses a particular problem. Cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons, for example, can change course relatively quickly. A government might have already warned of the impending hazard by the time that hazard has shifted direction. For people accustomed to such false warnings complacency may replace anxiety, until eventually they are caught out. Poverty,

50. Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, US Senate, *World hunger, health and refugee problems. Part IV: Famine in Africa* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 62.

51. *World hunger*, p. 48.

52. F. C. Cuny, 'Conference keynote address' in Davis, ed., *Disasters and the small dwelling*, p. 9.

53. Sheehan and Hewitt, *A pilot survey*.

54. It is interesting to note that despite the seriousness and prevalence of famines throughout man's history, only recently have sophisticated techniques for forecasting famines been developed. See, for example, Conference Report on Famine and Food Emergencies, 5–16 July 1982 in *Disasters—the international journal of disaster studies and practice*, 1982, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 159–62.

again, enters the calculation, for too often the development of warnings cannot be monitored for lack of communications equipment.⁵⁵

While stockpiling has been undertaken in many disaster-prone areas to provide instant relief once a disaster strikes, in too many instances severity of impact is a function of socio-economic conditions involving inadequate infrastructure. The usefulness of stockpiles is limited where, as is often the case, roads, local landing facilities and the like are inadequate to carry the traffic; and delays in assistance and increased casualties are frequent results.

Even disaster relief itself, as it is presently distinguished from development aid, can undermine the effectiveness of international attempts to assist and, ironically, can perpetuate disasters and even generate new ones. Under the present 'sticking-plaster' approach to relief, where goods flood in to an afflicted area, local economies can be severely threatened. Many are the times that international food aid has driven down the local price of produce to such low levels that recovery has been delayed by one or two years. Alternatively, disaster relief can also create the danger of local short-term economic booms which are dependent upon the temporary and artificial requirements of relief operations. Once the relief workers and the overall operation are disbanded, the boom collapses and economic stagnation sets in at a level far worse than even the economic activity immediately following the disaster.⁵⁶

The organizational imperative

'You can't make a career out of disasters', remarked an official from the United States Agency for International Development.⁵⁷ This sort of attitude epitomizes the constraints that organizational imperatives place upon the effectiveness of the international community's response to disaster relief. Simply put, the imperatives of the organization are principally survival and growth,⁵⁸ mandates are limited or expanded, offices are created or disbanded to ensure that resources are available to fulfil these fundamental objectives. Bearing this in mind, one might well understand, for example, the World Food Programme's supposed reluctance to be seen as a relief agency, since the idea of a development agency has a 'higher standing than the former in the international bureaucracy league table'.⁵⁹

Organizational imperatives constrain the international community's relief potential in a variety of ways. In the first place, disasters are generally regarded as a 'no growth' area for institutional and personal advancement. More often than not, according to senior officials within the United Nations, the surge of disaster units within the major UN agencies was due far more to a need not to fall behind the others than a real commitment to disaster work.⁶⁰ The fact of the matter is that even disaster relief in its widest perspective (planning and prevention as well as

55. Simonett, 'Possible uses of space satellites', pp. 79-80.

56. See, for example, Stephen Dudasik, 'Unanticipated repercussions of international disaster relief', *Disasters*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 31-37.

57. Interview with an official from US AID, Washington, DC, 18 November 1980.

58. There is an ever-increasing body of literature that views political resultants from the perspective of organizational dynamics. The view that organizations are principally concerned with their own survival and growth rather than any 'goal maximizing' objectives is consistent with the main thrust of that literature. See for example J. D. Steinbruner, *The cybernetic theory of decision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

59. John Cathie, *The political economy of food aid* (Aldershot, Hants: Gower, 1982), p. 93.

60. Suggestions of this type were made to this author by senior officials within the United Nations on the understanding that their names would not be identified with these points.

relief operations) pales when it comes to the more lucrative organizational benefits derived from dealing with development projects.

While the reactions of organizations to their missions depend upon their operating environment, in many relief situations the 'power of the purse' becomes the criterion of cooperation. On the international organizational level, officials who have attempted to pool the energies and resources of the agencies for disaster relief work have often found that they could get nowhere until the money was on the table. In the United States, government departments involved in a relief operation do so on the basis of strict accounting and reimbursement; this approach certainly applies to many if not all governments of disaster-prone countries. In certain instances, departments will not act without first being assured of reimbursement.

Organizational 'image' is a further impediment to effective international responses. Jorgen Lissner has pointed to the unfortunate but realistic view that voluntary agencies depend upon projecting their individual images to raise funds and thus to enable them to pursue their relief work.⁶¹ This home truth, however, is not applicable solely to NGOs. The organizational imperative too often dictates that IGOs, for example UNICEF, or donor governments, as in the case of US AID, act bilaterally so as to promote their presence and their efforts in order to draw attention to their own institutional worth. Allied to the question of image is one of organizational response. The goods, supplies, personnel which an organization sends to a disaster operation often reflect what that organization can do rather than what is required. This stems in part from a 'standard operating procedure' approach to relief work. If cholera vaccines are always provided for a flood disaster, then the organization might well send such vaccines for floods, even when it has been informed that there are no incidents of cholera. Another contributory cause is a determination to show the organization in its best light. Hence, even if a hospital may not be required in a particular situation, mobile hospital units might be sent, merely to dramatize the presence of the organization.

Beyond matters of image and technical competence is the factor of orientation. An organization, be it a voluntary agency or an intergovernmental body, is often oriented towards objectives for which relief operations are but the first step. Religious groups might see an opportunity to promote their message; a UN agency might create an opening for more extensive development work. Such motives do, however, make it difficult to harmonize efforts into a single coherent operation.

Lastly, a major disaster requiring some form of international assistance occurs approximately once a week. Such frequency means that a particular institution oriented towards relief finds itself dramatically overextended or able to pick and choose the disaster in which it can best project itself. This is yet another unpredictable factor in the responsive capability of the international system.

The bureaucratic imperative

On all levels the international community's efforts to provide relief also has to contend with the bureaucratic imperative—that clash of contending interests and procedural norms which tend to add uncertainty and delay to any attempt at concerted action. These can be divided into three types; symbolic struggles; territorial fights; and institutional procedures.

61. Jorgen Lissner, *The politics of altruism: a study of the political behaviour of voluntary development agencies* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977).

Symbolic fights are those in which one portion of a government or organization uses one issue as a means to lever concessions on what it perceives as a more important issue from another portion of government or organization. 'It is not unknown', says one US AID official with experience in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Washington, DC, 'for the release of relief aid to be delayed by one or other member of the Inter-Agency Staff Committee until a not related "matter of principle" is sorted out.'⁶² Even more relevant than symbolic struggles are territorial fights which always loom near the surface of any relief operation. Territorial fights are those in which contending groups—be they governments, IGOs or NGOs—seek to promote or preserve their 'turf' at the expense of others. The fact that one reporter could suggest that 'Oxfam did not do much to discourage perceptions' that the Red Cross-UNICEF mission to Kampuchea was 'a heartless, bureaucratic stooge of the US government'⁶³ gives some indication of the heat of these battles. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit concerning UNDR0 also provides a clear insight into the intensity of territorial combat. If UNDR0 were to take on technical specialists to deal with preparedness and prevention measures, warned the inspection team, these steps might be regarded as duplicating 'skills already available in the specialized agencies and may lead to an "operational" UNDR0 which causes frictions.'⁶⁴ On the ground examples of clashes are frequent. As one member of a joint CARE-UNICEF team in Bangladesh stated: 'My loyalty is not to any concept of a UN system; it is to the particular CARE-UNICEF operation in the province.'⁶⁵ And, as another expert explained: 'The first ten days of a relief operation are frequently spent staking out claims. After that, all the feuding settles down.'⁶⁶

The bureaucratic imperative also entails institutional procedures in which one organization seeks to protect itself from the criticisms of others, or one component of an organization from others within that organization. These procedures again cause delays and inhibit overall effectiveness. They encompass factors from accounting procedures to landing rights, from visas for UN and NGO officials to customs declarations for relief materials.⁶⁷ Signatures, paperwork and queues too often tend to replace speed and concern.

62. Interview with US AID official, Dacca, 21 November 1982.

63. William Shawcross, 'A shattered Cambodia facing new trials by hunger', *International Herald Tribune*, 3 April 1980.

64. Joint Inspection Unit, 'Evaluation of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator' (Geneva: United Nations, 1980). The report goes on to say that 'the major organizations in the UN system involved in disasters are much larger and better funded, have been functioning longer... and have their own programmes, clienteles and interests' (p. 28).

65. Interview with Dan Roth, CARE, 17 December 1981, based on experience in East Pakistan and Bangladesh, 1971-2.

66. Interview with Dr John Seaman, Save the Children Fund, 6 January 1983.

67. Time after time, relief operations are hampered by such basic administrative problems as customs declarations and visas. UNDR0 has attempted to make special arrangements with disaster-prone countries and other international agencies to ease such restrictions during times of relief operations. UNDR0, for example, has held discussions with the International Civil Aviation Organization 'resulting in revision and updating of ICAO instructions to regional and country staff regarding cooperation with UNDR0 and assistance to be rendered in disaster preparedness and disaster relief' (A/36/259, 22 June 1981). However, UNDR0 has reported no fundamental change from its 1980 assessment that 'on the other hand, 50 per cent of potential recipients still require normal commercial documentation for relief consignments... 57 per cent require visas for United Nations personnel coming to assist in relief work, and 65 per cent require them for other relief workers' (A/35/228, 16 May 1980). The frustration which this causes has more recently been reflected in M. El Baradei *et al.*, *Model rules for disaster relief operations* (New York: UNITAR, 1982). However, the reasons why administrators in developing countries cling to such rigid procedures are exemplified by the fact that even at the time of writing, court proceedings for alleged corruption are

In a different vein, institutional procedures also constrain the system when, for instance, the procedures of one bureaucracy do not effectively mesh with those of another. UNHCR, for example, is often faced with significant time lags between receiving member governments' funding pledges and actually receiving the funds. Governments, on the other hand, are restricted in the speed with which they can carry out their pledges, since sometimes even national legislation is necessary before contributions can be made.

Political dynamics

The political dynamics which affect the international community's disaster system and its approaches to specific events are purportedly not as transparent as are perhaps those which determine bilateral development aid.⁶⁸ Indeed, the statements of both practitioners and academic observers would suggest that there may be a great deal of truth in Maurice Williams's reported assertion that 'disaster relief is above politics'.⁶⁹ Of course, that depends upon how one defines politics: if one is referring to the process by which one seeks to gain advantages over an adversary or to serve geopolitical interests, then disaster relief is rarely regarded as a political weapon⁷⁰; if, on the other hand, one means the process by which one seeks to reconcile contending interests within governmental and non-governmental domestic institutions, then the term 'politics' provides to some useful insights into the ways in which the international disaster relief system is constrained.

The clearest interplay between political dynamics and disaster relief stems from the blatant disadvantages faced by the governments of the afflicted. Generally, disaster-prone states are those least able to afford effective preventive or preparatory measures; more often than not, most developing nations find that disasters bite into annual budgets and cause economic dislocation when even logistic support for a relief operation demands the redeployment of available lorries and trains. Such governments' inability to act effectively makes them vulnerable to criticism from within, by recognized or unofficial opposition groups, and does little to enhance their regional or international prestige. Since such governments often work at the brink of social as well as economic stability, accusations of insensitivity or ineffectualness can often have widespread political implications that can lead to violence, oppression and ultimately a man-made disaster. It is only too apparent at present how many disaster-prone countries already experience domestic conflict.

The involvement of the international community not only tends to show up the efforts of the indigenous authorities, but also tends to impose foreign influence upon significant portions of domestic decision-making through a process which

continuing against senior officials who ran the 1971 refugee operation on behalf of the Indian Red Cross. One of the defendants claims that his major fault was taking initiatives which by-passed normal procedures for utilizing transport.

68. There is a great deal of literature which points to the dominant political motivation in the provision of development aid. Two examples are: C. R. Frank, Jr and M. Baird, 'Foreign aid; past and future' in C. Fred Bergsten and L. B. Krause, eds, *World politics and international economics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1975) and T. Hayter, *Aid as imperialism* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1971).

69. Maurice Williams, before becoming the World Food Council's executive director, had been Deputy Administrator for US AID in 1971. His remark was quoted during an interview with Curtis Farrar and D. G. McDonald of US AID on 18 November 1980.

70. This view, frequently expressed by practising diplomats, officials in international organizations and voluntary agencies, has been reiterated by Morris Davis, 'A few comments on the political dimensions of disaster assistance', in Davis, ed., *Disasters and the small dwelling*.

Ronald Libby has called 'external cooptation'.⁷¹ From the perspective of the government of an afflicted country, disaster assistance is too often paid for by uncontrolled access to its society.⁷² Furthermore, the recipient government has to contend with the economic consequences of foreign assistance: the post-relief local booms and recessions, for example, which distort an already beleaguered economy. Relief aid can even create a climate of resentment between and amongst local communities in which local poor begin to regard refugees or victims of natural disasters as having benefited too greatly from their plight.⁷³

To avoid such pressures and interference, governments of the afflicted can resort to a host of defensive measures. They might underestimate the seriousness of the calamity, or despite the extent of disruption which arises out of a disaster, they might just refuse any proffered assistance at all. They may ignore the multilateral relief route and pick and choose the bilateral offers with which they feel safest. This defensive bilateralism applies not merely to dealings with other governments but also to dealings with voluntary organizations and international agencies. If aid is accepted, recipient governments tend to insert a layer of government administrators over large-scale operations, less to enhance the speed of the operation than to control the conduct of foreign relief workers.

For donor governments, too, dilemmas abound. Certainly Morris Davis captures well the pressure on governments to respond as he depicts them being 'alerted by the press, prodded by interest groups, urged on by phrase-making legislators'.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, governments are often wary of the types of obligation which they find themselves taking on in a relief operation. The prospect of enormous financial commitments and of being seen to support a particular regime or its practices often cools the ardour of even the most enthusiastic donor. Faced with this sort of dilemma, aid through multilateral agencies often seems the best option for potential donor governments. Yet, while this may well be the case, a variety of domestic interests might wish to speed up the relief process or stake a claim in the relief operation under their own banner, and hence urge the donor government to move bilaterally.

If the concerns of the potential recipient government and those of the potential donor government are understandable, then to a great extent their potential for distorting any consistent and systematic attempt to mobilize international relief becomes equally apparent. However, these concerns not only affect the way the system operates, they also affect directly the very way certain components of the system, the intergovernmental agencies, are actually structured. Arguments about the disproportionate amount of disaster relief one region gets as opposed to another, calculations of international agency personnel based upon national quotas and not upon expertise, reluctance to allow agency mandates to be expanded—these are more often than not mere extensions of these concerns.

71. 'External cooptation' is the process by which external forces, such as foreign governments and IGOs, 'structure the context' of the decision-making process of a state. See R. T. Libby, 'External cooptation of a less developed country's policy making: the case of Ghana, 1969-1972', *World Politics*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, October 1976.

72. Richard H. Ullman's introduction to Green, *International disaster relief*, p. 5.

73. See, for example, John Seaman, 'Principles of health care', *Disasters*, 1981, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 202: 'If the services developed for refugees are of a much higher standard than those available to the non-refugee population, the experience has been that this often breeds resentment between the local villager and the refugee'.

74. Davis, '... the political dimensions of disaster assistance', p. 51.

In conclusion

In the final analysis one is left with the difficulty of reconciling the significant steps which have been made to devise a more systematic approach to the international community's response to disasters with the seemingly irresolvable structural constraints which emerge from the components of the international community. Perhaps the explanation of these contradictory factors is perversely simple: disasters, in terms of their rapidly increasing complexity, have continually outstripped the nascent system's capability to cope with them. The more complex the disasters, the more economic deprivation and political instability produce their potent compound, the more the brakes are put on the international community's capacity to respond. There is little to indicate that this situation is improving. Today there are 16 million refugees adrift,⁷⁵ and there is little to suggest that continued political strife in Central America, southern Africa or South-east Asia will not add immensely to these figures. There are few signs that, given the priorities of poverty, any significant steps can be taken to stem the growing ecological imbalances which are so often causes of natural disasters.

In a recent meeting of the UN Environment Programme, the executive director, Mostafa Tolba, warned delegates that the world faced an ecological disaster as final as nuclear war within two decades.⁷⁶ Even discounting the hyperbole which such gatherings tend to generate, the fact, for example, that 15 million acres of arable or grazing land become desert every year owing to the destruction of forests and soil erosion tells a grim tale.⁷⁷ Villagers and slum dwellers cannot afford the option of conservation; renewable resources—wood for fuel, soil, no matter how overworked, for food—are needed now. The direct impact of such ecological imbalances upon human survival is increasingly telling. In Africa food consumption per person is 10 per cent less than it was a decade ago. Food production, owing to political instability as well as to ecological factors, has slipped in the African continent from a 7 per cent decline in the 1960s to a 15 per cent decline in the 1970s, and the decline is continuing in the 1980s. What the world might eventually be facing is not merely more complex disasters but more and more 'megadisasters' in which millions of vulnerable people are exposed to a disaster at any one time. If the past provides any indication of reactions to such future events, the sad conclusion will be that potential recipients will become more defensive in their attitude towards international relief, and donors will become more wary of committing resources in such inherently unstable circumstances. Faced with the alternative of sitting back and awaiting 'the inevitable', one might at least suggest that there are at present means by which the effects of the constraints can be mitigated to some extent.

Greater emphasis must be placed upon preparedness, particularly stockpiling. Despite some obvious criticism of 'Malthusian mentalities', aimed at agencies which have attempted this course of action, particularly in the area of food stockpiling, there is no more effective way to ensure that a degree of relevant supplies will be on hand when disasters strike. Since insufficient development has taken place in

75. Kathleen Newland, *Refugees: the new international politics of displacement* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1981), p. 5.

76. 'UN conference opens with a prediction of ecological catastrophe', *International Herald Tribune*, 11 May 1982.

77. 'UN conference opens . . .'. See also *Common crisis: North-South cooperation for world recovery—the Brandt Commission 1983* (London: Pan, 1983); and *Facing the future: mastering the probable and managing the unpredictable* (Paris: OECD, 1979).

areas of greatest potential for disasters, criteria of 'self-help' really are difficult to apply. Stockpiling also provides at least a basis for relief efforts to be carried out without the over-interference of outsiders, a point that cannot be too strongly emphasized from the perspective of the recipient government.

Prevention, too, has to be increased, but since truly effective prevention measures will never attract the resources that development projects do, prevention should at least be linked where possible to the latter.

Furthermore, despite all the frustrations associated with the creation of international machinery for disaster relief, it still affords, no matter how precariously, a better alternative than the system of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Functionally, the system has, in many instances, as this article has attempted to show, indeed worked. It should be allowed to gain competence by chipping away where possible at certain restrictive practices and by being able to develop further its own responsive expertise.

Finally, in a not dissimilar way to a recent Canadian proposal to establish a special post of 'humanitarian representative' for refugee relief, the international community should consider 'regional policy coordinators' who, because of their acute sensitivity to the political and economic problems of particular regions and their familiarity with the nature of relief requirements, could at least ease the way for a more sensitive involvement of the international community in disaster relief operations.