Cultures of Humanitarianism: Perspectives from the Asia-Pacific

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With complex humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters occurring with greater severity and frequency in various parts of the world, questions of humanitarianism – particularly how it should be conceived and practised – have become all the more relevant to our rapidly globalising world. In spite of conventional perspectives of humanitarianism as constituting a 'universal' value that transcends both time and context, there are, in fact, diverse interpretations of this complex concept, with its meanings being far from uncontested and uncontroversial. The socio-cultural context of any given situation in which humanitarian action is taking place oftentimes work to significantly complicate matters.

This two-day workshop sought to address these issues. The workshop was held on 10-11 August 2011 at the Australian National University (ANU), and was hosted by Dr Jacinta O'Hagan and Dr Miwa Hirono at the Department of International Relations in the School of International, Political and Strategic Studies, ANU. It included a range of speakers and participants from the academic and practitioner fields. The academics ranged from senior scholars, such as ASSA Fellows Professor William Maley and Professor Tessa Morris Suzuki, to emerging scholars such as Sarah Teitt, Hiroko Inoue, Pichamon Yeophantong and Paul Zeccola. International speakers included Professor Yukie Osa from Japan and Dr Sigit Riyanto from Indonesia. The workshop was further enriched through the participation of speakers and participants from the practitioner community, including Jeremy England of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Tanvir Uddin from Muslim Aid Australia. Comments do not necessarily represent the views of the participants' respective institutions.

The objective of the workshop was to interrogate to what extent different cultures share similar understandings of humanitarianism; and how diverse and varied understandings of humanitarianism inform the way distinct societies and cultures respond to humanitarian imperatives and challenges. We sought to achieve this through comparing and contrasting how actors' understandings of the humanitarian imperatives are expressed in responses to three key questions: who acts in response to humanitarian crises? Why do they act? And how do they act? In the course of discussions on these questions, we considered ethical, practical and policy implications for how external agencies should interact with agencies from other cultures and traditions. The three major themes emerged from the workshop discussions, which underlie ongoing debates over the 'use and abuse' of humanitarianism in national and global policy agendas.

Major themes and findings

Universalism versus particularism

A key tension in conceptualisations of humanitarianism is that between universalism and particularlism. Workshop discussions affirmed that culture and context do matter, and that there can be multiple interpretations of humanitarianism. 'Humanitarianism is not static, nor

monolithic. It *has* evolved and it *is* influenced by a variety of historical and political factors' (Pichamon). Most participants agreed that 'understandings of what "humanitarian" mean can lead to very different actions and patterns of behaviour'. 'Cultures of advocacy' also lies at the very root of humanitarian efforts. Practices of humanitarian advocacy in Asia tend to differ greatly from their Western counterparts, being much more low-key and, in certain cases, more dependent on the 'good graces' of the state.

However, the conventional understanding that cultural difference is irreconcilable is not always correct for a number of reasons. First, cultures transform over time. In Japanese and Chinese society, a 'communitarian ethic of obligation' – which sees one's ethical obligations as expanding in concentric circles – has long been the predominant mode of thinking on humanitarianism. China continues to harbour this attitude in its foreign policy-making, where its responsibility is conceived to be first and foremost to its own people. This has limited the level of Chinese participation in international humanitarian assistance. However, its growing international confidence and increase in material power have led to a gradual shift in Chinese attitudes toward alleviating the suffering of those who live afar. This is clearly indicated in the increase in Chinese peacekeeping efforts and the provision of disaster relief. Japan is also experiencing transformation. After the first Gulf War in 1991, popular pressure persuaded the government to become more active in the delivery of humanitarian goods in complex emergencies.

Second, cultural differences can be reconcilable because there are common grounds between different cultures. For example, in the case of Indonesia, the philosophical basis for understandings of humanitarianism is embodied in the Indonesian tradition of the *Pancasila* (five principles). One of the principles is '*Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab*', which means that all human beings should be treated with due regard given their dignity as God's creatures, whilst noting that the sentiment of 'humanity' transcends religions and wider ethic groups within the society. In addition, Islamic principles of 'giving' differ from Western notions of 'charity', but ultimately, they rest on similar humanitarian grounds. The origins of this idea can be traced back to the Islamic faith and Divine Law, which have subsequently come to inform the operation of Muslim faith-based organisations. It was noted that although these organisations tend to be heterogeneous in operational terms, they are 'homogeneous in inspiration'.

Political imperatives versus ethical obligations

Another tension that surfaced in discussions was whether we should understand humanitarianism as deriving from ethical obligation or political imperatives. It was suggested that we need to first understand the politics of any crisis, for only then can we begin to understand the power-based human relations that underlie the 'politics of humanitarianism'. The humanitarian agenda and activities are primarily state-led in Japan, China and Indonesia, and there are clear political interests in engaging in international humanitarian assistance. This dilemma was illustrated through the challenge faced by the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR) in attempting to balance between state prerogatives and (non-state) humanitarian concerns. For instance, officially, Japan cannot provide assistance to North

Korea – a stance which, by extension, applies to non-state humanitarian actors in Japan. However, as an 'independent' humanitarian organisation, AAR has an imperative to provide assistance to those in need regardless of the political regime.

The tension between political and ethical motives is also evident when we compare how state actors respond to complex emergencies and natural disasters in different manners. Responses to disaster events tend to be less 'politicised' and, as a consequence, governments prove to be more willing to extend assistance. In the Chinese discourse, providing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance is a less-politicised activity than engaging in humanitarian intervention. Assisting a country in the aftermath of a natural disaster does not mean that China interferes in internal politics, which then encourages China to take a more active approach to disaster relief than to humanitarian intervention. Similarly, in the wake of the devastation following the tsunami in Aceh, the Indonesian government was more willing to accept international disaster assistance than humanitarian intervention in the Aceh conflict, viewing the matter in relatively 'de-politicised' terms.

However, it is not entirely feasible to distinguish so-called 'ethical' from 'political' imperatives in humanitarianism. Often, the issue of whether a humanitarian act is ethical or political depends on interpretation. It is important to be aware that both elements co-exist, and are necessary prerequisites for the deployment of effective humanitarian activities.

Facilitating communication between technical/policy cultures and social/indigenous cultures

Closely related to the above themes is the challenge of negotiating humanitarian space. As was noted, whilst access to this humanitarian space constitutes a defining advantage for stakeholders, it is a space that needs to be renegotiated 'day-by-day through trust and cooperation between all parties in the conflict. You earn it through years of hard work, but you can lose it in an afternoon'. A key issue here is communication. Effective communication is critical both to effective coordination but also to building trust.

Practitioners, policy-makers and academics have their own unique language, standards of expectations and ways of thinking. More often than not, however, there is a tendency for these distinct 'cultural' characteristics to get easily 'lost in translation' among these actors. More importantly, technical and policy language is rarely comprehensible to local populations.

All stakeholders should make efforts to keep this language neutral and 'acultural', so that there is a common basis of understanding. However, such efforts have resulted in unintended consequences in culturally and politically complex situations. This problem was highlighted in the case of East Timor, where the language used had a significant impact on perceptions of a hierarchical relationship between humanitarian actors and local populations. It is essential to acknowledge the significance of local agencies and networks, and integrate them into humanitarian operations. This requires ensuring that effective communication is established between external and local actors, which thereby builds trust and cooperative relationships. Such acknowledgment runs counter to tendencies to label people as 'victims' and 'passive'

recipients of aid, instead of 'active' agents that form an integral part of humanitarian processes.

The way forward: challenges and opportunities

How do we move beyond the mere recognition of cultural specificity and difference, and address humanitarian policies that embrace difference and diversity? It is essential to develop the capacity to balance culturally diverse conceptions of humanitarianism with the imperative to create and disseminate a 'common' humanitarian language that all can refer to, irrespective of their more particular differences. But only by recognizing the contested nature of such understandings and the existence of alternative conceptions can the barriers that currently inhibit effective cross-cultural communication be gradually taken down.

To take down the barriers among different cultures, it is crucial for humanitarian agents to be 'self-reflexive'. Actors need to be aware of their own cultural subjectivities and be clear about their motives. At the same time, self-reflection must be balanced by the willingness and capacity to listen to the perspectives and priorities of others. This task is arguably one of the most challenging, as it necessitates humanitarian workers to look beyond their understandings of humanitarianism, but also to be open to alternative perspectives.

One of the key observations that was made in the workshop is that trust is the most important humanitarian commodity. Those affected by crises and humanitarian actors need to build and maintain 'trust' by constantly keeping channels of communication open. This entails the need for training and development of social and cross-cultural communication, as well as the technical skills required for humanitarian emergency responses, in order to strengthen capacities to build relationships and networks, as well as to gain access without causing harm.

The workshop also highlighted the need to enhance deeper engagement between state (including military), non-state and transnational humanitarian actors, whilst recognising that the relationship between these actors varies across societies. The specific expertise of these actors – whether technically, culturally or policy oriented – are complementary, and as such, partnerships between them would not only help to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive humanitarian space, but would also aid in facilitating humanitarian efforts in the field.

A further finding of the workshop was that, whilst there is a need to continue investigate approaches to humanitarianism in the Asia-Pacific from a broad and holistic perspective, there is also the need for more focused research on specific issues and case studies, by taking a bottom-up approach. Such focused research would provide rich empirical insights into continuity and variation in conceptions and practice of humanitarianism in the region, which could valuably contribute to training and to the design and implementation of assistance policies.