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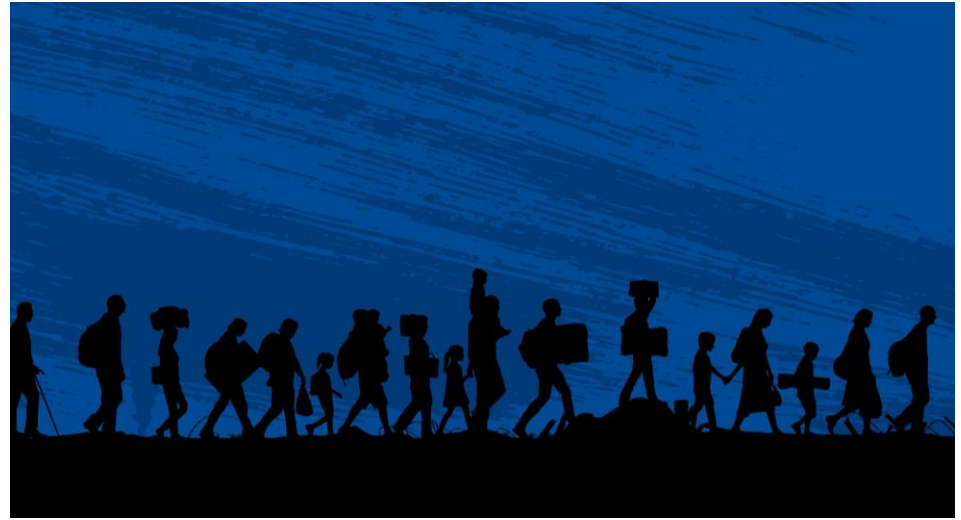


IMAGE FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

Adapting to Shifts in the Humanitarian Paradigm

Dennis J. King

Massive increases in transcontinental migration, intensifying climate change disasters, the global COVID-19 pandemic, more protracted regional conflicts, and escalating criminal violence are forcing the international donor community to rethink how it deals with these more complex humanitarian challenges. The need to find new ways to analyze, adapt to, and respond to these evolving crises is forcing a concomitant paradigm shift in the international humanitarian aid structure. To support these humanitarian efforts, the U.S. Intelligence Community will need to explore innovative ways of analyzing the threats, actors, and challenges that have emerged to better understand the implications of this far more complex humanitarian paradigm.

The Shift to a New Humanitarian Paradigm

Since the mid-19th century, the global humanitarian ecosystem has continually evolved as it responds to catastrophic events, emerging trends, and other developments. This evolution can be divided into five paradigm periods (see Appendix A). Starting around 2015, however, a sixth paradigm began to emerge that encompasses new actors, new threats, and new trends that necessitate new methods for addressing the changes. Under the previous paradigm, the United Nations and Western NGOs and donor governments dominated the international humanitarian system. Both natural disasters and conflict crises were most often addressed at a country level rather than with a global, multidimensional approach. IC analyses also had a national focus. But the emergence of more complex crises—such as transcontinental migration, climate change disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic, along with recent events in Afghanistan and Ukraine—has altered the humanitarian landscape. These crises are forcing the international humanitarian system, and the IC agencies supporting it, to adjust—not only how to assess and respond to the more complex emergencies, but also how to address the emergence of new actors who do not always follow established international humanitarian principles, norms, and best practices.



KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- During the past decade, the international donor community has had to adapt to paradigm shifts in transcontinental migration, climate change disasters, pandemic, protracted regional conflicts, and criminal violence.
- As these complex humanitarian challenges continue to evolve how will these responding organizations adapt? And how can the IC support the donor community as it shifts its response to changing aid needs?

LATEST SHIFT IN THE HUMANITARIAN PARADIGM

2001-14 Paradigm (Complicated)	Current Paradigm (Complex)
Refugees from marginalized populations in conflict-affected, low-income countries crossed borders into neighboring countries and were settled into camps.	Refugees and economic migrants travel long distances to desired destinations with help from human smugglers, smartphones, and social media.
Sporadic storms, floods, and droughts were addressed at the country level.	Changed climate patterns result in more frequent storms, flooding, droughts, heat waves, and wildfires.
Regional/countrywide epidemics of Ebola, cholera, malaria, yellow fever, etc. devastated mostly low-income countries.	The COVID-19 pandemic catches the international humanitarian community offguard and affects higher income countries.
Armed conflicts were mostly between governments and nonstate secessionist, revolutionary, sectarian, or terrorist groups.	Protracted, unresolved armed conflicts and nationwide criminal violence drive humanitarian crises and mass migration/displacement.
UN and Western NGOs and donor governments dominated the international humanitarian system.	New nontraditional donors, local NGOs, and malign actors play greater roles on the humanitarian stage.

Shifting Humanitarian Challenges . . .

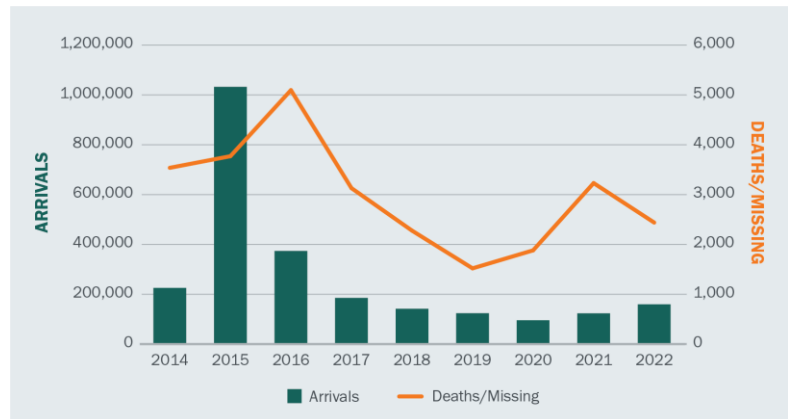
Transcontinental Migration

As a first example of the global humanitarian paradigm shift: refugees and migrants are no longer just crossing a single border to settle into camps in neighboring countries. Instead, large numbers of people are traveling increasingly long distances and crossing multiple borders to show up at their desired destinations in Europe and the United States. The tipping point occurred in the summer of 2015 when mass refugee and migrant flows from Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia began entering Europe. Likewise, in the Western Hemisphere, the number of migrants and unaccompanied minors from Central America, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, and other countries making the trek to the Mexico-U.S. border has spiked—reaching a peak in 2022.

Personal smartphones, social media, and criminal human smuggling gangs provide refugees and migrants with the assistance and means to traverse these long distances. At the same time, the longer treks have increased the numbers of refugees and migrants dying during their journeys from drowning, heat exhaustion, other harsh environmental conditions, lack of life-saving health care, and violent attacks.¹ Moreover, the increased number of refugees and migrants has spawned resurgent nationalist movements and xenophobic backlashes against migrants and refugees in some receiving countries.²

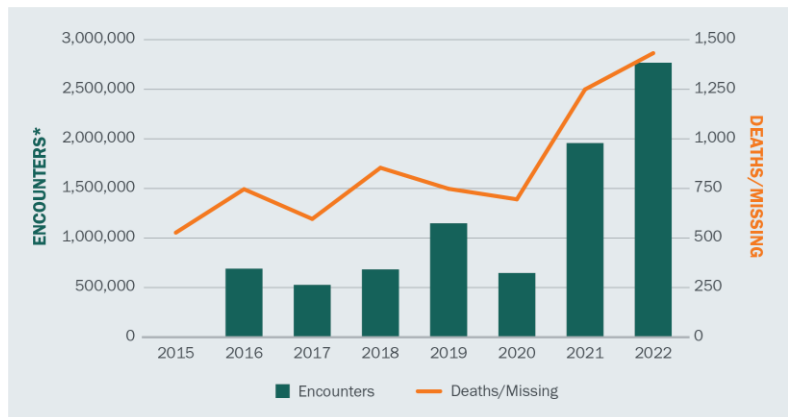
In 2022, the UN reported that an estimated 100 million people around the world were forcibly displaced from their homes—the highest number since World War II.³ Armed conflict, criminal gang violence—especially against women and children—persecution of minority groups, and environmental stressors that destroy livelihoods have displaced many refugees, while economic migrants have left their homes to seek opportunities to earn a living wage and send remittances back to family members.

Figure 1. Migration to Europe across the Mediterranean



Source: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Europe: Refugee and Migrant Arrivals and Dead and Missing Data, 2022*, UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2022, accessed March 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

Figure 2. Migration to US-Mexico Border



* “Encounters” differs from “arrivals” primarily in that multiple attempts by an individual to enter the U.S. are each counted separately.

Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Total Enforcement Actions by US Fiscal Year, 2022*, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics>, International Organization of Migration (IOM), *Americas: Total Dead and Missing at US-Mexico Border by Calendar Year, 2022*, Missing Migrants Project, accessed March 2023, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/americas>.

Climate-Driven Disasters

The years since 2015 have been the warmest on record, altering worldwide climate patterns and prompting a paradigm shift in the impact of climate disasters. More frequent floods, storms, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires are wreaking greater economic damage as they destroy crops and livelihoods and displace unprecedented numbers of people.⁴ In 2015, the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris officially recognized the link between climate change and the “loss and damage” caused by meteorological and hydrological disasters.⁵ Climate change is increasing food, water, and energy insecurity, which are adding to worldwide political and economic instability. Although improved early warning systems, evacuation programs, and preparedness and mitigation measures have lowered death tolls from these disasters,⁶ increased national preparedness and local resilience are no longer sufficient to address these climate change disasters. International coordinated efforts and adaptive mitigation strategies are now required.

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19—the deadliest pandemic since the 1918-19 global flu and the 1997 peak of the HIV/AIDS crisis⁷—has also forced a paradigm shift in how to address global health emergencies. Although the emergence of a pandemic had been identified as a potential future threat, COVID-19 caught the world unprepared and has been unlike any crisis the international humanitarian system has faced. From 2020 until the end of 2022, more than 750 million reported COVID-19 cases resulted in 6.8 million deaths worldwide.⁸ Ebola, cholera, and malaria epidemics have devastated lesser-developed countries and regions, but with COVID-19, 75 percent of reported deaths through 2021 occurred in Europe and the Americas, with only 3 percent in Africa.⁹ Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by another virus—the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories that drove believers to adopt self-destructive behaviors that exacerbated mortality and morbidity rates. Disinformation fueled paranoid suspicions that health care workers were spreading the virus, and conspiratorial fears about the detrimental effects of the vaccines led to a surge in attacks on health care workers around the world.¹⁰

Protracted Transnational Conflicts and Internal Criminal Violence

Protracted armed conflicts and nonconventional criminal violence indicate another paradigm shift in the drivers of displacement, migration, and political and economic instability. The number of countries experiencing protracted humanitarian crises has almost tripled since 2005.¹¹ Long-term unresolved conflicts in Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen continue to have lingering effects, increasing humanitarian needs that have stressed the international aid system.¹² The more than two decades-long conflict in Afghanistan ended in 2021 with the victory of the Taliban, leading to a retreat of the traditional international humanitarian community’s nation-building and human rights agenda.¹³

More recent conflicts in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan, and the Russia-Ukraine war have only added to the global humanitarian

challenges. In 2022, 39 of the 47 current UN-sponsored Humanitarian Response Plans, Regional Refugee Plans, Flash Appeals, and Plans of Action were related to ongoing armed conflicts, post-conflict situations, and nonconventional violence conditions in more than 50 countries.¹⁴ Humanitarian funding requests through the UN appeals mechanism increased 37 percent in 2022 over 2021, but government donor funding increased only 28 percent, raising concerns about the increasing humanitarian donor burden.¹⁵

Moreover, the intensification of criminal gang violence—previously considered a national governance and security issue—has upped homicide rates, instability, and migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras and Mexico.¹⁶ Vigilante violence in the Philippines, South Africa, and Venezuela has also become a humanitarian concern. In 2022, economic instability in Sri Lanka ignited violence, which added to these humanitarian concerns.

. . . Prompt Changes to the Humanitarian Aid System

Realignments in the Traditional System

The global humanitarian system is also undergoing a paradigm shift, as international aid organizations, NGOs, and traditional aid donors rush to adapt to these new, more complex humanitarian challenges and trends. The donor community promoted reform at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and through initiatives such as the 2016 Grand Bargain, which promoted providing one-fourth of donor funding to local and national aid organizations. However, by 2022 only about 3 percent of tracked international humanitarian funds had been sent to local and national organizations for their domestic aid and response.¹⁷

Just as humanitarian crises were becoming more complex and transnational in nature, a backlash to multilateralism and globalization has emerged as many donors have begun to emphasize national self-interest. Australian, British, and U.S. aid agencies reorganized, and in 2017, the United States temporarily withdrew from its commitments to the 2015 Climate Change Paris Accords and, in 2020, to the World Health Organization, although it rejoined both in 2021. Since 2015, Russia and China have asserted greater influence in the UN, vetoing several proposed Security Council resolutions on cross-border humanitarian deliveries into Syria and thwarting other UN humanitarian and human rights initiatives related to Burma, Ethiopia, North Korea, and Yemen.^{18, 19}

New Actors on the Humanitarian Stage

The emergence of new nontraditional donors, such as China, the Gulf States, Turkey, and other countries that provide most of their aid bilaterally, signifies a paradigm shift away from the established Western-dominated UN and NGO system. These new nontraditional actors do not always follow accepted humanitarian principles, norms, and best practices, such as coordination, transparency, and localization. For example, these donors tend to work outside the traditional multilateral system, do not support local NGOs, and usually do not provide transparent accounting of their bilateral aid.

At the same time, local volunteers, national civil society groups, and diaspora organizations are playing a more independent and stronger role in direct humanitarian response, often in geographic areas not accessible to international aid organizations. Under the previous paradigm, the UN, international organizations, Western governments, and NGOs dominated the international aid system. Collectively, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States provided 60 percent of publicly-reported humanitarian appeal contributions during the past decade.²⁰ Private donors—mostly philanthropic foundations, corporations, and individuals—also played an important role in financing humanitarian response, often providing more flexible and less restrictive conditions on the recipients.

The past decade has also seen malign antihumanitarian actors, such as the governments of Burma, North Korea, Russia, and Syria, work to deny humanitarian access and obstruct and attack humanitarian operations. Russian aerial attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and aid facilities, in both Syria and Ukraine have killed health and aid workers. Nonstate terrorist groups, such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIS, have targeted aid workers for abduction and assassination and controlled humanitarian access. Human smuggling and criminal gangs, along with paramilitary mercenary organizations, such as the Wagner Group, have also become new rogue actors on the humanitarian stage.

Redefining Humanitarianism

Although humanitarian issues and assistance have always been political, under this emerging paradigm, donor humanitarian aid is becoming even more blatantly transactional and politicized. In the previous paradigm, traditional aid actors endorsed the International Red Cross’s humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence, and neutrality. Traditional actors accepted the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Standards, the Good Humanitarian Donorship guidelines, and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine that promote similar objectives. However, with the recognition that humanitarian aid could be used as an instrument of “soft power,” political policy is more often taking priority over humanitarian principles.²¹

- Russia provides most of its humanitarian aid to allies in Syria, Russian-speaking minorities in other countries, and breakaway territories in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.²² It sends excess commodities to a few select countries with natural disasters and minor funding to centralized UN funding mechanisms.²³
- The international development agency China created in 2018 follows a nontraditional “transactional” definition of humanitarian aid to include concessional loans, its Belt and Road infrastructure projects, and bilateral aid for natural disasters and medical emergencies rather than for armed conflict humanitarian crises.²⁴
- In March 2019, the U.S. Government froze direct humanitarian and development aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, citing the influx of people from those countries to the U.S. border. This freeze undercut more than 80 percent of USAID programs.²⁵ This freeze

was partially reversed in October 2019 to allow some targeted aid programs, and the Biden Administration lifted it in January 2021.²⁶

Adapting to the Next Humanitarian Paradigm

The U.S. and international humanitarian communities need to adapt to the new threats, new actors, and changes to the humanitarian system and culture that characterize this latest paradigm shift. The current system tends to respond to natural disasters and conflicts as country or regional problems rather than as complex, interconnected transnational or global challenges. The new actors on the humanitarian stage do not play by the same rules or follow the established humanitarian principles, norms, or best practices. This complicates coordination, action, and the ability to anticipate the next game-changing event or situation that could yet again shift the humanitarian paradigm. IC assessments of these ever-changing humanitarian challenges will help the U.S. Government pursue its humanitarian policy goals and counteract the efforts of adversaries and bad actors.

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If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at Research@niu.odni.gov.

Appendix A.

FIVE PREVIOUS HUMANITARIAN PARADIGMS				
1845-1914 Rise of International Humanitarianism	1914-45 Large-Scale War and Genocides	1946-1966 Post-WWII/ Creation of United Nations	1967-2000 Intrastate Sectarian Conflicts/Humanitarian Initiatives	2001-2014 Mega-Disasters/ Protracted Conflicts
<p>Wars: Crimean War, Battle of Solferino, Spanish American War</p> <p>Natural Disasters: <i>Earthquake:</i> San Francisco, California, Krakatoa, Indonesia <i>Flood:</i> Johnstown, Pennsylvania <i>Famine:</i> Irish Potato Famine</p>	<p>Wars: World War I, Spanish Civil War, World War II <i>Genocides:</i> Armenian Genocide, Nanjing Massacre, The Holocaust</p> <p>Natural Disasters: <i>Epidemic:</i> Influenza Pandemic <i>Earthquake:</i> Turkey <i>Floods:</i> China, Japan <i>Famine:</i> Soviet Union/Ukraine, China, Vietnam</p>	<p>Natural Disasters: <i>Earthquake:</i> Ashgabat, Turkmenistan <i>Epidemic:</i> Asian Flu <i>Famine:</i> China</p> <p>Wars: Korean Conflict, Vietnam War, Israeli-Arab conflicts, Indo-Pakistan conflicts, French-Algerian War</p>	<p>Wars: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Biafra, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Iraq, Liberia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Peru, Rwanda, Somalia, Former Yugoslavia</p> <p>Natural Disasters: <i>Cyclones:</i> Bangladesh, India <i>Earthquakes:</i> Armenia, China, Mexico, Peru <i>Volcano:</i> Colombia <i>Hurricane:</i> Central America/Caribbean <i>Droughts/Famine:</i> Ethiopia, Sahel, North Korea</p> <p>Accidents: Bhopal, Chernobyl</p>	<p>Wars: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria</p> <p>Malign Antihumanitarian Actions: Nonstate armed groups control territory and deny humanitarian access; increased attacks on aid/health workers</p> <p>Natural Disasters: <i>Earthquakes:</i> Haiti, Japan <i>Tsunami:</i> Indian Ocean, Japan <i>Cyclones:</i> Burma, Philippines <i>Epidemic:</i> Ebola in Africa</p>
<p>Humanitarian Developments: International Committee of the Red Cross founded; First Geneva Convention; American Red Cross established; advances in seismology, epidemiology, meteorology</p>	<p>Humanitarian Developments: Save the Children, League/International Federation of the Red Cross founded; Herbert Hoover American Relief Administration; UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration; Oxfam; CARE</p>	<p>Humanitarian Developments: UNICEF established; UN Declaration of Human Rights; Geneva Conventions; UN High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR); World Food Program; The Marshall Plan; UN Convention on Refugees; USAID/Foreign Assistance Act</p>	<p>Humanitarian Developments: Médecins Sans Frontières created; Concert for Bangladesh, Live Aid, We Are the World; International Federations of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Humanitarian Principles; Interagency Steering Committee; International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement Code of Conduct, Sphere Project, Responsibility to Protect, Do No Harm</p>	<p>Humanitarian Developments: Advances in humanitarian technologies; non-state armed groups control territory and humanitarian access and attack aid workers</p>

Source: Dennis King 2019; Davey, Borton, Foley. "A history of the humanitarian system: Western origins and foundations", Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, June 2013.

Endnotes

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