



HUMANITARIAN*FUTURES*

— PLANNING FROM THE FUTURE —

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“...Trends, scenarios, visions and strategies are an integral part, at least implicitly, of most decision-making in the field. Their power to make decision-making ‘wise’ comes when they are made explicit and consciously shared to provoke thought, stimulate imagination, clarify options, relate values to long-term developments, and move people to take action...”

*The Future Belongs To Those Who... A Guide To Thinking About The Future,
The Institute For Alternative Futures*



The central challenge

- Humanitarian organisations are facing a dynamic environment with increasing and diverse crises, more demands on resources and rising expectations about their ability to respond effectively to the unforeseen.
- The humanitarian challenge in the 21st century will increasingly be reflected in the ways that responsible organisations deal with uncertainty, complexity and rapid change.
- Humanitarian organisations are expected to predict, plan and act, while under greater scrutiny from political constituents, commentators and beneficiaries. The combination of expectations and accountability creates an environment in which humanitarian organisations are under greater pressure than ever to perform effectively.
- The humanitarian sector has faced difficulties in anticipating and responding adequately to emerging crises. This is due in part to the ways that many organisations within the sector “think and strategise”. Given the new dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian threats, these difficulties have to be overcome and can be overcome.
- **The Humanitarian Futures programme**, based at Kings College, London, can actively support organisations’ efforts to strategise more effectively; and in so doing to make them more anticipatory, innovative and agile.
- In strengthening individual organisation, the programme at the same time will develop and test relevant approaches for the whole humanitarian community, through specific learning networks and internet open-access learning systems.



Overview

WHY IS THE HUMANITARIAN FUTURES PROGRAMME PERSPECTIVE NEEDED?

Our world is increasingly characterised by uncertainty, complexity and rapid change. The dimensions and dynamics of disasters and emergencies are changing exponentially. Causal factors and consequences are increasingly global, while at the same time human vulnerability is intensifying in distinctly different ways at local and regional levels. The scale of impacts of crises is also intensifying, with more and more disasters and emergencies undermining economic and political systems as well as destroying infrastructures and the basis of future livelihoods.

Those responsible for responding to crises have all too often failed to anticipate disaster and emergency events and their potential scale and consequences. In responding to such crises – whether a predictable event such as a hurricane or a potential pandemic such as avian influenza – the response, itself, frequently lacks strategic vision and clear end-state objectives.

The strategic capabilities of most organisations are uneven and their focus generally narrow and short-term. Given the particular responsibilities of humanitarian organisations, however, they are obliged both morally and practically to address such weaknesses. They face greater demands to account for their actions as well as greater demands on their resources. Expectations are rising in what has become a highly competitive market.

These factors present an enormous challenge to humanitarian organisations, be they governmental, non-governmental, international, regional or multilateral. All need to learn how to anticipate and adapt to changing circumstances with greater prescience and agility.

Towards that end the 21st century organisation will need to plan from the future. It can no longer presume that the past will serve as a guide to what will be. Nor can it assume that traditional structures, standard operating procedures and repertoires, and information networks and systems will be adequate to ensure vitally needed organisational sensitivity, perspective and adaptive competence.

Despite all the studies and evaluations undertaken to assess their performance, humanitarian organisations have devoted little attention to finding out how they think -- the assumptions that underlie their objectives, their visions and strategies. Too little attention has been paid to understanding how strategies can and should guide their decision-making processes and their operations. The very lives of untold millions and the survival of

those organisations upon whom those lives will depend will be determined by organisations that think, plan and act from the future.

Humanitarian organisations of the future need to prepare for future crises by planning from the future.

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** (HFP) has identified five competencies as core to the futures vision, and will work to develop these capacities both within and across a number of participating organisations. These capacities should generate understanding about ways to strengthen the prevention, preparedness and response capacities of the wider humanitarian community.

- to become more **anticipatory**, able to carry out robust and responsive strategic planning, and to monitor relevant trends
- to become more **adaptive**, utilising flexible and dynamic management processes, linking vision and mission to operational activities in fast-changing environments
- to become more **agile**, exercising decentralised leadership through measures that enable staff at all levels of the organisation to work more creatively and innovatively
- to be better **informed**, prioritising internal learning and knowledge management, leading to more effective partnerships between strategic and operational departments
- to **collaborate** more effectively, building dynamic interactions across a range of internal and external networks.

Overview (contd)

WHAT IS THE HUMANITARIAN FUTURES PROGRAMME?

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** is a three year programme designed to enhance the anticipatory and adaptive capacities of humanitarian organisations. The programme has three main components, and each plays an integral part in meeting the programme's overall goal:

- [1] **Participant development.** This is the core component of the programme, and has three main objectives – strengthening anticipatory and adaptive capacities of individual organisations; improving inter-organisational collaboration and knowledge transfer; and developing open access learning and training tools for the wider humanitarian community
- [2] **Innovations.** This component of the programme develops, tests and promotes a range of different innovations intended to facilitate the work of humanitarian organisations. Each

of the proposed innovations suggests different ways of undertaking various humanitarian functions, and each offers insights into ways that organisations can be more adaptive

- [3] **The Futures Group.** If sensitivity to change is of fundamental importance to humanitarian organisations of the future, then one key indicator is the way that scientific and social scientific trends are “translated” into the strategies and activities of an anticipatory and adaptive organisation. Hence, the third component of the programme is designed to offer insights into ways that policy makers, practitioners and scientists can best “communicate”.

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** brings together the best in intellectual, practical and corporate sector experience to address these challenges. The three-year programme, based at Kings College, London, is supported by a core group of bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental and corporate sector sponsors.



The programme in action

COMPONENT 1: DEVELOPING FUTURES CAPACITIES WITHIN AND ACROSS PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** strengthens the overall anticipatory and adaptive capacities of the wider humanitarian community by working closely with individual humanitarian organisations – assisting them individually to achieve identified objectives. Based upon a broad pool of experiences and lessons arising out of the sort of engagement described in objectives 1 and 2, below, the programme will develop more general approaches and instruments to fulfil its third objective, namely, to develop learning and training tools to help the wider humanitarian community.

(a) Organisation-specific capacity development

How we will achieve this?

Sixteen organisations will take part in the programme as ‘participant contributors’. Each will work with expert teams to assess the organisation’s current strategy formulation process and the ways that longer-term “futures” analysis is incorporated into strategic thinking and operational activities.

The 16 participant contributors will reflect a range of aid organisations operating in the humanitarian sector. They will comprise: three multilateral organisations, six governments, three regional organisations, and four international NGOs.

What is involved for participant contributors?

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** team will work closely with each participant contributor through a five-stage process:

- **identify the issues** facing your organisation about its ability to adapt and respond to future crises
- **develop a programme** specific to your organisation, with details of procedures, access by the expert team, timescale and outputs
- **implement the programme**, with the mutually agreed level of involvement by the **Humanitarian Futures programme** team
- **draw preliminary conclusions** that will be presented to the management of your organisation for review before finalising. All findings and conclusions will remain confidential to your organisation
- **monitor achievements** against the benchmarks set out in the final report.

Depending on the issues that are identified between each participant contributor and the programme team, we will use various methodologies centred around:

- *scenario development* – to assess how your organisation’s existing capacities could best respond to a range of alternative futures. Senior management will be asked to envision the kind of world their organisation will be operating in, in say 20 years’ time. Based on present capacity, how effectively could you respond, and what would need to change to enable you to respond more effectively to a range of future scenarios?
- *mapping capacity to formulate strategy* – to analyse how your organisation develops strategies, the assumptions you base them upon, and your ability to revise them in the light of fast-changing operational environments
- *matching strategy with operational activities* – how can you ensure that your organisation’s strategic objectives are consistent with your practices and policies on the ground? Expert teams will assess the alignment between strategic objectives and operational activities, and develop ways to ensure greater coherence between the two.

What are the expected outputs?

- Based on the individual assessments, each participant contributor will receive a set of confidential findings, conclusions and recommendations to enhance their organisation’s adaptive and anticipatory capacities to respond more effectively to human vulnerabilities in the immediate and longer term. The organisation’s final report will include benchmarks for implementing agreed recommendations.
- The findings and recommendations will remain confidential to each participant contributor. But common themes will be brought together and disseminated through the Humanitarian Futures learning and training tools to help other humanitarian organisations enhance their own capacities to respond to future crises.

(b) Improving collaboration and knowledge sharing across the humanitarian sector

How we will achieve this?

The impact of the Humanitarian Futures methodology has to be reflected not only in the ways that individual organisations enhance their anticipatory and adaptive capacities, but also in the ways that such approaches affect styles of inter-organisational collaboration. Towards this end the programme is establishing a Humanitarian Futures network which will provide participants with updates on programme developments as well as a platform for discussions on anticipatory and adaptive methodologies.

In the final phase of the programme, the Humanitarian Futures team will bring together representatives of the 16 participant contributors to share experiences on the effectiveness of the futures methodology and the impacts that it has had on individual participating organisations. These shared experiences will lead to agreed guidelines on ways to promote practical collaboration across the sector for anticipating types of threats and adopting collaborative ways to monitor and eventually to respond to them.



What are the expected outputs?

- Through network participation, on-going means to share relevant anticipatory and adaptive experiences and to review and adjust recommendations provided by the **Humanitarian Futures programme** team.
- A set of practical guidelines designed to enhance collaboration between humanitarian organisations in order to strengthen ways that potential long-term threats can be monitored and collaborative courses of action can be promoted.

(c) developing and disseminating open access learning and training tools

How will we achieve this?

Based on the activities carried out under the first two objectives – developing participant contributors' adaptive capacities and producing guidelines on improving collaboration – we will develop and disseminate web-based information, training modules and organisational support manuals. These will be designed to introduce new approaches and methodologies to other humanitarian organisations that would not otherwise be able to devote the necessary time and resources to developing their adaptive capacities. There will also be a knock-on impact, as users can employ these learning and training tools in their own capacity-building work with partner organisations. It is also assumed that these products will support the efforts of those organisations involved in capacity-building for others.

What are the expected outputs?

- A series of open access learning and training tools, including web-based learning applications, in cooperation with established relief and development websites. These will include
 - Training modules designed for human resource managers, and general organisational review exercises.
 - A 'futures scenarios' manual, to guide organisational exercises in speculating scenarios.
 - An organisational support manual, produced in five languages, identifying best practices for developing adaptive and anticipatory humanitarian organisations.

COMPONENT 2: EXPLORING, TESTING AND IMPLEMENTING INNOVATIVE HUMANITARIAN INITIATIVES



The second component of the **Humanitarian Futures programme** involves pushing the boundaries of current thought and practice, and moving away from standard approaches and responses to humanitarian crises. We are developing a range of initiatives that can enhance an organisation's anticipatory and adaptive capacities. They reflect a high level of innovation and experimentation, and offer alternative ways of anticipating and addressing future crises.

When it comes to the overall objectives of the programme, the emphasis on innovative practices has two dimensions. The first is the potential utility of these innovations to humanitarian organisations, per se. The second is the extent to which these practices serve as a test of how participating organisations can adopt relevant innovations into their anticipatory approaches and methodologies.

Here are some examples of the kind of initiatives the **Humanitarian Futures programme** is involved in:

Remittance patterns and early warning systems

Patterns of remittances from the diaspora to their countries of origin offer insights into patterns of stress among vulnerable populations. We have embarked upon preliminary scoping exercises to establish whether patterns of remittance flows can enhance early warning systems about future humanitarian crises.

The Foresight Forum

Designed in collaboration with King's College London's Department of Management, the Foresight Forum brings together leading multinational corporations with humanitarian actors to discuss scenario development and strategic planning techniques. Our aim is to explore how approaches to forecasting and strategy development are utilised in the private sector, and to assess how concepts of human vulnerability are integrated into their strategic perspectives. The first forum took place in November 2005.

Avian influenza response review

One of the most important aspects of the Avian Influenza threat is that it offers policy-makers and planners potentially deep and enduring insights into ways that one may have to deal with uncertainty, rapid change and complexity. The time is ripe now to capture the lessons that will have to be learned to understand humanitarian threats of the future by understanding those planning initiatives that were successful as well as those constraints and gaps that need not and should not happen the "next time".

Satellite imagery and humanitarian prevention, preparedness and response.

The potential importance of satellite imagery for supporting humanitarian work has been well recognised over the past decade. The actual application of its potential has fallen well behind the growth of its capabilities. The **Humanitarian Futures programme** is exploring ways to make such technologies cheaper and more accessible for the humanitarian community.

Security insurance and humanitarian intervention

A variety of creative experiments are underway to use insurance as a mechanism for disaster prevention, preparedness and response. The World Bank and World Food Programme's food security insurance experiment is one example. We are attempting to build upon such work, including micro-insurance concepts, to assess the extent to which 'insurance' can change some of the key humanitarian assumptions underpinning crisis prognosis and responses.

Organisational self-assessment tool

We are collaborating with a team of research institutes and private sector consultants, along with major humanitarian organisations, to develop a self-assessment tool that will enable organisations to measure their own anticipatory and adaptive capacities.

COMPONENT 3: STRENGTHENING DIALOGUE BETWEEN POLICY PLANNERS, PRACTITIONERS AND SCIENTISTS

The third component of the **Humanitarian Futures programme** is the Futures Group. Its role is two-fold. In the first place, it intends to add its own voice to a long and crucial discourse among policy-makers, practitioners and scientists about ways that the three need to communicate in order to address societal challenges of the future. The second is to identify compelling trends from the hard and social sciences that could affect large scale human vulnerability – both negatively and positively.

Who comprises the Futures Group?

Ten scientists and social scientists form the Futures Group. Their participation is based upon their individual expertise, as well as the networks they can draw upon to enhance the Group's work. They span a range of core disciplines, and are encouraged to focus upon inter-relationships across these disciplines that suggest mega-themes and trends.

What will the Futures Group do?

The Futures Group has three key objectives:

1. to contribute to the policy-maker, practitioner, scientist discourse through various fora and media
2. to identify compelling trends and cross-disciplinary mega-trends, in part to provide materials for the programme's scenario development exercises
3. to compile a 'futures scenarios' manual that will suggest ways that trends can best be monitored and incorporated into strategy formulation processes



Programme structure and access to expertise

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** brings together an unusual blend of academic specialists, humanitarian practitioners and corporate expertise to promote its objectives. This mix is reflected in the programme's core staff, its Futures Group and in the support teams assembled to work with individual participant organisations.

Multidisciplinary research capacities stem from King's College, London's own extensive resources, while operational expertise comes from individuals who highly recognised experience in the world of humanitarian and development assistance. Corporate sector specialists are on hand to provide insights and approaches to strategy formulation and planning systems.

The role of participant support teams

Participant support teams will carry out the in-depth assessments of participant contributors' thinking capacities, based upon the process described above. Each team will be formed according to the specific needs of the individual participating organisation, reflecting the required combination of skills and experience in humanitarian affairs, organisational development and strategy formulation. This will ensure that the assessments and the proposed solutions are both practical and sustainable for humanitarian organisations.

Programme staff

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** has a small staff team so that funds can be devoted to engaging the necessary expertise to enable us to meet our objectives. Here is an outline of the programme staff team and their tasks and responsibilities:

The **Director** has ultimate responsibility for the programme's implementation and outputs, and dissemination of information.

The **Futures Group Coordinator** is responsible for convening the Futures Group and ensuring that its objectives are met. The Coordinator will also compile and edit the 'futures scenarios' manual.

The **Policy Planning Coordinator** is responsible for organising and implementing the in-depth assessments with participant contributors, organising expert teams as appropriate, ensuring that agreed objectives are met, and monitoring the overall process.

The **Programme Administrator** and **Programme Assistant** will administer all aspects of the programme, with responsibility for maintaining programme records and accounts and reporting to donors.

WORK SO FAR

The **Humanitarian Futures programme** was officially launched with a grant from the British government's Department for International Development in July 2005.

The Programme Director has carried out various initiatives since 2004 that fall under the **Humanitarian Futures programme**, including a project investigating the role of the diaspora in disaster prevention and preparedness; a study proposing alternative roles for the UN in the light of the changing nature of humanitarian crises; scenario exercises for an avian influenza pandemic; and foresight forums, engaging the private sector on ways to deal with future large-scale threats to human vulnerability.

Based at King's College London, the **Humanitarian Futures programme** is sponsored to date by DFID, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, USAID, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and Save the Children US.



Next steps

We hope you now have a good understanding of what the **Humanitarian Futures programme** is, and what it has to offer your organisation.

At its core, the programme is designed to ensure that your organisation is sufficiently anticipatory, adaptive and agile to deal with uncertainty, rapid change and complexity. By working with you, we in turn will be able to help other humanitarian organisations and the wider humanitarian community.

- The programme is designed to help your organisation improve its capacity to anticipate and respond to future crises, by moving away from a conventional focus on standard operating procedures, to developing your capacities in five key areas that will help you plan from the future.
- It is also designed to help maximise your organisation's strategic planning and impact specifically through devising new and innovative ways of collaborating with other organisations.
- Your involvement as a participant contributor, working jointly with the programme team to fulfil the key objectives, will help develop ways that other humanitarian organisations can enhance their own capacities to respond to future crises.

If you would like further information about the **Humanitarian Futures programme**, or wish to discuss specific aspects of the programme in confidence, please contact:

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