Beyond Despair

Conference organised by Community World Service Asia in collaboration with the Humanitarian Action Initiative of the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, and the Regional Humanitarian Partnership Week Asia partners.

Anoop Sukumaran with the CWSA team

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Introduction

The Community World Service Asia (CWSA)and the Humanitarian Action Initiative (HAI) of the Elliott School of International affairs, George Washington University organised a half-day conference at the start of 2022 Regional Humanitarian Partnership week, hosted by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the International Council for Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and CWSA. Marcus Werne (Regional director of UNOCHA), Takeshi Komino (Secretary General, ADRRN) and Keya Choudhary (Regional Representative, ICVA) opened the conference by outlining the state of humanitarian sector in the region and the challenges ahead, and provided a summary of the schedule of events.

CWSA and HAI intended to flip the script of many gatherings: rather than bemoan the obstacles, which are well known at this point, they wanted to hear about how they manage to act boldly and creatively to stand and deliver despite the innumerable barriers. The conference had three parts: an overview of the barriers; the strategies developed to overcome these barriers; and how these strategies can help chart a more productive path in the future.

Palwashay Arbab, CWSA's head of communications, opened the proceedings, followed by Dr. Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre, Associate Professor of International Affairs and Director of HAI. Maryam summarised the intent of the conference in the following way: "*success is not downplaying the challenges, but despite the challenges being able to provide assistance. We need to reform the system, but we also need to focus on what's working.* "

Setting the tone

Dr. Michael Barnett, University Professor of International Affairs and Political Science at George Washington University, provided broad brushstrokes regarding the barriers that are the focus of much attention and frustration. Drawing from a survey he conducted with Smruti Patel (Global Mentoring Initiative), Alexandra Vandermaas-Peeler (GWU) and CWSA in May 2022, in which the majority of respondents were from the local and national organisations in the global South, he pointed to barriers from economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and knowledge capital.

Of all the obstacles to more effective action and widening power to the global South, money is most important. As is well known, donors and INGOs have pledged to provide more direct funding to local and national actors, but talk has not been followed by action.

They often refer to due diligence and competence as major barriers. Due diligence, that is financial and upward accountability, represents a major drain on staff time, and perhaps the costs of due diligence outweigh the benefits in terms of assistance. Trust also matters when attempting to understand why donors, the UN, and INGOs have failed to deliver on their promise. Trust takes time to develop, but trust is more likely to develop between those who see themselves as part of the same community, and there are walls between "international" and "local" actors. Additionally, staff contracts are short term, thereby creating a sense of anxiety and instability in the organisations. Smaller NGOs are constantly trying to play catch-up.

He then spoke about the social capital and trust that comes from familiarity and cooperative exchanges. There is relatively little trust between international and local organisations; this is not mistrust, but rather a fear that the other has different goals and capacities. Trust also more easily develops between communities that have shared cultural

and education al background and reference points, which must be overcome. Relatedly, there is the possibility that Western and Southern organisations have different understandings of humanitarianism; arguably the former is more likely to stick to humanitarianism as relief and the latter as humanitarianism as relief and development.

Knowledge is the final barrier to localisation. The humanitarian sector has "professionalised" and moved from "local" to "expert" knowledge. Expert knowledge is developed from training and education and the clearest evidence are credentials from institutions that award credentials. The rise of expertise is more readily available to those in the global North than South. But even when staff have equivalent credentials, those from the global South experience forms of discrimination. Discrimination is based on various categories of difference, but race is certainly one. Judgements of competence, in this regard, are shaped by racial biases. The same can be said for "capacity, an ill-defined discourse in which international agencies are assumed to have it and local agencies are assumed to be without. Barnett said "*This is a sector with racism without racists*" where competence is often a code for race and civilizational categories.

This is a sector with racism without racists

These barriers to autonomy and localisation, according to Barnett, are financial social, shared meaning, and knowledge. Structures are more or less constraining which harden and soften over time. They do allow for manipulation and opportunities for agency. Structures are not homogenous and are different, some which are more formidable and entrenched than others. They question therefore is what can be done? Should we work the system, should we change the system, or should we leave the system? These questions are at the heart of the conference that looks at ways forward.

During an interactive session, Deloffre asked attendees of the Beyond Despair workshop to discuss three questions at their tables and note their responses on a digital whiteboard (Jamboard). The three guiding questions were as follows:

> *1. When faced with structural barriers, how does your organisation respond? What creative solutions, innovations or new ways of working can you share?*
>
> *2. What strategies did you use during COVID that were not or did not seem available to you before COVID? What stopped you from using those strategies before?*
>
> *3. What strategies of resistance does your organisation use? How do you resist? How do you go around the global system of aid?*

The answers collected on the Jamboards were analysed by Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre following the interactive session.

In response to question 1, participants noted both structural barriers and solutions to overcome them. The most common structural barrier cited were **access constraints**, which include regulations and laws that inhibit or limit operations, international sanctions, financial constraints such as liquidity problems, a lack of recognition by the government, and a lack of access to donors. Participants also noted a "colonialist mentality," where programs are defined and imposed by external actors and a "unresponsive and complicated hierarchy." Finally, participants noted limited resources and a lack of both funding and capacity-sharing support.

When asked what creative solutions, innovations, or new ways of working they use to circumvent these barriers, attendees offered practices in four main areas: **localisation**, **relational practices**, **voice**, and **learning**. Attendees view **localisation** as a way to promote and enact decolonisation. They noted several ways of localising to decolonise including, "giving more autonomy and legitimacy to local organisations to have more power in decision-making" and "Go to the local level, go to the local community and local government. Listen to their needs, see the resources they have, and be like them."

Relational practices include partnerships, bridging different actors or policy areas, and translating ideas across these areas. Attendees partner with others to gain access in conflict settings, to coordinate, and to cooperate in implementation. They bridge to their connections to help strengthen capacity, build trust, maintain communications with like-minded organisations as well as with authorities and stakeholders. They translate by learning the donors' language and striking a balance between donor and affected community expectations.

Voice strategies include coalescing with other groups to collectively advocate for issues, advocating on behalf of refugees to governments, advocating for direct access to donors and lobbying and advocating with community leaders to promote change.

Attendees engage in **learning** to share experiences, obstacles, and solutions; conduct analyses, mapping exercise and data collection for evidence-based programs and advocacy; and work with academic institutions to benefit from expertise.

Unsurprisingly, these strategies changed dramatically during the COVID pandemic era. In response to question 2, attendees overwhelmingly indicated **technology**, **adaptability** and **localisation** were the top strategies used to provide humanitarian assistance. **Technology** was used to maintain and establish networks, share information, and continue dialogue with communities and partners. Technology also enabled remote work, remote program management, and working through online platforms. Many attendees transitioned to and adopted fintech, electronic payment systems (including for cash voucher assistance) and digitisation of interactions with vendors.

Attendees also noted that donors and partner organisations adopted more flexible practices, enabling the use of adaptive solutions. Attendees also adopted new ways of

working such as door to door aid delivery, urban sustainable gardening, and more sustainable responses. Technology was also used to conduct trainings on-line, gather data and minimise unnecessary travel which saved time and resources.

Finally, attendees indicated that COVID enabled the use of **localisation** strategies by putting more trust in community leaders and volunteers to deliver assistance, promoting community-based initiative and leadership, developing community capacity, and engaging with the state to assess needs and share information.

We received the fewest responses to question 3, this might be due to time constraints.

Attendees overwhelmingly noted **voice** as the primary strategy of resistance, followed by **relational practices** and **localisation**. In terms of **voice**, attendees referred to the hierarchical nature of the global aid system and inequalities in power, they suggested "global aid system is very hierarchical and challenging to overcome. Wins can come from advocacy, public communication of problems - media pressure can sometimes work." Voice is exercised at multiple levels, global, regional, national and community and often involves negotiation for better operating conditions. The **relational strategies** emphasize partnerships and collaborations with local actors, communities, and peers, as a means of increasing social capital. Finally, attendees discussed **localisation** strategies to deliver aid "outside the formal system" and increasingly see local actors as necessary and powerful partners.

Panel discussion

This was followed by a panel session entitled Innovative solutions to bypass obstacles and constraints. This session was moderated by Dr. Hanna A Ruszcyk (Post-Doctoral Research Associate, Department of geography, Durham university). The panelists included

Juliet Parker, Director, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), Smurti Patel, founder Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) and member of the International Convening Committee of Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP), Nannet Antequisa, Executive Director, Ecosystems work for essential benefits (ECOWEB) Philippines, Takeshi Komino, Vice President, Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network (ADRRN), Sudhanshu Singh, Founder and CEO Humanitarian Aid International (HAI).

In her remarks Juliet Parker laid out the fact that despite unprecedented crisis and increasing crises the world over, the humanitarian sector has been responding to more crisis than ever before, reaching more people than ever before, and that the sector as a whole is learning and growing. There is for instance increasing evidence the Cash and voucher systems are being used to improve education, health and livelihoods. One fifth of all assistance today is cash based. *The system is anticipatory, faster and has mechanisms to encompass more partnerships. Evidence indicates that narratives are changing and that there is a shift in the mindset, language and perceptions within the sector. These are indicators of improvement.* Indicators of the constant evolution of the humanitarian space. Similarly, localisation and debates related to similar issues have become more mainstream, and there is a visible increase in the representation of smaller southern NGO in international forums and other key spaces.

Organisations are also actively implementing safeguarding and protection mechanisms, and there is greater inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups such as people with

disabilities, LGBTI and women. She underlined that there is still a lot that needs to change and in her perspective the system is moving slowly towards that change.

Smruti Patel in her conversation focused on certification mechanisms, specifically localised certification mechanisms. Her remarks specifically looked at *global certification mechanisms which are geared towards large INGOS and tend to be ill suited for small national NGOs, both in terms of scope, and costs*. She provided examples of localised certification systems in Uganda, where quality assurance and accountability processes were based on a national certification system developed, and implemented by local and national NGOs, that not only was suited for purpose, but was in tune with the specificities of the national situation and strengthened collaboration between national NGOs.

Nannet Antequisa spoke about empowering partnership models. Antequisa spoke about her experiences and those of her organisation in *strengthening and empowering local and national NGOs through making tools and skills which amplifies their voices and also gives the communities more agency*. She underlined if there were more resources at the community level, then disaster preparedness and recovery would be much faster. She provided examples from the Philippines where a empowered and strengthened local response in coordination with local governments meant that communities were able to recover quicker and more importantly have done that on their own strengths. People and communities are not victims but are survivors. These models should be supported with flexible, long term multi-year programming. These models also allow for greater accountability and transparency. We need to innovate, build on partnerships, build trust and collaboration.

Having shared vision will allow you to navigate through difficult times when the partnership gets tested and leads to an inclusive "we" approach.

Takeshi Komino

Takeshi Komino spoke of his experience in working with the private sector in Japan in strengthening and expanding the humanitarian system in Japan. Japan is well known for its meticulous preparedness for disasters, and its reliance on technological advancements. It should be noted that in Japan the private sector plays a big role as well. Komino spoke about partnering with Japan Conservation Engineers, co. Ltd which is a technical firm on DRR and works closely with both central and prefectural governments. With their involvement, CWS was able to synergize technical elements of DRR with community empowerment approach and expanded programs to Afghanistan. Pakistan, Vietnam and Indonesia. This has led to the establishment of ADRRN Innovation hub.

There are two success elements for this partnership.

Shared Vision: Partners have different backgrounds and there are both good and bad times in the partnership. Having shared vision will allow you to navigate through even in difficult times when the partnership gets tested and leads to an inclusive "we" approach.

Exit plan: It is fine to have different exit plan as strategies for each of the stake holders.

Investing into the process is important. Komino encouraged donors to move away from call for proposal approach and invest towards the process so that many more organisations can forge cross-sectoral partnerships.

Sudhanshu Singh spoke about the difficulties and challenges he faced in starting a new NGO in the global south and gaining credibility in an environment that is dominated by large INGOs. He argued that a way to overcome some of these challenges was building social capital of shared values and resources that allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose. He spoke about how he was able to connect with volunteers and raise resources through crowd funding.

Building social capital of shared values and resources allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose

Conclusion

There were a few questions towards the end and as time was rather limited the discussions were constrained. However, there was a lively discussion amongst participants during the breaks.

Marvin Parvez, Regional Director Community World Service Asia closed the conference with his vote of thanks and underlining the criticality of hope. The conference had sparked questions and fired the imaginations of those that attended. More importantly, as Marvin Parvez opined "*this conference has opened a portal of thought that looks beyond the restrictions and the barriers, to imagine beyond despair.*"

Annex 1

AGENDA

Beyond Despair
Regional Humanitarian Conference

Bangkok

December 9 2022

Time	Session
9:30- 9:45	**Welcome and introduction**
	Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre
	Director of the Humanitarian Action Initiative(HAI)
	Associate Professor of international Affairs,
	The George Washington University
	Palwashay Arbab
	Head of communications/gender justice focal point
	Community World Serivce Asia
9:45 -10-50	
	1. **Brief Overview of structural barriers**
	Micheal Barnett
	Professor of International Affairs and Political Science
	Elliot School of International Affairs
	George Washington University
	2. **Innovative Solutions to by-pass obstacles and constraints**
	Moderator: Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre
	Breakout into to small groups
10:50-11:00	Coffee Break

11:50- 12:00	**Panel Session: Survival Strategies**
	Panelists: Juliet Parker, Director, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)
	Smurti Patel, founder Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) and member of the International Convening Committee of Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP),
	Nannet Antequisa, Executive Director, Ecosystems work for essential benefits (ECOWEB) Philippines,
	Takeshi Komino, Vice President, Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Network (ADRRN),
	Sudhanshu Singh, Founder and CEO Humanitarian Aid International (HAI).
	Moderator: Hanna A Ruszyk
	Department of Geography
	Durham University
11:50-12:00	**Wrap up and Closing**
	Marvin Parvez
	Regional Director, Community World Service Asia