



Humanitarian Futures Toolkit

Introduction

Contents

Overview	3
Introduction.....	5
Section I: The Humanitarian Capacities Challenge.....	7
Section II: Barriers to Effective Strategic Planning.....	9
Section III: Planning from the Future	11
Section IV: The Humanitarian Futures Toolkit in Context	13

Overview

Today, those with humanitarian and emergency roles and responsibilities find themselves stretched and challenged to respond to the scale, scope and changing nature of crisis events, generated by natural and man-made hazards. Disasters and emergencies will continue to grow in magnitude and frequency, driven to a great extent by increasingly interconnected, complex and fast changing global, technological, socio-economic and geopolitical factors.

Humanitarian organisations and practitioners may naturally find themselves confronting these challenges by trying to draw lessons from the past. Yet, in light of today's fast changing landscape, looking only to the past or the present in order to understand the future will not be enough for addressing the crisis challenges of tomorrow. At issue is how humanitarian actors can ensure that their organisations are fit for that ever more complex and uncertain future. They will have to begin now to develop the mind-sets as well as the know-how in order to adapt, innovate and collaborate to deal with the future.

The world today is characterised by profound geo-political, economic, scientific, technological and social disruption and change. Depending on how these factors play out, such disruptors can influence or trigger future crisis events, major disasters and emergencies. From the consequences of cybernetic failure and artificial intelligence to misused nanotechnology, the human implications of these and a plethora of other potential threats will be further intensified by their interaction with natural hazards and conflict.

In a world in which human vulnerability and risk are forecast to be changing and increasing, characterised by both uncertainty and complexity, those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities need to have a clear idea about the societal contexts that may generate future threats and their potential consequences for humanitarian action. Being 'fit for the future' means being attuned to the global and regional contexts in which crises will increasingly occur.

Ultimately, the future of humanitarian action will depend on understanding the kinds of challenges¹ which societies will face in the longer-term and being able to mobilise a range of experts and expertise for managing such humanitarian challenges and building resilience.



Organisations that are likely to thrive in the future will be those that are capable of long-term thinking, anticipating future crises threats and sufficiently adaptive to be able to respond to even unanticipated threats.



¹ World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2016, UNOCHA

Introduction

*The **Humanitarian Futures Toolkit [HFT]** is designed to provide humanitarian organisations with measures to strengthen their ability to deal with increasingly complex and uncertain humanitarian crises. The Toolkit comprises four tools, each supported by Tip Sheets and Annexes, and each providing an alternative approach to help **Plan from the Future**.*

- ***Futures Roundtable Exercise (FRE)** uses a roundtable format to bring senior level humanitarian decision makers and policy planners together with natural and social scientists in order to develop global portraits of the future, and to consider the sorts of organisational transformations that must be taken now to deal with that future.*
- ***Testing the Future Exercise (TFE)** is a two-day exercise designed for an organisation's departments. It is targeted at those with roles in operational planning, in-country programme support, learning and development. The exercise encourages participants to reflect on a changing crisis landscape and to explore the types of organisational capacities required to identify and deal with future humanitarian crises.*
- ***Ferghana Valley Scenario Exercise (FVSE)**, through a series of evolving scenarios, explores methods for assessing and utilising the 'value-added' and comparative advantages of different types of organisation – the private, military and humanitarian sectors – for dealing with complex crises. In so doing it explores effective cross-sector collaboration.*
- ***Organisational Self-Assessment Tool (OSAT)** is a questionnaire intended for individuals at senior and middle management levels to assess their own and their organisations' capacities to meet the challenges of the future.*

To understand more fully the potential value of the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit* for those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities, it is important to put the toolkit in perspective. An appreciation of the changing dimensions and dynamics of crisis drivers is one such perspective; a second concerns the implications on those humanitarian organisations that are determined to respond effectively to these changes; and the third is what organisations need to do now to prepare for change in an ever more complex and uncertain future.

These perspectives explain the structure of the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit Introduction* that follows:

Section I: *The Humanitarian Capacities Challenge* focuses on the rationale for organisations to begin now to prepare for the future, or, in other

words, to reflect on the “what might be’s”.

Section II: *Barriers to Effective Strategic Planning*. Present organisational limitations, however, inhibit in various ways the foresight and flexibility so essential when it comes to dealing with such plausible futures.

Section III: *Planning from the Future* proposes five specific measures that organisations need to consider to prepare for the future.

Section IV: *The Humanitarian Futures Toolkit in Context* reflects on how the previous sections relate to the purposes and specific objectives of each of the tools in the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit*.

The rationale, perspectives and substance of the Humanitarian Futures Toolkit emerged from extensive research, analysis and experimentation over a ten-year period at King’s College, London’s Humanitarian Futures Programme. The tools in the toolkit have been tested and used by a wide range of organisations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States, various government agencies in Africa, South East Asia, South America and the United States, the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and a range of non-governmental organisations, including the United Kingdom’s Start Network.

The Humanitarian Futures Toolkit had been compiled in 2017 by Joanne Burke and Randolph Kent, with the assistance of Charlotte Stone.

Section I: The Humanitarian Capacities Challenge

The types of factors, or drivers, that lead to humanitarian crisis, their dimensions and dynamics, will rapidly increase, in some instances exponentially. The interface between natural hazards and technology may well lead to ever more deadly and disruptive crises, and these may increasingly be linked to an expanding range of conflicts.

Technology, as a potential crisis driver as well as a source of opportunity, may continue to be one of the most transformative factors in the foreseeable future. It may well offer the promise of economic progress for billions in emerging and developed economies at a speed that would have been unimaginable without the Internet. Paradoxically, at the same time, it poses hazards that can trigger disasters and emergencies of possibly unparalleled proportions.



One concern is the prospect of cybernetic failure. On the one hand, the positive and transformative impacts of ‘the internet of all things’ are many. The spectrum of applications across the globe

from remittance transfers, mobile phones and crop monitoring to financial and market transactions, warehouse codes, medical functions, regulatory authority and the media – have all become cyber dependent. On the other hand, disruption of the cyber net could result in societal collapse, threatening the viability of government, rural as well as urban infrastructures and economic systems. Deteriorating humanitarian conditions such as conflict, anarchy, mass displacement and deep poverty could also have grave humanitarian consequences.



Outer space, too, for all the opportunities and resources that it may offer, has been identified as a source of potential conflicts. For example, as cybernetic systems and energy sources become increasingly dependent upon outer space, competition for dominance could well lead to violent conflicts of interest. In a related vein, it could also result in the hegemony of a few states over those who lack outer space capacities. Here, too, the stranglehold of technology could threaten the survival of

social and economic structures with all too evident humanitarian impacts.

These sorts of technology-driven examples are but one type of plausible risk that strategists and policy planners will need to consider. Such risks may (at the same time) also relate to factors with which they may be more familiar. Demographic factors – population increases, major population shifts and the growth of denser, ever more vulnerable urban and peri-urban populations – all are examples of factors that could lead to more complex human catastrophes. Added to all of this are the ubiquitous consequences of climate change, and those of pandemics that will spill over borders, in many instances regionally and increasingly globally. In so doing, they could create political as well as social challenges well beyond their source.

And, more and more as such complexity becomes increasingly evident, the prospect that crises rarely have finite ends will, too, become a recognised characteristic of future crises. Their fallout will most likely have effects upon afflicted populations (that may remain evident) for many years and possibly decades.

To date the sources of such longer-term threats, their consequences and ways to mitigate them are issues rarely given much attention. There is, of course, the occasional focus on catastrophic and in some instances existential threats, and there also is occasional interest in

innovations that might address such serious longer-term humanitarian threats. Yet there is rarely any consistent attention given to longer-term threats for which governments, the private sector, the broader humanitarian sector and international and non-governmental organisations as well as the media should be prepared.

None of these possible threats, however, should be regarded as predictions. They are posited as plausible, in some instances probable, but never as forecasts. They should be seen as perspectives – as *what might be's*. They are intended to test the extent to which an organisation's decision



makers and policy planners can deal with the transformative in order to ensure that their organisations have the anticipatory and adaptive ethos to deal with ever increasing complexity and uncertainty.

Section II: Barriers to Effective Strategic Planning

An organisation that promotes an ethos of anticipation and adaptation will most likely be able to handle ever more complex and uncertain crises more effectively than those that do not. None of the tools found in the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit* is intended to help organisations predict. They instead are a means to assist humanitarian organisations to assess if they have the requisite capacities to think, prepare and respond more creatively and effectively to future threats. This assumes from the outset that so-called ‘standard operating procedures’ and other deeply embedded organisational repertoires will not meet the challenges of the future.

At least four factors appear to frustrate efforts to ingrain an anticipatory and adaptive ethos into many organisations. These four all too often blind decision makers and planners to the benefits of *futures* thinking.



The first reflects the uncertainty and complexity that surrounds so many of the plausible threats and opportunities under

analysis. There is a tendency for analysts and decision makers to focus on the consequences of a single, or single set, of transformative factors when attempting to



anticipate the future. This tendency, however, ignores the reality that such factors will inevitably be part of a highly complex system of issues. It is this complexity that needs to become part of anticipatory and adaptive planning.

The second factor is the standard ‘probability–impact’ calculation. Low probability–high impact and vice versa are convenient ways to categorise, but have increasingly less relevance as complexity analysis makes all too evident.

A third factor that complicates discussions on plausible *futures* is the insistence by many institutions on evidenced-based analysis. Too rarely answered in such circumstances is the question, ‘what kind of “objectivity”?’ In a global system faced increasingly with ‘black swans and ‘flapping butterfly wings’, a dogmatic insistence on

Section III: Planning from the Future

Despite such potential barriers, there are ways to plan strategically to meet challenges posed by humanitarian crises of the future. These are not the linear models that focus on precedents and 'tried and tested' solutions and 'fixes'. They reflect alternative approaches to strategic planning based upon *planning from the future*, and which in turn suggests that:

- Strategy formulation and planning need to be seen as a dynamic, ongoing process and not as one-off outputs.
- Dealing with uncertainty and complexity requires greater efforts to develop contending scenarios that can lead to a common set of propositions.
- Greater attention must be given to horizon scanning that will reflect different assumptions about *futures* perspectives.
- Bringing together the views of a wide range of non-traditional humanitarian actors – the private sector, the military, social and scientists – broadens the scope and depth of plausible futures.
- Collaborative efforts to promote solutions to complex problems should also focus on 'problem-solving' networks, namely, representatives of different sectors that have mutual self-interests in finding solutions to complex problems.
- *Futures* lenses can be enhanced by exploring innovations and innovative practices that may not have direct humanitarian application.
- Myriad organisational constraints hinder *futures*-oriented strategic planning, even for those who recognise the importance of looking for alternative approaches. Yet, these constraints can be overcome in various ways by promoting the anticipatory and adaptive organisation.

THE ANTICIPATORY AND ADAPTIVE ORGANISATION

Organisations have to commit consciously and proactively to at least five capacities to be fit for the future, including:

- 1. anticipation**
- 2. adaptation**
- 3. new approaches to collaboration**
- 4. greater attention to innovation and innovative practices**
- 5. fostering an enabling environment to support the necessary leadership to achieve such ends.**

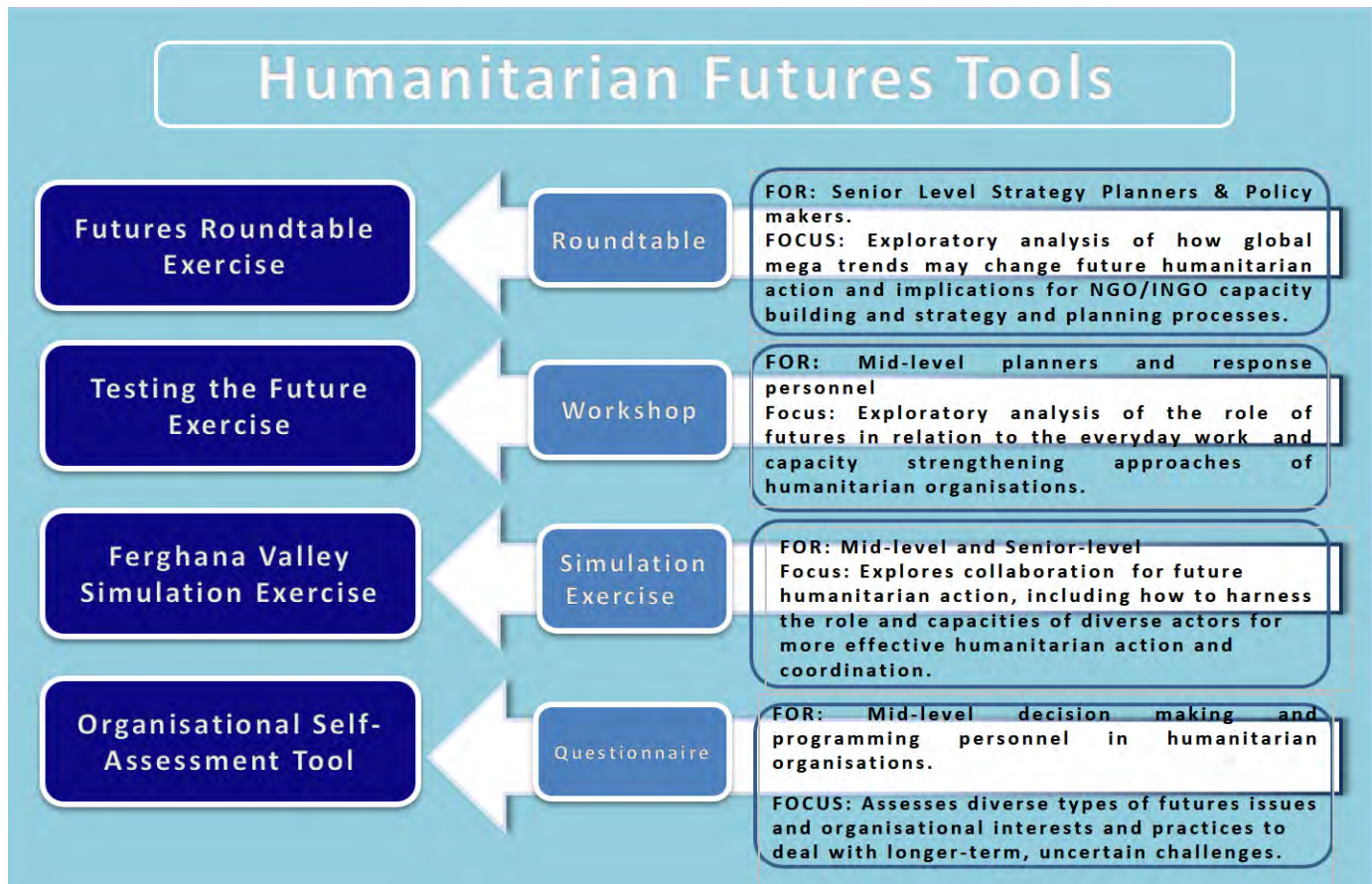
This means that organisational self-assessments are needed as a way of determining whether or not they are fit for the future.

- Greater attention must be given to longer-term, speculative analyses in order to promote effective strategic frameworks. Longer-term perspectives have the advantage of reducing bureaucratic protectionism.
- Strategies need to be seen as continuing processes, and not static products. The adaptive organisation will adjust its strategic benchmarks, supporting analyses, objectives and procedures to adapt to changing environments on an ongoing basis.
- Greater interaction between strategic and operational functions are essential for an anticipatory and adaptive organisation.
- Following examples of major Information and Communication Technology (ICT) organisations, it is essential to promote an ethos of anticipation and innovation as core organisational values.

Even for organisations deemed to be fit for the future, other means are needed to supplement or inject new ideas and ‘new ways of thinking’ that go beyond immediate concerns about institutional survival. From that perspective,

- There is a growing need to think more practically about what one means by ‘networks’ and how networks interact, directly and indirectly, with established organisations.
- Greater attention needs to be given to mobilising social networks (eg crowd-sourcing) that will feed new ideas into traditional organisations.
- Efforts should be made to create temporary, *ad hoc* consultative bodies, intended to enable competing organisations to deal together with ‘complex problems’.
- Platforms that bring together public and private sector organisations for risk reduction planning should be used to stimulate new approaches for dealing with complex crisis threats.

Section IV: The Humanitarian Futures Toolkit in Context



For those in the humanitarian sector who appreciate the challenges that lie ahead, and are determined to respond appropriately and effectively, the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit* has been designed to provide support in several ways.

Its fundamental objective is to enable those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to identify ways that they can strengthen their organisations to anticipate and respond to plausible future crises. Equally important is its recognition of the need to be sure that analyses of

future requirements and organisational capacities are part of the organisation's ethos. The four tools that follow are designed to do just that.

FUTURES ROUNDTABLE EXERCISE [FRE]

The principal objective of the FRE is to provide an opportunity for senior decision makers and policy planners to consider transformative societal change – and explore the implications of such change on strategy, policy and planning approaches within their organisation.

In the FRE, humanitarian experts meet with natural and social scientists in a two-day event to explore mega trends that are deemed likely to influence or change society in the future. These serve as the basis for the development of 'portraits of the future'. These portraits are used to explore the sorts of humanitarian crises that might result from new and possibly more complex crisis drivers.

With such portraits in mind, the humanitarian experts are asked to assess the relevance of their organisations' missions from a *futures* perspective, and then to exchange views and ideas on how to reconfigure their current approaches to organisational strategy and planning. This also includes the sorts of structures, specialisations, products and processes their organisations might require.

The value of the FRE is that it enables those in senior positions in their organisations to step away from their day-to-day managerial pressures in order to assess their organisations' overall value-added and comparative advantages as humanitarian crises become ever more complex and uncertain.



The FRE results in an exchange of views among humanitarian participants about ways to ensure that their organisations are more agile and adaptive to anticipate *the what might be's*. They should leave with a sense of a strategic perspective and organisational options that can deal with future humanitarian crises and opportunities.

TESTING THE FUTURE EXERCISE [TFE]

The TFE is designed primarily to introduce participants to the inter-relationship between longer-term future perspectives and types of organisational capacities required to deal with them. It involves two linked meetings, the first for a half day, the second for a full day.

Normally intended for one organisation, the TFE is generally designed for those at



departmental level, involved in operational planning and response, resource mobilisation, communications and in-country support, learning and development.

The two linked meetings are held at least two weeks apart. In the first, a facilitator normally puts forward a series of plausible

futures and transformative factors that are likely to influence or change society in the future. Participants then explore the crisis and humanitarian implications of a changing global and societal context. The first meeting allows participants to speculate about ways to think about the future and future crisis events.

The substance of this first meeting should be given time to gestate in the minds of the participants before they return for the second meeting. This meeting focuses on the organisational implications of a changing societal and crisis landscape. It seeks to generate discussion on the sorts of measures participants would like to see their organisation pursue to prepare for and address future humanitarian crises.

The second meeting introduces five capacities a *futures-oriented* organisation should have – *anticipation, adaptation, collaboration, innovation and leadership* – and explores how an organisation can enhance those capacities.

Participants discuss their organisation's present approaches for dealing with complex change, and explore the sorts of adjustments that would enhance their own and their organisation's abilities to deal with such change.

The *Testing the Future Exercise Guide* is designed as a resource package that will assist hosts and facilitators to organise and conduct the exercise.

FERGHANA VALLEY SCENARIO EXERCISE (FVSE)

The FVSE is intended to have participants consider one of the most challenging issues that will arise when it comes to dealing with humanitarian crises in the

future, namely, ways to ensure effective collaboration.

The intention of the FVSE is to explore a range of capacities from non-traditional humanitarian actors – including social networks, community-based organisations as well as governments, private sector organisations and the military – that can prevent, mitigate and respond to humanitarian crises.



The specific objectives of the exercise are to:

1. Identify those capacities that can strengthen humanitarian action.
2. Determine the extent to which different 'languages' of participants (eg professional concepts, terminology and objectives) pose constraints in identifying such capacities.
3. Itemise participants' respective value-added and comparative advantages when it comes to humanitarian action.
4. Agree on mechanisms by which the exercise results can be reviewed, improved and implemented.

The 1½ day simulation exercise will involve representatives from a range of sectors concerned with longer-term strategic planning and strategy – the military, the private sector, and governmental, inter-governmental and

non-governmental organisations. The outputs from the FVSE will include an innovative tool for developing effective engagement across key sectors required for humanitarian action, and also a data portal model that can be used to provide a multi-sector, interactive catalogue of capacities, innovations and approaches to strengthen humanitarian action at community, national and regional levels.

ORGANISATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL [OSAT]

The OSAT is based on a questionnaire format, designed for upper and middle management to explore the:

1. Types of longer-term humanitarian threats which respondents identify.
2. Levels of interest and importance demonstrated by respondents' organisations to look to the longer-term.
3. Types of capacities, if any, the organisation presently has to focus on the longer-term.
4. Types of capacities that respondents' organisations deemed necessary to enhance their *futures* perspectives.

The questions, broadly speaking, are divided into different types. The first provides a list of possible threats that could lead to large-scale humanitarian crises over a two-decade period. Participants are then asked to suggest the probability of occurrence for each of these threats, their possible impact and the overall importance that they should have for their organizations.

Stemming from the focus on future threats and their relevance to participants' organisations is a deeper exploration of the ways in which participants believe that such threats are reflected in their

organisations' current policies, in their operational work and their staffs' skills, equipment and resources.

The OSAT questionnaire, found in the *Humanitarian Futures Toolbox*, takes 30 minutes per person. Essential for those organizing the OSAT is the need to ensure adequate time and resources to interpret the OSAT's findings.

The OSAT can be used as a stand-alone tool or in conjunction with the organisation of a Futures Roundtable exercise, the Testing the Future Exercise or the Ferghana Valley Simulation Exercise.

A GUIDE TO THE TOOLKIT

Each of the 'tools' in the *Humanitarian Futures Toolkit* has been developed for specific purposes and audiences. Having a clear understanding of the individual exercise's objectives and outputs is essential. For that reason, the description of every tool begins with a discussion about purpose and intended outputs.



The tools do not require facilitators to be external experts, for example, in *futures*



analysis and organisational behaviour. That said, users of the tools can always decide if a specialist would be helpful when using a specific tool.

Each tool has its own specific guidance which takes an organiser or host through every stage of the process. This includes a Reference Guide with detailed instructions that require further explanation, and 'Tip Sheets' for each phase of an exercise or activity. These tip sheets are linked into on-line texts.

The FRE and TFE tools also include Annexes that provide such details as sample meeting agendas, participant hand-outs and sample presentations. Links to online resources that are located within the **Humanitarian Futures** website are also provided in the Annexes or listed in each Exercise Guide.

<https://www.humanitarianfutures.org>

Every effort has been made to make each of the tools not only useful, but accessible. Nevertheless, you may have questions or require additional support. If that is the case, do not hesitate to contact either: Joanne Burke [burkej777@gmail.com] or Randolph Kent [Randolph.kent@kcl.ac.uk]