

## **Multilateralism in Crisis: A Historical Perspective**

### **Background paper for Nuffield Humanitarian Forum 18 March 2026**

#### **Background**

Current concerns about the perceived crisis facing the multilateral system of global governance that has prevailed since the end of WW II include fears that concerted international efforts to make the world a better and fairer place for all may be a thing of the past – at least for the time being. It therefore behoves us to look closely at that past, and to ask whether there have been moments in recent history when the world faced a similar set of challenges to the philosophy and practice of ‘aid’ (defined as the nexus of emergency relief and longer-term development assistance), and if so, how – and how successfully - these challenges were confronted. Our primary focus is on the system for relief and development, but that cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider multilateral system.

Attempts to address problems of effectiveness in any sphere, including the aid sector, often home in on structural or institutional solutions, without sufficiently addressing questions of principles, policy, and practice. Without clarity of purpose and approach, organisational restructuring is unlikely to deliver benefits. At a time when the UN system, hit by swingeing budget reductions from the US in particular but also from other traditional supporters, is attempting a fundamental redesign of itself, these questions assume a particular importance.

Nor is this confined to the UN, but to the entire architecture comprising bilateral (state) aid donors, other multilateral bodies such as the EU and other regional associations, major philanthropic foundations, international and national NGOs, and even multinational corporations. Both funders and deliverers of aid need to ask themselves what they are trying to achieve, how they can best work together to do so, and (only then) what institutional arrangements might best facilitate this.

To help answer these questions, we are looking at four periods from post-WW II history where the aid system has faced equally demanding questions: not necessarily as a result of the same factors – we would argue that these are almost certainly specific to any one period – but certainly appearing equally existential at the time. How was the crisis perceived, how was it analysed, to what extent were commonly agreed remedies possible, what were they, and how successfully were they implemented?

#### **Four Periods of Recent History**

The four periods we are examining are:

1. The time towards and immediately after the end of WW II, where the work of UNRRA foreshadowed the creation of the UN and its associated bodies, e.g. the Bretton Woods institutions.
2. The late-60s and early-70s crisis in development and the Big Surveys that were triggered, including the best known of them, the Pearson Report.
3. The post-1991 decade, when liberal interventionism briefly held sway in what with the benefit of hindsight we can see was a relatively brief ‘unipolar moment’.

4. The period following 9/11, when security gradually came to predominate over development, and the links between the two were poorly understood and acted upon, leading to the present era of renewed great power competition and the attrition of both national and international norms of e.g. human rights and sovereignty.

### Four Major Challenges

A preliminary workshop was held in November 2025 at Nuffield College, bringing together a selected group of academic researchers and aid practitioners. Some of the inputs to that workshop are attached as 'provocations' ahead of the Nuffield Humanitarian Forum meeting on 18 March 2026. The rest of this note seeks to articulate the major issues emerging from the workshop discussion that define the intellectual and practical challenges that need to be addressed at the Forum.

The **first major challenge** is that we need to be clear about the nature of the current crisis. It is not comparable to the devastation at the end of the six years of WW II that gave not only urgency to, but also broad initial ownership and acceptance of, the task faced by UNRRA. Although the latter was to an extent a Western, liberal, project, a broader political will existed that allowed it not only to carry out its short-term role but also to pave the way for the founding of the UN. In that early phase, UNRRA was in a sense able to act as the 'Red Cross' of the system, its mandate understood and accepted by all to the extent that it could undertake without serious contestation a number of delicate and potentially divisive activities (such as repatriation and resettlement).

UNRRA was, of course, quite a short-lived experiment: one that was very much caught up in early Cold War politics. However, it was also able - to a limited yet not insignificant degree - to transcend them, or at least to not get consumed by them, and as such its history may still offer important lessons for the present day. Importantly, the late-1940s and early-1950s also saw other key developments in the realm of aid, not least the striking growth of charities and other non-governmental organisations triggered by the war. Reflecting this coming together of state- and non-state action in the field of aid, the creation of a hierarchy of civil society organisations "in consultative status" with ECOSOC also dates from this period.

Throughout the deadlock of the Cold War period, the UN struggled to perform a neutral role. Indeed, it was heavily attacked at times, and by all sides, for not being neutral enough. Its nascent human rights pillar was almost paralysed (in an investigative and enforcement sense of that word) by Cold War rivalry, and because the UN Charter bore so many of the hallmarks of the Atlantic Charter that preceded it. However, unlike its predecessor the League of Nations, the UN never allowed itself to be captured by a single political bloc, and in that sense it was (and arguably has always remained) the closest thing to a recognisably genuine instrument of global governance the world has ever enjoyed.

Indeed, in spite of the constraints, a surprising number of UN Conventions were drawn up and ratified during this time, from the Genocide and Refugee Conventions and Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, through the Conventions on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, on Civil and Political Rights, on Ending Discrimination Against Women, and on the Rights of the Child. Nor should one overlook the Geneva Conventions of 1948 and especially the Additional Protocols of 1977, although behind the adoption of the latter lies a

tale of often bitter contestation between North and South, in the context of the wars of liberation in Africa especially.

It is hard to claim that in 2025 the UN enjoys the same moral authority. There is precious little talk of “We the Peoples”, and the organisation is more frequently spoken of by its members in the third, rather than the first, person. Since the 1990s unilateralism has increasingly prevailed over multilateralism, despite the emergence of potentially powerful instruments such as The Responsibility to Protect, and the adoption of the MDGs/SDGs.

One might have hoped that the contemporary crises such as those we see in Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, or the DRC might have galvanised a collective response such as UNRRA and its successor bodies were mandated to deliver. Although the idea of ‘compassion fatigue’ is often exaggerated, and international NGOs continue to enjoy impressive levels of public support that allows them to respond to humanitarian crises, the degree of intergovernmental collaboration needed to respond decisively to end conflicts and bring peace, is lacking.

The failure to stop the suffering of civilians is a grim reminder of how far back the sense of collective responsibility has slipped since even the relatively recent days when the Security Council passed Resolutions committing states to respond when such protection was urgently needed. Even the Ukraine crisis, closer to home for Europeans at least, has failed to deliver an unequivocal international response to the most flagrant recent breach of the principles of the UN Charter, not to mention international humanitarian law.

The **second challenge**, therefore, is to confront the difficult question of the extent to which the current crisis is one of Western hubris - of the delusions of the 1990s and earlier coming home to roost – or one that is recognised across the global community as calling for a collective response. Certainly, the West bears its share of responsibility for the falling away of support for collective international action, even if its interventions have usually been well-intentioned. For example, its enthusiastic embrace during the 1990s of the notion of ‘humanitarian intervention’, despite the lack of support from China and Russia, and the often strongly expressed opposition from the G77, has in the long run weakened support for collective action to combat egregious violations of human rights.

However, assumptions that the collapse of the system would suit those who would challenge Western hegemony may be misplaced. On the contrary, a multilateral system always benefits those who are not the dominant power, because to some extent it dilutes the latter’s influence. But there is still a struggle to be had over how the system is designed and operates, and the demands of, especially, India and China for more say in both appear at once legitimate and irresistible.

What, therefore, is the common ground that might allow the world’s major powers to work together to restore a sense of common purpose? One obvious answer is the climate emergency facing the planet, but even that is contested by some of those whose active engagement is most needed. How can that hurdle be overcome?

The **third challenge** is whether we need to find a new way of understanding what our ‘international system’ actually is, and what must happen if it is to work better. Certainly, those in greatest need but with the least voice – local communities in less-favoured nations - want to see something less top-down and more empowering, whence the debate about



'localisation', even though the very use of that self-referential term itself speaks to the problem. Is it an illusion to think that we have had a functioning model over the last 80 years; have we allowed an understandable desire for the best to become the enemy of the good?

It may be more helpful to acknowledge that rather than an 'international system', what we actually have is a 'system of systems', where there are important ideological and other differences between the different components parts, and where the key challenge is to ensure that these do not cause the system as a whole to fail. Such a 'system of systems' is necessarily composed of a diversity of entities; to be effective it needs to be malleable and multifunctional, and no one actor or set of actors can be allowed to dominate – which is not to say that there should not be effective accountability and control mechanisms.

However, to the extent that the different parts of the system are co-dependent, it becomes extremely difficult for one part of it to reform itself in isolation from everyone else. How many of the reforms an individual organisation might wish to undertake are ultimately dependent upon wider reforms to a multilateral system which seems to be in a real state of crisis, and how many could proceed regardless? How far is any major international humanitarian organisation really, in the current moment, the author of its own fate? To what extent does it find itself trapped by a crisis in a wider multilateral system, of which it is only one key part?

It has become a truism to say that every crisis is also an opportunity: "never waste a good crisis", as Churchill is reputed to have said in the context of setting up the UN; "only a crisis - real or perceived – produces real change", as Milton Friedmann put it. It is also a favourite saw of management consultants that if you want to change an organisation "first create a crisis".

The period covered by our study includes examples where this worked (even if the crisis was involuntary, rather than engineered!): the ICRC after its humiliation in the Biafran War, the emergence of the global social reform movement after the development failures of the late 1960s and early 1970s: the 'New International Economic Order', the shift in development thinking away from industrialisation to poverty reduction, the major reports of the 1970s such as "The Limits to Growth" and "North-South: A Programme for Survival" (The Brandt Report). But if the ICRC eventually managed to regain the moral high ground, the 1970s unfortunately remained, as Henry Kissinger argued, a decade of lost opportunities.

The **fourth and final challenge**, therefore, and arguably the most important, is to be able to identify the ingredients that were missing from previous attempts to 'reform the system', in the hope that this understanding can be useful now. Here we repeat our assertion that the solution cannot be a purely technocratic one, or it will simply be a case of moving the deckchairs on the Titanic. If we have, collectively but especially as an aid community, 'lost the moral contract', the challenge is to forge a new moral endeavour. If that sounds grandiose, it did not stop the true social pioneers of the past from sticking their necks out: figures such as Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton, founders of Save the Children; Barbara Ward, pivotal figure in the organisation of the Pearson Commission; Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC, the world's largest NGO, to name but a few.

But charismatic leadership, although essential, is not enough to address a problem as globally complex as the one we face now. We must recognise that a major reason why reform is required in the 2020s is because of unprecedented funding cuts, whereas for much

of the 80-year history of an international humanitarian system reform was about dealing with the consequences of growth and/or lobbying for that growth. It is a lot easier to grow an organisation or a system than it is to slim it down. So, arguably, we are in quite uncharted waters. Whatever we do this time will of necessity be quite different from what has gone before, and calls for a kind of leadership that state and non-state actors, from East and West, North and South, are willing to accept.

### Three Key Questions

One can perhaps express the above analysis in three key questions:

1. Will genuine system reform even be possible without some sort of scale back, and a recognition that it might be time to focus on a smaller number of (less controversial) issues, around which states/aid donors can more readily coalesce?
2. What might be the great galvanising issue or issues of the twenty-first century, that enable wealthy states to defend spending on ODA to their (supposedly sceptical) publics?
3. Do we have to reconcile ourselves to a narrow view of the international arena as a place where states' commitment to cooperation is simply a pursuit of their own individual interests? Or is there a future for "internationalism", viz., a belief that many of the world's problems are truly shared problems, and thus require a more collective commitment to their resolution?

### Conclusion

A final thought. There is often a long lead time between the birth of an idea and its execution. The concept of the Responsibility to Protect, mentioned above, was conceived in the late 1990s and emerged in 2001 - just as the fall of the Twin Towers sealed its fate. Although it was eventually adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005, its moment had already passed. But, by the same token, it is 'always darkest before the dawn'. Could it be that out of this very dark moment in our history something good is about to emerge, and can we increase the chances of that happening?

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12 March 2026