

REDEFINING HADR *ESTABLISHING INCORPORATED ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS*

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"Homo sapiens now rivals the great forces of nature. Humanity is a prime driver of change of the Earth system."¹

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), provides a structural framework of response to events and incidents which perpetuate large scale infrastructure and institutional failings. Across the world, we are witnessing an increase of such incidents as a result of climate change and environmental degradation, significant urban population inflations, rising tensions and conflicts – internal and external -, and the transition into a more globalized world through which knowledge and information is spread at rapid rates; resisting traditional spatial restraints. *Water* is establishing itself as resource of crucial significance, its value being registered as a source of energy, sovereignty and dominance; continuing to seep into international relations driving cooperation and conflict.



"The erosional forces of the sea and wind along the coast continuously mould the landscape, together with the huge amounts of silt and other sediments, deposited in the countless estuaries, visible in the water. Distinct throughout the image, the network of these estuaries, tidal rivers and creeks, criss-crossed by numerous channels, enclose flat, densely forested, marshy islands and agricultural plots"²

HADR does not exist as a standardized model, insofar that the event or incident it acts in response to is similarly not uniform in nature. In response to a recent publication which examines how "various developments are indeed highlighting the linkage between water and peace" (Chellaney 2011: 1), this paper will endeavour to configure the rhetoric on water within new theories and scopes in HADR.

I want to briefly touch upon the anthropological understanding of what a disaster is. Social sciences, in particular anthropology, often talk about the human and natural systems in their unified totality; conflating "all natural, modified, and constructed features" (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). Naming states of fragility and vulnerability helps to establish a categorizing of social and ecological conditions but also acts as a commentary on

¹ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2120951-simple-equation-shows-how-human-activity-is-trashing-the-planet/>

² <http://spaceref.com/earth/earth-from-space-sundarbans-bangladesh.html>

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social and technological basis in terms of how and to what extent humans are able to respond to disaster events (Bankoff 2001 & Klinenberg 2001). Strömberg (2007) spends time theorizing over how knowledge of social factors can help to establish trajectorial comprehension of disaster impact and how, joined with cultural and geopolitical perceptions, the development of assistance and response can both enable and restrict suffering (Strömberg 2007). In terms of environmental security, Barry Buzan perceives it as the “maintenance of the local and the planetary biosphere as the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend” (Buzan 1991: 433); supporting conceptions of dynamic response mechanisms based on environmental, political and societal cooperation (Swanstrom 2010: 41).

The transitional quality of the present world is reconfiguring perceptions of social and natural security. As the world has developed, new forms of security threats have precipitated into our social systems and branch laterally across nations and continents (Buzan 1991: 450-451). We must now expand upon our understandings of these potential hazards, and build more sophisticated frameworks for perceiving the ever-present overlaps and interactions between traditional and non-traditional security threats (Swanström 2010). Of all the risks, climate change is rapidly becoming a major threat and many thinkers now consider this phenomenon to be of significant global and ‘transcendent’ (Swanström 2010: 450) proportion. In the *Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies Policy Brief* titled “Security implications of climate change: A case study of Bangladesh”, the interconnected nature of climate change is highlighted through causal analysis of coastal and water vulnerabilities and potential insecurities around food, health, industry and habitation (NTS 2013). The complex nexus is driving an ideological shift in how we comprehend climate threat towards more “carefully sequenced, layered, and integrated interventions” (IRIN); a process which is grounded in understanding water flows and ecological systems which shape nations and effect transnational relations.

In striving for a HADR framework which draws information from the eco system, humans not only assert a spatio-temporal perspective, but further enable themselves to respond to transitional and translocal threat potentials. In a recent roundtable on HADR, key actors and critical thinkers in Bangladesh utilized the flow of waters to

Sources:

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Chellaney, B. (2011). *Water: Asia's new battleground*. Georgetown University Press.
Ghazi, T.W., & Muniruzzaman, A.N.M., & Singh, A.K. (2016). Climate Change & Security in South Asia. *Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change*, no.2.
Hoffman, S.M., & Oliver-Smith, A. (2002). Introduction. Hoffman, S.M., & Oliver-Smith, A. (Ed.), *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*. Sante Fe: School of American Research Press.

emphasize the risk of evolving nuclear contamination and health pandemics. Natural contamination of water has impacted the national health of Bangladesh in the past; for example, numerous studies published online shows how high levels of arsenic have been found in groundwater sources nationwide; showing numbers of up to 80 million affected³. With reference to the naming of the Tibetan Plateau as ‘the Water Tower of Asia’ - which supplies 40% of the world’s population with fresh water and stands as an expression of cultural tradition and biodiversity (GMACCC 2016) – the developing water insecurities following the planned hydro infrastructure projects in northern countries will inevitably have a negative secondary effect on water degradation in Bangladesh and other low lying countries⁴. Further to this, Brahma Chellaney’s book, “Water: Asia’s New Battleground”, speculates over how “intercountry disputes and geopolitical competition over transboundary basin resources actually pose a greater threat to peace and stability in a continent already troubled by festering territorial and resource disputes” (Chellaney 2011: 3). These two examples highlight the need for tenacity within HADR to be aware of how hazards and threats can develop internally, and how trans-local engagements shouldn’t be understood as outside national interests.

To quote the writing of Anna Tsing, an established anthropologist, and to tie in themes of interconnection as mentioned in the NTS report, Tsing uses the rhetoric of “world-making flows” (Tsing 2000: 327) to capture the transitional qualities of our globalized world; not only in terms of the ecosystem, but also taking into account capital, communication, and human flows: “These world-making flows...are not just interconnections but also the recording of channels and the remapping of the possibilities of geography” (Tsing 2000: 327).

We must utilize this conceptual framework of comprehending globalization and apply it to a more dynamic HADR process; developing more ‘biosphere positive’⁵ assistance models which continue to span the ‘relief to development continuum’⁶. Through grounding HADR processes in ecological systems, we will not only be better positioned to build resilience in the case of climate change but it will provide global mechanisms of cooperation which might have the potentials to build capacity against any future conflicts based on resource dominance and exploitation.

Klinenberg, E. (2001). Bodies that don’t matter: death and dereliction in Chicago. *Body & Society*, 7(2-3), 121-136.
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³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3191694>

⁴ <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/water-clouds-tibetan-plateau/p37848>

⁵ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2120951-simple-equation-shows-how-human-activity-is-trashing-the-planet/>

⁶ http://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/02/07/tackling-drought-emergency-aid-not-answer?utm_source=IRIN+-+the+inside+story+on+emergencies&utm_campaign

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