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CONVERGING HUMANITARIAN RISKS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Policy Report

May 2022

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Executive Summary

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in the Indo-Pacific have had to deal with the overlapping effects of a pandemic and natural hazards. This policy report evaluates the governance challenges faced by humanitarian actors in managing the risks of natural hazards and pandemics. It assesses the approaches to funding, partnerships, localisation, and technology use from April 2020 to March 2022 in Bangladesh, Fiji, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These countries represent South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands as the regions of the Indo-Pacific that were most affected by natural hazards while concurrently experiencing COVID-19. The pandemic is a wake-up call signalling the interconnectedness of the planet and highlights the need for countries to work together to overcome future pandemics. Disaster management and emergency response is no exception in this regard, and the risk of pandemics should be integrated into operational and strategic planning for more robust and anticipatory humanitarian responses in future. This will require proactive institutional adaptation, including investment in strategic futures teams, reflection on the past two years, identification of areas for change, and ultimately taking necessary action to be better prepared for future shocks.

Introduction

As of 18 April 2022, the coronavirus had infected close to 505 million people around the world, resulting in roughly 6 million deaths.[1] Coupled with the high frequency of natural hazards in the region, this toll has exacerbated humanitarian crises in the Indo-Pacific region. While responding to the pandemic, countries in the region continue to face pre-existing risks of natural hazards, including cyclones, typhoons, storm surges, floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.

This policy report assesses the effectiveness of disaster preparedness and response mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining disaster management in concurrent natural hazard–pandemic scenarios in Bangladesh, Fiji, Indonesia, and the Philippines during the period April 2020 to March 2022, this report highlights the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance during COVID-19 and evaluates how countries, organisations, and communities have (or have not) adapted to converging risks in the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, it explores humanitarian responses conducted following the onset of Cyclone Amphan in Bangladesh, Cyclone Harold in Fiji, the earthquake in West Sulawesi, Indonesia, and Typhoon Vongfong in the Philippines. It finds that changing dynamics in civil–military partnerships, an increased use of local networks, flexible funding, and technology use are some of the ways in which organisations have adapted. Finally, it highlights the necessity to invest in more inclusive risk management and preparedness in the Indo-Pacific.

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[1] Worldometer, "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic", https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/.

Methodology

This report is based on data and insights collected through 25 in-depth, semi-structured elite interviews with multiple stakeholders conducted from January to March 2022 and desk research. The interviewees included representatives of relevant UN agencies and humanitarian personnel from international and local humanitarian organisations working in Bangladesh, Fiji, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This research was administered under Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review Board project number IRB-2021-759. Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that in-person fieldwork was not possible. Interviews were instead conducted using online audio and video meeting platforms. The authors recognise the limitations to online interviews, which include the exclusion of those without internet access and the security concerns involved in remote engagement, such as data privacy concerns.

Converging Humanitarian Risks[2]

Millions of people in the Indo-Pacific have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, people in some parts of the region have been exposed to natural hazards. According to a report by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), from the start of the pandemic until August 2021, 154 extreme weather events affected roughly 67 million people in the Indo-Pacific, resulting in 7,000 casualties.[3] The overlapping effects of a pandemic and natural hazards compound socio-economic vulnerability.[4] This dual crisis can result in human insecurities and the need for humanitarian assistance. Of primary concern is that disaster and emergency management capacities across the region run the risk of being completely overwhelmed[5] or reliant to a significant degree on external humanitarian assistance.

Over the past two years, many established disaster preparedness and response mechanisms were interrupted by lockdowns, travel restrictions and other measures imposed to contain COVID-19.[6] Less than a month after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, the Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold devastated several countries in the Pacific, including Fiji, where more than 180,000 people had their homes and livelihoods affected. The agriculture sector was severely impacted, with widespread damage to infrastructure, schools, and health centres.[7] Efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19 resulted in intra-island mobility restrictions and limited commercial flights, which prevented the transport of aid supplies and support personnel.[8] A month later, when Typhoon Vongfong hit the Philippines, efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus meant that affected populations could not be evacuated in large numbers and evacuation centres

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[2] In finance, risk convergence is the phenomenon of outsized risk that occurs when one risk overlaps with another and then even transforms into yet another risk. In the context of humanitarian crises, we use the concept to demonstrate how overlapping biological and natural hazards can exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities among affected populations.

[3] Dan Walton, Julie Arrighi, Maarten van Aalst, and Marie Claudet, "The Compound Impact of Extreme Weather Events and COVID-19", IFRC, September 2021, https://www.ifrc.org/document/compound-impact-extreme-weather-events-and-covid-19.

[4] Christopher Chen and Alistair D. B. Cook, "Humanitarian Assistance in the Asia-Pacific during COVID-19", NTS Insight, August 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/humanitarian-assistance-in-the-asia-pacific-during-covid-19/#.YjwsvOczZPZ.

[5] UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)–Asia-Pacific, "UNDRR Asia-Pacific COVID-19 Brief: Combating the Dual Challenges of Climate-related Disasters and COVID-19", 2020, https://www.undrr.org/publication/undrr-asia-pacific-covid-19-brief-combating-dual-challenges-climate-related-disasters.

[6] UNESCAP, "Resilience in a Riskier World: Managing Systemic Risks from Biological and Other Natural Hazards — Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2021", https://www.unescap.org/kp/2021/asia-pacific-disaster-report-2021.

[7] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, "Tropical Cyclone Harold", https://www.dfat.gov.au/crisis-hub/Pages/tropical-cyclone-harold.

[8] Kayly Ober and Stefan Bakumenko, "A New Vulnerability: COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone Harold create the perfect storm in the Pacific", Refugees International, 3 June 2020. https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/6/1/a-new-vulnerability-covid-19-and-tropical-cyclone-harold-create-the-perfect-storm-in-the-pacific.

operated at half their capacity.[9] Similarly, when Cyclone Amphan approached Bangladesh, also in May 2020, the authorities had to open 14,000 evacuation centres — three times the normal number — to ensure social distancing for the estimated 2.4 million evacuees.[10] Moreover, responders were at risk of contracting the coronavirus, which impacted operational capacity. In the immediate aftermath of the 6.2 magnitude earthquake that hit West Sulawesi in January 2021, many volunteers and health workers contracted COVID-19 due to lack of personal protection equipment (PPE), overcrowding at evacuation centres that were not designed for pandemics, and poor attention to health and safety protocols.[11] These case studies highlight the strain that the pandemic has placed on national and international disaster management systems. The experiences also highlight the increasing risk that communities in the region face.

[9] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update: Typhoon Vongfong leaves trail of damage as the country grapples with the 'new normal'", UN OCHA Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update. 20 May 2020. https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/asia-pacific/card/tjXV99QVBE/.

[10] Kanupriya Kapoor, "Coronavirus compounds climate disasters but shows action can work — Red Cross", Reuters, 17 September 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/coronavirus-compounds-climate-disasters-shows-action-can-work-red-cross-2021-09-17/.

[11] Karuni Rompies, "Dozens contract COVID-19 in Sulawesi 'earthquake cluster'", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/dozens-contract-covid-19-in-sulawesi-earthquake-cluster-20210205-p5702a.html.

Humanitarian Challenges

This section outlines the main challenges faced by the humanitarian sector in responding to concurrent natural hazards–pandemic situations over the past two years.

Response Efforts

In all four countries, humanitarian response efforts were hampered by national lockdowns and movement restrictions, as well as regional and international travel restrictions. For instance, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus while still supporting people from the effects of a natural hazard, responders had to ensure social distancing in evacuation shelters.[12]

Movement restrictions curtailed international travel, which resulted in a decrease in physical deployments from staff based overseas. They also affected domestic travel by the additional time it took to obtain travel permissions, undergo tests, and observe quarantine requirements.[13] The restrictions affected the implementation of response efforts as well as ongoing recovery and rebuilding programmes from previous disasters. They created difficulties in conducting post-disaster needs assessments and maintaining feedback mechanisms previously conducted face-to-face.[14] Given that most countries across the world, including in the Indo-Pacific, mobilised their armed forces to help enforce movement controls, these experiences highlight the need to invest in building sustainable civil–military relations in order to minimise future disruptions to accessing affected populations.

Most interviewees indicated a noticeable shift from direct assistance to online assistance. In rural and remote areas, however, this shift was hampered by the local population's lack of familiarity with online platforms and/or poor internet connections. Critical infrastructure such as powerlines were also damaged during the disasters, which further complicated digitised response efforts.

Travel restrictions affected the surge capacity of humanitarian organisations as they could not second overseas staff to disaster areas, particularly in the initial stages of the pandemic in the first half of 2020.[15] The global nature of the pandemic meant that most countries had capacity challenges and no spare personnel for overseas deployments.[16] This affected the ability of organisations to rapidly and effectively scale up their usual operations to respond to the needs of affected populations.

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[12] Dan Walton, Julie Arrighi, Maarten van Aalst, and Marie Claudet. "The Compound Impact of Extreme Weather Events and COVID-19", IFRC, September 2021, https://www.ifrc.org/document/compound-impact-extreme-weather-events-and-covid-19.

[13] Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

Furthermore, humanitarian organisations needed to enhance staff safety and well-being measures. The need to ensure that staff were sufficiently protected, vaccinated, and uninfected meant that responses were more expensive and often delayed. For instance, COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test results usually took a day to come back, which meant volunteers and response personnel were unable to deploy within the usual 12-hour time frame.[17] Long working hours and online fatigue[18] also were issues as available staff found themselves overstretched.

Funding

Over the past two years, a large proportion of funding for disaster responses was channelled towards pandemic responses. One interviewee in Bangladesh identified that international humanitarian funding was targeted at the Rohingya refugee crisis and pandemic responses.[19] This compounded the impacts of natural hazards on affected populations as funding was directed elsewhere.

One major concurrent development over the past two years was the increasing use of anticipatory action measures to mitigate disaster impacts in the Indo-Pacific.[20] These involved the UN Central Emergency Fund (CERF) releasing funds for typhoon response, upon the meeting of certain thresholds,[21] to support the work of UN agencies and participating non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, the initiation of this anticipatory action effort faced significant challenges. The most notable was witnessed in the Philippines prior to Typhoon Odette making landfall in December 2021. The emergency funds were not disbursed in time through the trigger mechanism as the thresholds were not sufficiently met.[22] While this example highlights the need to fine-tune such processes, it demonstrates the current early stage of technical development for effective anticipatory humanitarian action.

Procurement and Supply Chain Management

The pandemic exposed supply chain vulnerabilities, which created challenges for humanitarian response efforts. Some organisations struggled to identify PPE suppliers at the start of the pandemic; they were also unable to procure more specialised equipment such as oxygen tanks, concentrators, and tubes.[23]

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Due to an increase in the number of online meetings/engagements.
[19] Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.
[20] See, for example, Anticipatory Action Framework Philippines, 2021-2022, ReliefWeb, 15 September 2021, https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/anticipatory-action-framework-philippines-2021-2022.
[21] These are wind speed and projected damage.
[22] Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.
[23] Ibid.

One humanitarian organisation stated that it had underestimated the impact of the pandemic during the first few months of 2020. It sent 50,000 masks to a national chapter in another country, which in the following months led to a mask shortage when COVID-19 hit the country where the organisation was headquartered.[24] The increase in prices of imported goods also led to some organisations reducing the number of items in aid and care packages.[25]

Absent Strategy

Almost all our interviewees highlighted the absence of strategic planning for multi-hazards and simultaneous risk events. In the absence of such contingency plans, standard operating procedures were hastily developed on an ad hoc basis.[26] The main reason cited for the failure to plan was that pandemic response was a novelty. Most organisations had not responded to a pandemic or conducted relief efforts in a pandemic setting before. Consequently, in the initial stages of the pandemic, they simply waited for specific direction and guidelines from national governments and the World Health Organization (WHO).

A recent study indicates that public health emergency response systems remain separate from disaster response systems in the Indo-Pacific.[27] These parallel response systems created "administrative bottlenecks" and resulted in leadership, mandate, and coordination limitations.[28] Some interviewees identified policy incoherence across national ministries and at sub-national levels as a significant barrier to effective humanitarian assistance, which were reflected in inconsistencies in guidelines and coordination procedures.[29] These led to duplication of effort and inefficiencies in response efforts.

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[24] Interview with member of a humanitarian organisation.
[25] Interviews with members of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Gerald Potutan and Masaru Arakida, "Evolving Disaster Response Practices during COVID-19 Pandemic", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 6 (2021): 1–11.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.

How Organisations Adapted

This section identifies the changing dynamics of civil–military partnerships, increasing use of localised networks, flexible funding, and the use of technology as some of the ways organisations adapted from March 2020 to April 2022.

Civil–Military Partnerships

As Table 1 highlights, most of our interviewees indicated that their organisation had some form of interaction and engagement with the military in their respective countries of operation. Particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia, most international NGOs (INGOs) and local NGOs had ongoing interactions with the respective militaries. These engagements included participation in coordination meetings, joint exercises, knowledge-sharing workshops, civil–military coordination training, and mutual use of assets during response.[30] They illustrate the current dynamics of civil–military relations during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight a general trend of military involvement in disaster and pandemic response in the Indo-Pacific.

In all four countries, the military was heavily involved in maintaining lockdown protocols and controlling the movement of people. This meant that humanitarian organisations had to actively coordinate with the military in activities such as checkpoint clearances, transportation of goods and personnel between areas, and vaccination campaigns. This experience demonstrates that the military are key gatekeepers to accessing populations affected by natural hazards during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[30] Ibid.

Table 1: Degree of Interaction between Humanitarian Organisations and the Military

Organisations (Anonymised)	Military Engagement (Y/N)	If Yes, Degree of Interaction, i.e., Ongoing, Ongoing (weak)*, or New
Philippines A	Y	Ongoing
Philippines B	Y	Ongoing (weak)
Philippines C	Y	Ongoing
Philippines D	Y	Ongoing
Philippines E	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia A	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia B	Y	New
Indonesia C	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia D	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia E	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia F	Y	Ongoing
Indonesia G	Y	Ongoing
Bangladesh A	Y	Ongoing
Bangladesh B	Y	Ongoing (weak)
Bangladesh C	Y	Ongoing (weak)
Bangladesh D	Y	Ongoing (weak)
Bangladesh E	Y	Ongoing
Fiji A	N	NA
Fiji B	Yes	New
Fiji C	N	NA
Fiji D	Yes	Ongoing (weak)

* Weak denotes either no direct coordination/engagement with military or only ad hoc interaction

Reliance on Local Partners

The study found that when travel restrictions grounded the international humanitarian community, local actors, such as volunteers and local and in-country personnel, played important roles in supporting populations affected by natural hazards. All interviewees indicated that they worked more closely with implementing partners on the ground. One interviewee used the term "dispersed/networked approach" to explain how their organisation engaged local networks to facilitate humanitarian action.[31] Some organisations worked with local journalists and other media persons to disseminate risk communications material to communities, while others engaged with religious leaders to gain access to affected populations.[32] The pandemic reinforced the urgency of empowering and recognising the importance of these actors in natural hazard and pandemic response.

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[31] Interview with member of a UN agency.
[32] Interviews with members of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations.

Flexible Funding

Many organisations dealt with funding challenges by re-allocating their available resources. One organisation re-allocated funds that were originally meant for air travel to strengthen its internal ICT infrastructure. This enabled staff to run programmes virtually and provide remote assistance.[33] Other organisations negotiated with donors and asked for more flexibility in project timelines and budget allocation. For instance, longer-term development projects were put on hold and funding was channelled towards pandemic and natural hazard responses. The scale and resource intensity of the prevailing pandemic, coupled with natural hazards, underlined the importance of flexible funding.

Use of Technology

To cope with movement restrictions, all the interviewees mentioned the use of online meeting platforms to coordinate responses and conduct training for local staff. Some of the more popular platforms included Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams.[34] Daily communication was also conducted through WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger.[35]

The sector adapted data collection practices for needs assessment and monitoring and accountability. To this end, many organisations utilised KoBo Toolbox — a free toolkit for collecting and managing data in challenging environments and during humanitarian emergencies.[36]

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[33] Interview with member of a humanitarian organisation.
[34] Interviews with members of UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academia.
[35] Ibid.
[36] See KoBoToolbox, https://www.kobotoolbox.org/kobo/.

Preparedness for Future Shocks

Strategic resilience has emerged as a notion calling on organisations and communities to anticipate future crises and develop the institutional and funding flexibility to deal with them instead of relying on reactive measures to immediate threats.[37] In humanitarian work, where multiple sectors and stakeholders are usually involved, it is particularly necessary that such scenario planning efforts be undertaken in a collaborative manner; anticipatory efforts where all sectors and key stakeholders are involved will allow for more accurate scanning of the horizon for identifying and mapping emergent risks and therefore more comprehensive risk management. They will also assist each actor to adapt and be better prepared for new circumstances.[38]

The converging risks that emerged over the past two years have made it all the more important that decision-making and strategic planning move beyond reactive measures and shift towards proactive anticipation of and planning for potential future challenges. The humanitarian sector should embrace a process of "unlearning and relearning" and develop the flexibility and willingness to adapt to new ways of working.[39] Moreover, while "unlearning" usually happens after major organisational failures and crises, a strategic resilience approach requires an organisation to unlearn and relearn before the occurrence of a breaking point.[40] The next section puts forward several recommendations for systemic change that humanitarian actors in the Indo-Pacific could consider in order to become fit for purpose.

[37] Gary Hamel and Liisa Valikangas, "The Quest for Resilience", *Harvard Business Review*, September 2003, https://hbr.org/2003/09/the-quest-for-resilience.

[38] Christopher Chen, "Future-Ready Humanitarian Action: Strategic Resilience in a Post-Covid World", IDSS Paper, 16 December 2021, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip21023-future-ready-humanitarian-action-strategic-resilience-in-a-post-covid-world/#.YjwTN-dBxPY.

[39] Helen Barclay-Hollands, "Flexibility in Fragility", in *The Humanitarian Machine: Reflections from Practice*, ed. Diego Fernandez Otegui and Daryl Yoder-Bontrager (Routledge, 2021), p. 69.

[40] Marta Morais-Storz and Nhien Nguyen, "The Role of Unlearning in Metamorphosis and Strategic Resilience", *The Learning Organisation* 24, no. 2 (2017): 93–106.

Recommendations

(1)   Enhance anticipatory action programmes and initiatives to broaden risk assessments to include disasters such as pandemics. These should involve deeper collaboration with the local, academic and scientific communities and private sector to fine-tune anticipatory action instruments.

(2)   Designate specific strategic futures teams[41] within humanitarian organisations and disaster management authorities to ensure that future risks are embedded in strategic planning.

(3)   Review capacity-building and awareness-raising programmes for local responders and communities, reflect on their experience during the pandemic, and empower them to take the lead in planning humanitarian responses.[42]

(4)   Develop stronger ties across the supply chain, including producers, vendors, transportation companies, and storage facilities, to minimise disruption to aid supplies in times of crisis.

(5)   Embed flexibility into protocols, guidelines, and processes for humanitarian response without compromising accountability.[43]

(6)   Develop more consultative after-action reviews (AARs) by engaging local, scientific and academic communities to increase accountability and transparency.

(7)   Invest in stronger ties with military and police forces:
  - (a) Organise and encourage participation in regular national and sub-national civil–military coordination (CMCoord) exercises;
  - (b) Actively participate in platforms such as the Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific.

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[41] For more on the role of strategic futures teams, see note on the team set up by Denmark's Emergency Management Agency, which has been named "Pandora Cell", at the OECD website, https://www.oecd.org/governance/toolkit-on-risk-governance/goodpractices/page/denmarkspandoracellforcrisisanticipation.htm#tab_description.

[42] Examples include digital literacy, proper use of PPEs, Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE), and search and rescue.

[43] Including but not limited to funding, operational/response modalities, and partnerships.

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About the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.

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