A Catalyst for Change? The Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the Humanitarian Response to Climate Change

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Abstract

The strongest tropical cyclone ever to make landfall, Typhoon Haiyan, hit the Philippines on November 8th, 2013. It broke all previous records with wind speeds at landfall of 195 miles per hour, sea surges up to 13 feet and left 1.9 million homeless. The following week states at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) highlighted that this storm was part of a larger trend of increasing hydro-meteorological disasters triggered by climate change. Humanitarian organizations are at the coal-face of climate change: they are responsible for assisting developing countries to prepare for and respond to the consequences of increasing floods, droughts, and sea-level rise. Yet organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugee and the International Organization for Migration were not created for this purpose. This paper examines how 20th century humanitarian organizations are adapting to one of the 21st century’s greatest challenges. It argues that the inter-agency standing committee (IASC) was a critical catalyst in mobilizing and coordinating a humanitarian response to climate change.
The strongest tropical cyclone ever to make landfall, Typhoon Haiyan, hit the Philippines on November 8th, 2013. It broke all previous records with wind speeds at landfall of 195 miles per hour, sea surges up to 13 feet and left 1.9 million homeless.\footnote{1} The following week the Philippines and other delegates at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) highlighted that this storm was part of a larger trend of increasing hydro-meteorological disasters triggered by climate change. The 2014 IPCC report also confirmed this message. Humanitarian organizations are at the coal-face of responding to climate change: they offer assistance to those affected by natural disasters, be it floods in Philippines (2009), Pakistan (2010) or droughts in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia (2011).

Yet humanitarian organizations were not created for this purpose. States established today’s principal humanitarian organizations with very distinct mandates that did not include responding to climate change or natural disasters. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), for instance, was established in 1950 to offer legal protection to refugees of World War Two. Similarly, UNICEF was created in 1946 to offer food and healthcare to children and mothers in post-war Europe. Meanwhile states established the International Organization for Migration in 1951 to transport labour migrants from Europe to the Americas and Australasia. In the intervening decades these inter-governmental organizations have taken on new tasks, and grown in scope and size. The growth of the ‘humanitarian business’, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, has been fuelled by an increase in demand and the supply of financing from states, private institutions and individuals.\footnote{2}

This evolution of the humanitarian marketplace over the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s has been well documented.\footnote{3} However, scholars have not examined the humanitarian community’s response to climate change. This is problematic given the significant impact climate change is predicted to have, and already having in some cases.\footnote{4} This article asks: how have humanitarian inter-governmental organizations responded to climate change, and what explains their response? Answering this question will illustrate if and how humanitarian institutions are adapting to one of the major challenges of the 21st century. This paper finds that the humanitarian community was remarkably coordinated in its initial engagement with climate change. Thus, the overarching trend was cooperation, not competition between humanitarian agencies.
How can we explain this coordinated response? This paper suggests that the inter-agency standing committee (IASC) played a critical role in mobilizing and coordinating humanitarian organizations’ initial efforts. The IASC, a relatively new coordinating mechanism in which representatives of humanitarian organizations met regularly, offered humanitarian organizations an autonomous space away from member states’ eyes to carve out individual and collective positions on climate change. At the regular IASC meetings in Geneva, humanitarian organizations considered how climate change would impact on humanitarian activities, cooperated to write submissions to the UNFCCC and coordinated their lobbying efforts. This is significant finding as the IASC has been overlooked, and even dismissed, by states and scholars as ineffective.

Humanitarian scholars will be intrigued by a case of coordination in a market place which is often described as highly competitive. Furthermore, they should take note of how the IASC has enabled humanitarian agencies to engage with issue-areas, beyond their core mandates of emergency relief. Furthermore, this finding has important implications for scholarship on inter-governmental organizations. It indicates how inter-governmental organizations may use coordinating mechanisms to increase their autonomy (or ‘slack’). I demonstrate how the IASC provided a strong and flexible forum where organizations could meet regularly, share information, build trust and create new working groups to coordinate policies and advocacy strategies. Thus this paper contributes to our explanations of change in and cooperation between inter-governmental organizations, demonstrating when and why inter-governmental organizations may cooperate and not compete even in a competitive market place.

The paper begins by charting the humanitarian community’s response to climate change. It focuses on changes in policy, decided at the Geneva level, to engage with climate change specifically, not other natural disasters, such as earthquakes and landslides. It draws on extensive primary research: more than 100 interviews with humanitarian actors in Geneva, in New York, at the UNFCCC summit in Copenhagen (2009) and in the field in Kenya as well as an examination of policy and advocacy documents published by the humanitarian community between 2000 and 2012. The second section then turns to theoretical explanations for this response. It outlines two possible explanations: principal agent, and resource dependency theory and then suggests a third: that the IASC catalyzed and mobilized humanitarian actors to engage with climate change at the
international policy level. The paper in its conclusion calls on humanitarian scholars to examine more closely the role and impact of the IASC in other areas. It urges scholars of inter-governmental organizations to consider the role of coordinating and networking mechanisms in organizational change and autonomy.

**Part 1: The Humanitarian Response to Climate Change**

Humanitarian organizations have a long history of responding to natural disasters. In fact, some of the most famous relief efforts have been directed towards severe drought in Sahel.¹ In 1993 General Assembly members expressed that they were ‘Deeply concerned about the increasing number and growing magnitude and complexity of natural disasters and other emergencies’ and sought to strengthen the humanitarian system to better respond. It is thus not new that humanitarian organizations have responded to floods, earthquakes or other extreme weather events. Climate change is distinct as it calls upon these organizations to deal not only with a current emergency, but also to consider and plan for future crises which are likely to be more frequent and intense. Yet the humanitarian community was not designed to do this long-term planning or address root causes of complex emergencies. This section traces how humanitarian organizations mobilized, coordinated and advocated collectively on climate change.

**1990 – 2007: Minimal Response**

Humanitarian organizations had minimal engagement with the climate change regime for much of the 1990s and early 2000s. There were several reasons for this. Firstly the climate change regime during the 1990s was almost exclusively focused on mitigation, which had little relevance to humanitarian activities.[vi] States met at the UNFCCC to discuss how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and drew up the Kyoto Protocol, but there was little space for discussions over adaptation. Indeed environmentalists were concerned that adding adaptation to the UNFCCC agenda might undermine the argument to mitigate emissions.⁷ Furthermore, in the 1990s the humanitarian community was caught up in its own reform process. In 1991 the UN General Assembly debated how to strengthen the humanitarian system and created a position to coordinate humanitarian relief in complex emergencies and natural disasters: the Emergency
Relief Coordinator (ERC) (see resolution 46/182). Then in 1992 the General Assembly established the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to further strengthen and coordinate humanitarian assistance. In addition, the Secretary General established a new Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) in 1994 and assigned the ERC to lead this office. However, the DHA proved to be dysfunctional and in 1998 the UN created the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) whose primary purpose was to gather information on humanitarian needs and share with key stakeholders. The 1990s was thus a period of major institutional reform in the humanitarian system and it is little surprise there was no engagement with climate change.

In the early 2000s humanitarian reforms continued. The IASC established a new ‘cluster’ approach firstly to coordinate assistance for internally displaced peoples (IDPs), who were the focus of much debate within the UN, and then expanded this to cover all humanitarian emergencies. The ‘cluster’ approach established 11 sectors with a lead-agency responsible for coordinating all the NGOs and inter-governmental organisations working in that area. The sectors included: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); food and nutrition; shelter and camp management; and protection. Thus when a humanitarian crisis hit, there were agencies with a clear responsibility in the country and in Geneva to ensure coordination. They were also the ‘provider of last resort’ should gaps appear in the system and were ultimately accountable. This was a major innovation in the humanitarian system, which had been criticized for poor coordination for years. However, it received mixed reviews although one 2007 evaluation summed up thus: ‘[T]he weight of evidence points to the conclusion that the costs and drawbacks of the new approach are exceeded by its benefits’.

Meanwhile, the State of the World’s Refugees 2012 highlighted that ‘the cluster system has achieved a great deal since 2005 but challenges remain’. Interestingly, although the IASC has been the focus of much policy debate within humanitarian circles there has been little scholarly literature on it. In summary, humanitarian reforms and the focus of the UNFCCC negotiations meant there was little rationale or time for humanitarian engagement with climate change.

Meanwhile in the 2000s the focus of the UNFCCC negotiations changed as adaptation became a significant agenda item. Alongside mitigation, states, civil society and inter-governmental organizations also began to discuss how to prepare for and deal with the impacts of climate change.
change. In 2006, for instance, at the Nairobi UNFCCC Conference of the Parties, African states lobbied to have adaptation on the agenda, and urged developed countries to finance adaptation in Africa given that they were amongst the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Subsequently, states finalized the *Nairobi Work Programme on Adaptation*, a five-year plan of work to support climate adaptation.\textsuperscript{xii} Then in 2007 at the Bali summit, states ‘attached equal importance’ to mitigation and adaptation in the final *Bali Action Plan*.\textsuperscript{xiii} States also established new funds, such as the Adaptation Fund, to assist developing countries to adapt and prepare for climate change. This shift was an opening for other actors, beyond the core climate and environmental regime, to engage. Climate change would lead to an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events and also to sea-level rise and developing countries were seen to be most vulnerable, and least resilient. These funds were not designated to a single adaptation agency but would intended to flow through existing development mechanisms.

In summary, climate change became a major global policy issue in the 1990s and 2000s with the establishment of the UNFCCC. Scientists, civil society and some states called for massive emissions reductions and emphasized how climate change would lead to an increase in extreme weather events, which developing countries were likely to be most vulnerable to. Developing states pushed adaptation up the UNFCC agenda in the early and mid-2000s. Although there were potential spill-overs into humanitarian policy-making the humanitarian community had minimal engagement with the UNFCCC and climate change.\textsuperscript{xiv} That changed in 2008: and the next section illustrates why.

2008 – 2010 Turning Point

It was June 2008, Madeleen Helmer, the director of the International Federation of the Red Cross’ *Climate Change Center*, was running late to the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) meeting in Geneva. Helmer’s plane has been delayed on the day when she is to make a critical pitch to the humanitarian community about why they needed to consider climate change and the UNFCCC.\textsuperscript{xv} It was critical because for the very first time that climate change was on the agenda of the IASC. Meanwhile, Helmer had been investigating the links between humanitarianism and climate change for the past five years: in her role as the first director of the Climate Change Center and through her lobbying efforts at the UNFCCC negotiations. She arrived to find she had only 2 minutes left to speak. She began by outlining how the UNFCCC
negotiations had been overly focused on mitigation (reducing emissions) and not adaptation (dealing with and preparing for the impacts of climate change). Furthermore, she highlighted how discussions had focused on climate change’s impacts on the environment and animals (such as the symbolic polar bear, set adrift by the melting of the polar ice cap) but neglected the dire effects climate change would have on people, particularly in the developing world.\textsuperscript{xvi} This she proposed was where the humanitarian community’s role came in.

As Helmer spoke IASC members gained interest and she won time to elaborate. Her initial allocation of 2 minutes extended out to 30 minutes and a much more substantial discussion on if and how the humanitarian community should be engaging with climate change developed. Some agencies were skeptical as they did not see climate change as a core part of their mandate and thought it would be just a passing ‘fad’. UNHCR for example fell into this camp, they have a narrower mandate than most (‘refugee protection’) which does not encompass people displaced across borders by environmental change or natural disaster. UNHCR staff and member states are reluctant for the agency to expand into other areas.\textsuperscript{xvii} However the majority of UN agencies present were receptive to her message and decided to establish a ‘climate change’ task force to organise and coordinate the humanitarian community’s engagement with the UNFCCC process. This moment was a critical juncture in the humanitarian community’s involvement in climate change.

At its inception the IASC climate change task force had a challenging task ahead: it had to find and develop an advocacy strategy and a common message to deliver at the UNFCCC meeting at Poznan in December, then less than six months away. The task-force met on a regular basis in Geneva with delegates (or climate change focal points) from each of the IASC member organizations. They decided to deliver one consolidated paper, rather than 20 individual papers, to show a coherent coordinated humanitarian approach.\textsuperscript{xviii} The IFRC appointed a full time coordinator to lead the IASC and set-up two sub-committees under the task force: one on advocacy and another on climate change and migration. The humanitarian community faced a ‘huge learning curve’ as most IASC agencies ‘knew very little about climate change policy and the UNFCCC process’.\textsuperscript{xi} A number of agencies were ‘nervous of climate change’ – and in particular apprehensive of the science and of entering onto ‘someone else’s turf’.\textsuperscript{xx} The science community and the development community had been involved with the UNFCCC and were
asking – ‘why are you here?’ The task force thus served as a space for humanitarian agencies
to discuss these issues, share information and update each other.

At Poznan in 2008, a record number of humanitarian actors attended the negotiations. All of the
IASC sent delegates, many for the first time, when previously few of them had any
representation. The IASC organised several side-events and panel discussions at Poznan
highlighting the severe humanitarian impacts of climate change. They made a number of
submissions including: “Change, Migration and Displacement: Who will be affected?” and
Adaptation to Climate Change” in which they encouraged members states to ‘Take account of,
and manage, the humanitarian consequences of climate change, including protecting those who
may move as a result’. They were still, however, minor players in a crowded landscape of
other IGOs, civil society, interest and lobby groups. Yet they made a ‘tremendous change in their
position in a short time’ and in the words of one IASC member ‘went from being a non-player to
a player’.

The IASC agencies used Poznan as a stepping-stone in preparations for Copenhagen. Despite the
criticism they were determined to demonstrate that the humanitarian community was an asset in
the climate change debate and highlight that they had adaptation programmes which were
successful and could be scaled up. Over the course of 2009 the IASC focused on monitoring
negotiation texts, making submissions and developing a strong advocacy campaign for
Copenhagen. IASC members produced a summary report of highlighting how humanitarian
agencies were “Addressing the humanitarian challenges of Climate Change”. This report
included example adaptation projects implemented by the Red Cross, OCHA, WFP and the FAO
in countries as diverse as the Solomon Islands, Nepal, and Ethiopia. As in the lead-up to Poznan
in 2008, the pressure of producing a position for Copenhagen meant that the IASC were ‘very
disciplined’ in making decisions and getting agencies to sign off climate change statements at a
senior level. The IASC thus created impetus within agencies to engage with climate change.

Over the course of 2009 the IASC and its members made a number of submissions to the
UNFCCC. UNHCR and IOM, both members of the informal group on Migration/Displacement
and Climate, for example made collective submissions arguing for ‘International cooperation to
support urgent implementation of adaptation actions’. They argued that ‘Adaptation strategies
and action need to consider the humanitarian consequences of climate change, including migration, displacement and the need to prepare for and address them’. They also emphasized that migration – either internal or international - should be considered as a possible adaptation strategy and included in any Copenhagen agreement.

These humanitarian organizations then turned out in force to the UNFCCC summit at Copenhagen and lobbied delegates actively. The heads of all the major humanitarian inter-governmental organistaions attended the UNFCCC negotiation for the first time and held major press releases and presentations. The informal sub-group on Migration/Displacement and Climate Change, for example, held a joint press conference and a high-level side-event to advocate for the inclusion of migration as an adaptation strategy. Their well-coordinated advocacy messaging resulted in a success– their suggested text was widely accepted by member states. However, in the chaotic closing hours of the negotiations a small group of world leaders took over and wrote the Copenhagen accord, and this meant that the adaptation text was not adopted formally at the 2009 summit. At Cancun, the following year, an agreement was reached at the UNFCCC summit and the paragraph was included.

In addition to coordinating the humanitarian community’s advocacy at the UNFCCC, the IASC instigated change in some humanitarian agencies that were skeptical of engagement with climate change. UNHCR, is a telling case as it was apprehensive about the creation of a working group on climate change, displacement and migration. Their concern was that climate change could not produce ‘refugees’ in the legal, official sense and that by creating a working group they would confuse and conflate different types of displacement. UNHCR were strongly loyal to the Office’s refugee protection mandate and the 1951 Refugee Convention, which has an “almost constitutional character” within UNHCR. Refugees, as defined by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees as only someone with “A well-founded fear of persecution based for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside his country of nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” The IASC working group was thus mired in definitional debates over the correct terminology for people displaced by climate change. UNHCR, according to one participant, argued that existing mechanisms could be used to offer protection and sought to avoid the term ‘climate change refugees’. Their position was evident
in the submissions written by the working group, what is interesting is in engaging with the working group, UNHCR had to develop its own internal position and policy. In other words, the IASC instigated change even in the most reticent members.

**Post-2010: from advocacy to operations?**

In 2010 the two-year climate change taskforce came to the end of its term. In the final year its focus shifted from advocacy to operations. The IASC released a report showcasing how humanitarian agencies were doing ‘adaptation’ and addressing climate change in their programming.

Projects included: disaster risk reduction in Nepal (FAO) and Tuvalu (Red Cross), health and agricultural education in Sri Lanka (WHO, FAO and UNEP), and early warning systems for natural disasters in Central America (WFP).

Interestingly the inter-governmental organizations which showcased their work were predominantly the development organizations, which were members of the IASC (with the exception of the WFP and the IFRC). environmental projects in a humanitarian context. The report thus inadvertently signals the challenges for humanitarian agencies to do adaptation. What is the role of humanitarian agencies, as opposed to development organizations, in doing ‘adaptation’? How should humanitarian agencies change, given that their core mandate is to deliver emergency relief to the victims of political crises and natural disasters (and not to do development or disaster risk reduction)? These questions are being worked through at an agency level, in reference to their particular area of expertise, rather than at the inter-agency level.

As an example, I will briefly examine how UNHCR and IOM responded to this challenge. IOM, a more eager participant of the IASC working group on climate change and migration, sought to expand its operations into climate change migration and adaptation. In fact, by 2009 they had already published the *Compendium of IOM’s activities in Migration, Climate Change and the Environment* which covered a broad range of projects from providing earthquake shelter assistance in Pakistan, to soil conservation in Haiti and promoting youth employment in the environmental sector in Senegal. As these examples illustrate, some of the listed operations had no explicit link to climate change adaptation and/or only a tenuous link to IOM’s migration mandate.

Furthermore, IOM’s activities dealt with a range of migrants and non-migrants in situations where environmental change was sometimes severe (earthquake) and sometimes not
even apparent. Moreover, climate change was not identified as either a direct or contributing cause of many of the activities. The *Compendium* highlighted a conceptual ambiguity and tension between IOM’s climate operations and migration mandate.

Meanwhile, UNHCR did not seek financing, nor did it implement adaptation projects. However, the High Commissioner for Refugees did campaign for an expansion in UNHCR’s legal protection framework to encompass people displaced by climate change and other natural disasters. In 2011 he gave a speech to the Security Council, arguing that: ‘More and more people are being forced to flee due to reasons that are not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention’ and it was a ‘humanitarian imperative’ to assist those displaced by climate change or other natural disasters.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} He recommended that the international community ‘formulate and adopt a set of principles, specifically designed to reinforce the protection of and find solutions for people who have been forced to leave their own country as a result of catastrophic environmental events, and who may not qualify for refugee status under international law’.\textsuperscript{xxxix} He reiterated this demand for a new international protection framework to states at a major Ministerial Meeting in December 2011 and stated that UNHCR was ‘ready to work with states who want to help develop such guiding frameworks’.\textsuperscript{xli} However, only a handful of states were interested in developing a new protection framework and few pledged to pursue this.\textsuperscript{xli} With such minimal member state support the High Commissioner was unsuccessful at expanding the protection framework of UNHCR to encompass climate change displacement.\textsuperscript{xlii}

In sum, the IASC was a catalyst in unifying the humanitarian community to work collectively on climate change. While it is likely each agency would have worked on it individually the IASC bought humanitarian actors together, and convinced those that were skeptical (such as UNHCR) that climate change was an important priority for them all. It also coordinated their energies and activities, enabling them to produce a number of submissions to the UNFCCC in a very short space of time (2008 – 2009) and ensure that the humanitarian voice was heard. Lastly, the IASC contributed to highlighting the humanitarian implications of climate change through its advocacy campaign. It was part of an important, larger shift away from viewing climate change as merely an environmental problem, towards climate change as a problem that will deeply impact on human lives, particularly in the developing world. However Helmer and the IASC were only able to make this shift due to much broader changes in the humanitarian and climate change regime.
Explaining the Humanitarian Response to Climate Change

So how can we explain the humanitarian community’s response to climate change? Why did the humanitarian community coordinate its response in 2008, submit joint submissions to the UNFCCC and then diverge into different operational strategies in the 2010 – 2012 period? I draw examine two existing explanations: principal agent and resource dependency theory, and then propose organizational cooperation as a third potential explanation. Note that these accounts are presented as alternatives, but may indeed be complementary and not mutually exclusive. I suggest that the inter-agency standing committee played a pivotal role in catalyzing and mobilizing the humanitarian community. Without it, the humanitarian community would not have acted in a coordinated, collaborative fashion and some humanitarian organizations may not engaged with climate change. The inter-agency standing committee is an important contribution to our understanding of how the humanitarian community works and also how inter-governmental organizations may use collaborative mechanisms to overcome principal agent challenges.

Principal Agent Theory

States (‘principals’) establish inter-governmental organizations (‘agents’) to fulfill particular tasks, then fund and direct their activities. Under this view, states will determine if inter-governmental organizations expand. They may do this in two ways: they may explicitly delegate an organization to take on a new issue; or they may grant an agent autonomy, and allow it to expand. In any case principals must closely monitor an agent to ensure they do not deviate too far from their delegated mandates. Principal agent theorists are interested in when ‘agency slippage’ occurs – when it deviates from principals' preferences, toward its own preferences. Factors highlighted in the literature include: preference heterogeneity within collective principals (such as differences between member states on the board of an IGO); or the cost of monitoring an organizations’ actions may be too high.

What does this theory tell us about the humanitarian response to climate change? It would suggest that humanitarian actors engaged in some degree of agency slippage – they were not directly delegated to collaborate on submissions to the UNFCCC, but they did so anyway. Some states may have viewed their 2008 – 2010 IASC activities positively, even if they did not
explicitly fund or endorse them. States monitored agents closely and when they strongly disagreed with a particular inter-governmental organization’s climate change response they indicated this directly to the agent. This was the case at the UNHCR Ministerial meeting in 2011 when states did not pledge to broaden protection frameworks for those displaced by climate change or natural disasters across international borders. Meanwhile, they did not stop IOM’s climate change projects. This account explains to some extent why UNHCR and IOM’s responses were different in the 2010 – 2012 period. However it tells us little about what motivated the humanitarian community to engage when it did; or what shaped the response. That’s because principal agent theory is predominantly occupied with explaining agents’ behavior as a factor of states decisions (or non-decisions). Thus this theory does not shed light on what motivated inter-governmental organizations to engage with climate change and then cooperate in their advocacy strategies.

Resource Dependency Theory
Scholars have also drawn on resource dependency theories and argued that inter-governmental organizations will expand their task scope to access new resources. The logic here is that inter-governmental organizations are reliant on their external environment for survival. These accounts emphasize that organizations have autonomy and can shape their environments. Organizations may seek tangible resources – finances, information – or intangible resources – prestige, legitimacy, policy-attention. Inter-governmental organizations operate in a competitive market place and thus look for opportunities to increase their chances of survival.

This account fits with the view that humanitarianism is evolving into a marketplace, in which humanitarian actors must compete for resources. As the supply of financing and demand for humanitarian assistance has increased the number of humanitarian actors has also spiked. Now organizations, that were not traditionally humanitarian (such as IOM) are involved in emergency relief. In a competitive environment, humanitarian organizations are also seeking to maximize their chances of survival by broadening their scope. Humanitarian actors are increasingly seeking to address ‘root causes’ and redefining ‘humanitarianism’ to encompass gender mainstreaming, protection of livelihoods, and human rights, when traditionally it was narrowly
understood as ‘impartial relief to victims of manmade and natural disasters’. This ‘mission-creep’ is likely to continue as humanitarian organisations look for new ways to maintain their institutional structures and staff.

According to this account, we would expect humanitarian organizations to expand into climate change activities to maximize their chances of survival. The mid and late 2000s as new financing mechanisms were established in the UNFCCC for climate adaptation was an opportune time to engage. Humanitarian organizations engaged to access these funds directly. They also shaped the negotiations’ outcomes, to ensure that humanitarian activities and their particular issue-areas (migration) were included in the final agreement. These actions, may have been driven by financial incentives and/or ideational rationales (a need to address the root causes of natural disasters). This account explains humanitarian organizations’ preferences (namely to expand and maximize survival), while principal agent theory does not. However, it does not adequately explain why inter-governmental organizations collaborated in the 2008 – 2010 period on their climate change submissions? Why did they not seek to carve out their own individual positions, and market access on climate change adaptation and humanitarianism, given the competitive market place?

*Inter-Organizational Cooperation*

Scholars have examined when and why or inter-governmental organizations may cooperate with other actors. Studies suggest organizations favour exchanges where they can mutually benefit from greater aggregate access to a commonly shared resources. Organizations will avoid asymmetric relations where they exchange one resource – such as expertise, financing or prestige – for another as this leads to dependency. Cooperation is often enabled by the need to pool resources to ‘increase overall gains in prestige, funding or expertise’.

However, it is constrained by divergent organizational cultures; different member state preferences; lack of complementary goals which enhances rivalry (for instance, between UNHCR and IOM) and the fact that organizations are reluctant to give up their autonomy. Cooperation can vary from *information sharing*; to *coordination of activities*; or *joint-decision making*. The strength of the cooperation depends on the cost/benefit analysis for each organization or cooperation. Scholars have noted that it can vary in form: from monadic (one-way); dyadic (two-way) but there has been little study of the existence and effect of inter-agency networks (where several organizations meet in
an institutionalized forum and collaborate on an ongoing basis). This section urges theoretical development.

So how would existing theories of cooperation explain the humanitarian community’s response to climate change? These theories would suggest that individual agencies saw a greater benefit in cooperating through the IASC – they could pool their expertise, and have greater lobbying impact at the UNFCCC if they submitted joint submissions. By pooling resources, speaking on the same platform (physically and metaphorically) at side events at the UNFCCC they could garner greater attention for their cause. Media, NGOs, and state delegates were more likely to hear their message if they communicated as the humanitarian community rather than as individual humanitarian agencies. This account certainly seems to explain why in the 2008–2010 period humanitarian organizations cooperated in the IASC. Furthermore, it could suggest why they did not continue to cooperate as actively after 2010 but rather pursued their own organizational goals. Once they had elaborated the link between climate change and humanitarianism they then then competed for access to the resources.

However, these theories do not go far enough in identifying and explaining types of cooperation. The IASC was more than a forum to pool resources and maximize opportunities for prestige, funding or expertise. It played a pivotal role in mobilizing and catalyzing a common humanitarian response to climate change because it was an established institutionalized forum. Thus cooperation in one realm (namely coordinating humanitarian relief in emergencies through the cluster system) could ‘spill-over’ into other realms, as functionalists have noted. Helmer’s role as a ‘policy-entrepreneur’ was crucial – she was the ‘spark’ that ignited the IASC’s interest in climate change. However, it is unlikely she would have had the same result if she had had to lobby each organization individually. She was effective because there was a stable, regular coordinating forum, which was sufficiently flexible to enable the formation of new working groups on new issue-areas. Although it was not inevitable that joint decision-making, or even information sharing, on climate change would take place as a result of her speech. However, the IASC was well-placed to quickly enable cooperation once the spark was lit; it was after all the product of a decade of inter-agency debate over coordination.

**Conclusion**
The IASC played a pivotal role in catalyzing and crystalising the humanitarian community’s response to climate change. Before Helmer’s speech in June 2008 few humanitarian organizations had engaged with the climate change regime; or developed climate change policies. However, her speech spurred the humanitarian community to establish a climate change task-force, write joint-submissions and host side-events. These humanitarian agencies echoed a similar message: that climate change would lead to an increase in natural disasters and have dire impacts on developing countries, which were the least prepared for such humanitarian emergencies. The 2008 – 2010 period was thus marked by significant cooperation between agencies, which were operating in a competitive humanitarian marketplace.

This article suggests that scholars of inter-governmental organizations should examine inter-organizational coordinating mechanisms to explain organizational change. The IASC is not a unique institution, there are other coordinating mechanisms in other sectors: the heads of the UN’s 29 specialized agencies meet in the UN Chief Executive Board; regional banks and the World Bank also hold an annual meeting of their Chief Executives. Yet there has been little investigation on if and how these forums provide impetus for collaboration and joint decision-making. This should be the focus of future research for inter-governmental organizations scholars as it may represent an alternative pathway for agents’ to maximize their slack (principal agent theory). IO cooperation theories, may work alongside and contribute to our existing explanations of IO change. Furthermore, this article has challenged theories of cooperation to examine the impact of existing inter-organizational mechanisms, and consider when cooperation may spill-over into other issue-areas.

Finally, this research has important implications for humanitarianism. If humanitarian organizations are able to cooperate at the international policy level on climate change how can they translate this into other areas of their activities? More research should be done on the effectiveness of the IASC as an institution not just in leading the cluster response. Perhaps the IASC is a stronger coordinating body than some scholars have suggested. If this is the case, this is promising for developing states, such as the Philippines who are at the coalface of climate change.
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vi Unless, one made the argument that humanitarian activities should try to reduce their own emissions. This argument was later made in the UN, when UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon initiated a ‘Green the UN campaign’ www.greeningtheblue.org/ (accessed 14 February 2010).


x Weiss, Humanitarian Business.


xiii Persson, Asa, Richard Klein, Clarisse Siebert, Aaron Atteridge, Benito Muller, Juan Hoffmaister, Mihael Lazarus and Takeshi Takama. Adaptation Finance under a Copenhagen Agreed Outcome. (Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute, 2009).

xiv There were some exceptions to this: several IASC members sent delegates to the UNFCCC annual negotiations in the 1990s and 2000s. However, these were mostly organizations that had a primarily development mandate (eg. the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organization) rather than humanitarian. Some organizations did begin to formulate policy and research on the links between environmental change or climate change and their issue-area in the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, the International Organization for Migration held a conference in 2007 on environmental migration in Bangkok and had in the 1990s had published several reports on this issue.

xv Interview with IASC members, 18 and 23 March 2010, Geneva.

xvi Telephone interview with IASC member, 16 April 2010.


xviii Interview with IASC Member, 19 March 2010.

xix Interview with IASC Member, 23 March 2010.

xx Interview with IASC Member, 19 March 2010.

xxi Interview with IASC Member, 19 March 2010.

xxii All 12 of the IASC members were there, previously the UNDP, World Bank and FAO (more development than humanitarian actors) had been regular attendees but few of the others had attended.

xxiii Side-events are held in parallel to the UNFCCC negotiations and a forum for non-governmental organizations, interest groups and international organizations to convey their messages to delegates and other conference participants.
“A Catalyst for Change?” Nina Hall

IASC, “Change, Migration and Displacement: Who will be affected?” Working paper submitted by the Informal group on Migration/Displacement and Climate Change of the IASC, 31 October 2008 to the UNFCCC Secretariat.


Interview with IASC Member, 23 March 2010.


Interview with IASC Member, 19 March 2010, Geneva.

IOM, UNHCR and the United Nations University (UNU) in cooperation with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Representative of the Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Peoples (RSG on the HR of IDPS). 2009. Climate change, migration, and displacement: impacts, vulnerability, and adaptation options, Submission to the 5th session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the Convention (AWG-LCA 5). Bonn, March 29 – April 8, 2009, p.3.

UNHCR et al., Climate Change, migration and displacement, Ibid, p.3.


UNHCR (1950), Statute, Article 6 (a) and 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1a, paragraph 2.


Note there have been subsequent conversations on natural disasters, climate change, displacement in the IASC. For instance, the Nansen Secretariat, which is advocating for a protection framework for those displaced across borders by climate change or natural disasters and presented its work to the IASC on 4, April 2014. Their presentation can be accessed at IASC Documents, http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-documents-default&mainbodyID=6&publish=0 (accessed 22 May 2014).

Note that adaptation is a broad category so some of these projects could fit within a broad definition of adaptation, however IOM gave neither a definition of adaptation nor made any explicit connections between these activities and climate change adaptation.


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There was no mention of climate change or natural disaster displacement in the final Ministerial Communiqué.

However, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, Germany and Switzerland were supportive of addressing the protection gap. See: Ministerial Communiqué, Intergovernmental event at the ministerial level of Member States of the United Nations on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (7-8 December 2011), HCR/MINCOMMS/2011/6, 8 December 2011 and Mexico Pledges, Intergovernmental event at the ministerial level of Member States of the United Nations on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (7-8 December 2011). Interviews with UNHCR member state representatives, 8 and 10 May 2012, Geneva, Switzerland.

Note that some states, including Norway and Switzerland who did make pledges at the 2011 Ministerial Conference, have now formed the Nansen Initiative and created a small Geneva-based secretariat dedicated to a “protection agenda” for people displaced across borders in the context of natural disasters and the adverse effects of
climate change”, see http://www.nanseninitiative.org/s...If this gained momentum it could instigate change in the broader protection framework.


xiii Dalton et. al, Changes in Humanitarian Financing: 11 – 12.

xlii Biermann, “Towards a theory of inter-organizational networking”; 168

1 Gest and Grigorescu, “Interactions among intergovernmental organizations in the anti-corruption realm”; 67

ii Biermann, “Towards a theory of inter-organizational networking”; 168