

HPG**Humanitarian
Policy Group**

Creating a paradigm shift: statement for the World Humanitarian Summit Global Consultation

The humanitarian system is suffering a crisis of legitimacy. The conduct of war and the nature of disasters look very different today than they did in 1945, when the humanitarian sector came of age, or indeed in the 1990s, when many of the concepts, mechanisms and tools of the current, formal humanitarian system took shape. There have been important efforts to adapt to these changes, many of them good. Indeed, humanitarian organisations have provided more assistance to more people in more places than could have been conceived even a generation ago. Mortality, disease and malnutrition in conflicts and disasters have decreased, while clean water, sanitation, education and shelter are available for tens of millions of people caught up in emergencies.

While advances have been made in how humanitarian assistance is organised, funded and delivered, these changes have invariably been tinkering at the edges, rather than getting to the heart of the challenges facing the system. Despite widespread recognition of the need to diversify alliances and reorient activities away from the current centralised model, the formal humanitarian system, while altruistic in its aims, tends to be selfish in its conduct. This applies less to individual

staff, who work tirelessly – and often at great personal risk – on the frontlines of crisis response and recovery, and more to the institutions they belong to. The current conduct of the sector points to enduring structural problems, perverse incentives and unintended consequences that work against its principles, aims and aspirations.

In its current form, the humanitarian sector often seems more concerned with the way it organises itself than with the problems it is supposed to address. Power within the sector is concentrated at its apex and aligned with the priorities and desires of its donors, the mandates and organisational priorities of its largest agencies and the foreign policy priorities of its most powerful nations. Meanwhile, crisis-affected countries are increasingly resisting or rejecting international aid interventions in favour of home-grown organisations, structures and funding streams which they deem to be more trustworthy and legitimate.

The aid architecture is at a critical juncture. Major transformations in the geopolitical landscape require a fundamental shift in how aid works. The World Humanitarian Summit comes at a particularly timely moment. The global ambition to reshape aid and involve people

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from as many traditions as possible is an opportunity to push for this change.

The key question is how to bring about the changes needed to create a more diversified and decentralised response that addresses humanitarian needs in all their complexity. Here, we outline three key areas of change, developed further in a forthcoming HPG report.

Forge a new ‘humanitarian consensus’

There is a tendency to assume that humanitarian action is about how outsiders protect and assist civilians, neglecting the fact that affected people are the first line of defence when it comes to their safety and livelihoods. Addressing the specific needs of people in conflict requires a renewed commitment by all parties and actors to limit the effects of war on civilians and societies. This includes more focused implementation of existing norms and laws, more systematic engagement with perpetrators of violence and finding stronger, more effective means of holding parties to account. A new ‘humanitarian consensus’ should be brokered between local and international humanitarian organisations, states and armed non-state actors on the rules of armed conflict, based on applicable legal norms, humanitarian principles, involvement of communities and protection of aid workers. Ways will need to be found to nationalise and localise such conversations. Affected people are not passive in the face of threats to their safety: they make arrangements with belligerents, work to prevent violence against their communities, document violations and train communities on where to find refuge during attacks.

Redefine success

Improving system-wide performance requires managing the trade-offs and changing the pay-offs so that the longer-term incentives for mutual cooperation in the interests of crisis-affected people outweigh the short-term incentives to compete for resources and visibility. In these terms, success means moving away from a centralised, tight-knit system and working with smaller, specialised, local organisations, accepting greater local autonomy and ceding power and resources to structures and actors currently at the margins of the formal system.

Change culture and behaviour

Fundamentally, the current culture of the humanitarian system and its self-image as indispensable saviour and rescuer reinforces the sharp inequality of power between international aid agencies and their recipients, many of whom find themselves in crisis in the first place because of other types of inequitable power relationships. It also marginalises local capacities to cope and recover, and presents a fundamental barrier to new entrants and new forms of assistance and giving. Confining crisis response to a limited set of humanitarian actors has the effect of reinforcing the exclusive nature of the system and determining who can and cannot take part. Rather than distinguishing humanitarian action as legitimate and trusted, such humanitarian ‘exceptionalism’ actually prevents us from working effectively and cooperatively with experts and institutions with greater knowledge and understanding of the issues at hand. This needs to change.