

Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE)

A large, faint, light-colored graphic in the background depicts several stylized human figures in various shades of blue, grey, and red, arranged in a circular pattern.

Annual Report 2015

Message from the Executive Director



The international humanitarian profile of Geneva remains unmatched in the world. Many of the international organisations working in the area of humanitarian response continue to be headquartered there, and many others have representation offices or visit the city at regular intervals for meetings. It is the birthplace of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the four main international treaties that govern the conduct of parties to an armed conflict carry the name of this Swiss city in their title. Geneva is therefore probably the most obvious location in the world for an independent humanitarian think-tank. Surprisingly, despite some earlier efforts, it was not until late 2014 that Geneva became home such an organisation, with the registration of HERE as a Swiss foundation.

Through its activities, HERE seeks to provide a much-needed reality check of humanitarian action. HERE is particularly interested in examining humanitarian responses in armed conflict. It is in these situations that the responsibility of, and the commitment from, humanitarian actors to deliver humanitarian assistance and protection are tested the most. Humanitarian response is not just concerned with people in need, but especially with the people most in need. HERE works towards highlighting evidence of situations where humanitarian action needs to be strengthened in order to effectively assist and protect those who are most in need. This annual report provides an overview of HERE's activities in its first year. We have addressed a number of issues where we think practice must be improved. We have also worked with a number of partners in providing them with advice and analysis at their request. I would like to leave it to these partners and to you, the reader, to evaluate if we are on the right track in fulfilling our mission of contributing to closing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop'. The signature is stylized and fluid, with a large loop at the end.

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop

About HERE

HERE is a young, Geneva-based independent think-tank. In a world where humanitarian needs remain unmet, HERE's mission is to contribute to improving humanitarian performance in order to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian action. HERE drives evidence-based dialogue and identifies solutions for rebooting the humanitarian system. We create synergies by bridging action and policy, and by engaging actors involved in humanitarian responses. Working in close collaboration with operational humanitarian actors, we feed the humanitarian community with independent reports, policy papers, and studies based on applied, mixed-methods research and analysis with a view to influence policy, fuel debate and dialogue, and change behaviour.

Our focus is on situations of armed conflict, where the most urgent needs are found. Crisis in humanitarian terms emerges not just from the existence of conflict, but in particular from its conduct. States and other armed actors consistently defy the obligations of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, with devastating consequences for affected communities and for the delivery of aid. It is our concern that humanitarian actors have increasingly been unable to deliver aid to those most in need, especially in armed conflict.



Since its creation, HERE has carried out two types of projects:

- Self-initiated research, covered by unrestricted funds from donors, and based on HERE's own observations and gap analysis; and
- Commissioned pieces of work.

Our research is primarily at the policy and strategic level: how can humanitarian action be made more effective?

The Year at a Glance

Influencing dialogue and exchange on policy and practice

As the preparation year for the World Humanitarian Summit, 2015 witnessed renewed attention to challenges in humanitarian responses. While humanitarian actors engaged in a flurry of discussions and consultations, humanitarian principles and protection gaps in armed conflict received surprisingly little attention. Throughout the year, HERE has consistently tried to bring these issues to the fore through a series of events, starting with an expert-panel event, on the topic of assessing the application of humanitarian principles on the ground. Co-organised with the ICRC on 24 February, the debate was held at the *Humanitarium*, and moderated by Helen Durham (Director of the Department of International Law and Policy at the ICRC). Panellists Marc DuBois (Former Executive Director of MSF UK), Kate Halff (Executive Secretary of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response), and Sorcha O’Callaghan (Head of Humanitarian Policy at the British Red Cross), all provided fresh insights on the practical relevance of the principles and the need to develop mechanisms to measure them. The audience comprised both State representatives, humanitarian practitioners, and other policy-makers, who all expressed a vivid interest in the topic. Using the preparations and outcome of this debate, the HERE Executive Director also contributed an extensive article to the *International Review of the Red Cross* on the opportunities and challenges in assessing the application of humanitarian principles.¹



As part of the Humanitarian Priorities Project launched late 2014, HERE gathered two expert meetings in the course of the year. The objective of the Humanitarian Priorities Project is to provide purpose and direction to the increasingly broad agenda of humanitarian action. The first working-meeting focused on a

number of critical challenges faced by the humanitarian community in discharging its protection responsibilities in armed conflict. It took place at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva on 15 June, and saw the participation of a diverse group of humanitarian practitioners and academic experts conversant in protection challenges. The second working-meeting of the Humanitarian Priorities Project sought to look at how the humanitarian community understands and applies the humanitarian principles. It was held on 13 October, also at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and it gathered practitioners and experts in the fields of international humanitarian law, anthropology, theology, etc.

¹ Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2015), [Coming Clean on Neutrality and Independence: The Need to Assess the Application of Humanitarian Principles](#), *International Review of the Red Cross*, 90(897/898), pp. 295-318.

The second working-meeting was also followed by a high-level public debate, held on the eve of the WHS global preparatory consultation. Tania Dussey-Cavassini (Swiss Ambassador for Global Health, and HERE Trustee) moderated the debate with Ulrika Mod er (State Secretary to the Minister for International Development Cooperation of Sweden), Jan Egeland (Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council), Hesham Youssef (Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), and Elhadj As Sy (Secretary-General of the IFRC). They discussed actions to ensure that the values and principles underpinning humanitarian action are translated into a universal approach to assist and protect those most in need. The well-attended and lively event was much appreciated, both among WHS participants and the Geneva audience.



Other events in which HERE played an active role in 2015 were an informal debate convened in June by CARE International on its new humanitarian strategy and the ECOSOC humanitarian segment side-event on the WHS and expectations for the WHS outcome. The HERE Executive Director also participated in a panel discussion on the humanitarian principles at the global WHS preparatory meeting. He was later asked to join the Board of the new Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative that seeks to verify if humanitarian actors are upholding humanitarian standards in their work.

Rebooting the humanitarian system

In recent years, the humanitarian agenda has become extremely broad as many different priorities have been added to it. As a result, there is confusion and misunderstanding on what humanitarian action encompasses and tries to achieve. In addition, there is a need to focus on situations of armed conflict as unmet needs and gaps in humanitarian responses are mostly found in these contexts. Ironical as it may sound, the goal of humanitarian action has to be reaffirmed.

HERE launched the above-mentioned Humanitarian Priorities project for that precise purpose: reasserting the goal of humanitarian action. The project has sought to formulate a number of

messages in the context of three key themes: humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability. These three themes were selected as they are all relevant in the most urgent situations of distress, especially armed conflict situations. They relate to the rights of those most in need and the duties of those who have the responsibility to fulfil or uphold these rights.

In the course of the year, the project benefited from the insights of a number of experts who also served as a reference group. For each of the events described in the previous section, background notes were produced. These background notes were informed by interviews held with former UN and humanitarian top officials, including Jakob Kellenberger, Louise Arbour, and Mark Malloch Brown. The general sense from these conversations was one of pessimism with regard to the state of multilateralism and the lack of willingness of states to define their interests in the broader context of sharing burdens and helping others. Security and counter-terrorism measures dominate the international agenda, with effective humanitarian action being dependent a political will to assist and protect populations in need.

Following the two expert meetings on protection and humanitarian principles, in June and October respectively, HERE also issued two reports. In its [report on protection](#), HERE endorsed the broad consensus among the experts at the meeting that, in addition to numerous ‘tweaks’, the humanitarian protection system requires more in-depth transformation. That ambition relies less on creating an expanded normative framework, for which there is little political appetite, and more on establishing a protection system that includes the essential accountability, political leverage, and commitment to principled action.

In its [report on humanitarian principles](#), HERE concluded that there is a need for a thorough analysis of the political forces, power dynamics, and systemic structures/drivers, which undermine principled humanitarian action in the first place. Such an analysis must consider the interplay between the humanitarian principles and the reality of poor accountability to the people on the ground. HERE finally advocated for good practice in terms of a principled approach to include good practice in terms of compromise: being more transparent/honest to all actors about limitations, documenting decisions to compromise on principles, and, importantly, matching compromise with commitments/plans to improve performance in the future.

Understanding humanitarian response gaps in armed conflict

While the humanitarian sector has grown exponentially over the past 10 to 15 years, its capacity to operate in armed conflict remains limited. When it comes to identifying sources to, and remedies for, this problem, there are studies that have considered specific elements and contexts, such as for example the needs-based funding gap, or the issue of securing access in volatile environments. Little attention has however been given to operational ‘mandates’, and the degree to which they stand in the way, or enable, organisations to deliver humanitarian response in armed conflicts. Recognising that the majority of international non-governmental organisations active in humanitarian response define their purposes broadly, as of 2014, HERE engaged in a project on “The role of ‘mandates’ in humanitarian priority settings for international non-governmental organisations in situations of armed conflict”. In humanitarian discourse, these approaches are frequently distinguished as ‘multi-’ or ‘single-mandate’. The

project builds on the interest of a number of organisations to better understand the factors that enable humanitarian organisations to achieve the shared goal of protecting and assisting those populations who are most affected by armed conflicts. The Mandates Study intends not only to enable humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders to better understand the implications of organisational mandates for work in armed conflict, but it also responds to recent calls for the humanitarian community to transcend the so-called humanitarian-development divide - not by pushing for convergence of humanitarian and development activities, but by providing an opportunity to better serve affected populations by capitalising on complementarity.

HERE focused most of 2015 on fine tuning the parameters of the study and engaging with the participating organisations. Following a project meeting in June, it was agreed that the study would focus on three main research questions: 1) Is it helpful to talk about mandate-distinctions? What does it mean?; 2) In regard to humanitarian organisations' capacity to work in situations of armed conflict, what opportunities and/or limitations arise from different 'mandates'?; 3) What are the comparative advantages that can be associated with different 'mandates'? Where do they allow for complementarity between organisations? Where do they engender competition or tensions, such as policy differences, incommensurable priorities and different target groups?

Selected Commissioned Pieces of Work

Inherent to HERE's business model is the focus on tailored and commissioned pieces of work. Based on strategic discussions with its Board of Trustees in 2015, HERE decided to focus on pieces of work that would be in line with its mission and core research focus.

In 2015, HERE's work with partners included:²

- International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), Regulatory Issues in International Disaster Response Operations. Final reports available at http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/195860/IDRL%20Impact%20Study%20Draft%20for%20Expert%20Meeting_270215.pdf and <http://here-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/IDRL-project-product-2-policy-trends-overview-3-March-2015.pdf>
- Norwegian Refugee Council, State Perspectives on Dilemmas and Opportunities for Operationalising Humanitarian Principles.
- Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, The Future of Humanitarian Coordination.
- World Food Programme – Global Food Security Cluster, Facilitation of the Global Retreat for Food Security Cluster Coordinators.

² Not all final reports are publicly available.

- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment Review.
- British Red Cross, Local Leadership and Response Capacity in the Syria Conflict: The Syrian Arab Red Crescent and International Partners.

HERE Supporters

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We also thank our partners for their collaboration, in particular the Lausanne-based Syni programme for temporary employment, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and colleagues at the *Humanitarium*.

About us

Board of Trustees

Niels Dabelstein, Martha Maznevski, José Antonio Bastos, Kathleen Cravero-Kristofferson, Tania Dussey-Cavassini, Mahmoud Mohamedou, Ben Ramalingam, Balthasar Staehelin, and Eva Von Oelreich (until December 2015).

The Team

Executive Director: Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop

Programme Manager: Enrique Jimenez

Research Director: Marzia Montemurro

Researchers: Melanie Blanc, Karin Wendt

Research Assistant: Heleen Hiemstra

We would also like to thank Anastasia de Beaucé and Katie Maznevski for their communications support during the year.

Complete financial statements are available upon request.