



What Next?

HERE Conference - 16-18 March 2021

Background Note



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The humanitarian sector is no stranger to reform. Crises – both those outside the sector and, more profoundly, those from within, have triggered spates of soul-searching and promises to improve. The late 1990s saw NGOs band together to try to implement systematic accountability to affected populations. The humanitarian reforms initiated in 2005 were supposed to improve predictability, leadership, and partnership. And the 2015 Grand Bargain agreement between donor governments and agencies sought greater efficiency.

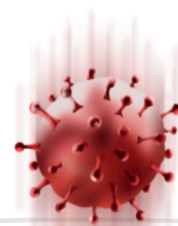
The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought yet another layer of policy and operational reckoning. This time, the reckoning has been driven by a crisis that is global and pervasive; it has demonstrated not only the interdependence of the global community but has also exposed existing inequalities and structural power imbalances. As societies have been forced to confront racism and discrimination, the humanitarian sector has been grappling to respond to its own legacies: colonial attitudes and institutional bias that have long been prevalent in humanitarian and development discourse.

Alongside calls for aid to be “decolonised”, humanitarian needs have been escalating, and seem set to continue to grow. The pandemic, and a deeply uneven global vaccination programme, has coincided with growing urbanisation and continued environmental degradation. The creep of the digital ecosystem has made cyber threats more likely and more deadly. War, insurgencies and (counter-) terrorism continue to plague some of the world’s most vulnerable communities. Amid this complexity and uncertainty, humanitarians have been

forced to go back to basics. At least one humanitarian expert, [Randolph Kent](#), predicted the need for a fundamental rethink of humanitarian action more than a decade ago. But if there’s one thing the humanitarian system refuses to do, it’s to learn from past acts of short-sightedness and develop a planning horizon that reaches beyond the next couple of years.

One result of short-term planning can be found in how unprepared most humanitarian actors were to deal with a global pandemic. The question HERE has continued to interrogate since the start of the pandemic is whether COVID-19 marked a watershed moment, if its impact would be a [game-changer](#). In a sector that has traditionally been hands-on and ground-level, what are the consequences of border restrictions and travel bans? Could afflicted communities cope – and even cope better – with aid actors forced to act only from a distance?

Since those early efforts to examine whether the humanitarian system is fit for purpose, HERE has been gathering evidence to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the humanitarian landscape. We initiated a [global research programme](#), with a focus on four different contexts: Cameroon, Colombia, Libya and Myanmar. In November 2020, HERE hosted a discussion with practitioners and policymakers to consider how the impact of the pandemic could be leveraged to instigate improvements in humanitarian action. An initial analysis of the findings makes one thing clear: the time to garner a collective energy to map the future we want is now.



The COVID-19 pandemic has been a stress test for the humanitarian sector. It has accelerated change by forcing humanitarian actors to rapidly adapt and transform their approaches. In the same way the financial crash of 2008 exposed the vulnerabilities of financial institutions, so the pandemic has starkly exposed modes of working in humanitarian operations that are wildly ineffective.

Unsurprisingly given the restrictions on movement, localisation has risen to the forefront of current humanitarian thinking. But other questions, related but perhaps more subtle, have also been gradually taking shape. In the face of government restrictions, diminishing access and relationships that are forged as much online as they are on the ground, how do we now frame humanitarian actors' relationship with the State? What does proximity mean? And how do we keep building trust in humanitarian actors?

It would be disingenuous to claim the pandemic has been transformational. Transformation takes time and long outlives that which drove it – we can't declare this yet. It would also be unwise to underestimate how difficult it can be to shift existing institutional incentives. Change, where it has been observed, has been organisational and technical, rather than sectoral and political.

While the embers of the financial crash were still glowing, the banking system was resurrected and today largely resembles that which came before it. The urge to swing back to a post-pandemic normalcy would appear tempting. But, were we to do so, a rare opportunity would have been missed. Never before has the prospect of sector-wide reform seemed so necessary and so plausible – and the motivation for such systemic change will only wane. So what needs our focus?

Firstly, the system has tried to fix political problems with technical solutions. But technical solutions are necessarily limited in scope. Of course, needs assessments, data

collection, and monitoring systems may have become more precise, but agency competition for profile and funding is resilient and cannot be eradicated by technical solutions alone. Mandate reform remains the elephant in the room.

Secondly, with the professionalisation of the sector came fragmentation. For every conceivable humanitarian theme there is a cluster, sub-cluster, task force, working group, guideline or handbook. And with everything existing in isolation, everything is a priority. Right now, most humanitarians can't see the forest for the trees.

Thirdly, the incentives remain perverse and undermine accountability. Focusing on quantitative results (aka 'results-based management') obscures as much as it illuminates. The proxy for child protection in emergencies is not the number of child-friendly spaces constructed. And yet, ticking boxes and amassing data remains the focus of most planning and reporting exercises. This runs counter to creativity, innovation, and much-needed radical thinking.

We need to refocus on the bigger picture, and reprioritise those values that orient us to do the right thing and not only do things right. We also need to critically review how we define and measure success. And we need to return to the origins of the humanitarian impulse, rather than being inextricably bound by the past choices and current structures that we presently fail to see beyond.

HERE's 2021 Conference, What next?, will bring together thought leaders, humanitarian innovators, and policy experts to address not only the challenges that have strained the sector in the past 12 months, but also how these challenges can be met to realise a new vision for humanitarian action in the future. Online, free to join, everyone welcome. [Register now!](#)





The Geneva-based Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE) was founded in 2014, with the goal of closing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice. Serving as an independent humanitarian think tank, HERE delivers studies, (real-time) evaluations, policy papers, practice reviews, etc. at its own initiative or the request of partners. HERE's mission is to contribute to improving performance and increasing the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian action.

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