

The Future of Humanitarian Coordination

Note of the HERE-convened roundtable discussion, 13 August 2021

This note provides a summary of a roundtable discussion that was held in August 2021 among a small group of mostly Geneva-based humanitarian practitioners and independent experts. The meeting was an opportunity for an informal exchange on current humanitarian affairs and served particularly to share views and analyses on the priorities for the humanitarian coordination architecture with the appointment of a new ERC. The discussion was meant to garner a diversity of views, not to seek a consensus. This summary note reflects the conversation without attributing statements or views to specific participants.

The roundtable conversation feeds into HERE's ongoing research project looking at the [Future of Humanitarian Coordination](#). The project aims to provide actionable suggestions on how to address some of the longstanding and systemic challenges related to humanitarian coordination. Starting from working hypotheses on the obstacles, we believe that quick wins will only be effective if they are part of a longer-term trajectory working towards meaningful solutions.

Summary of the discussion

Strategic vision has been lost due to technocratic approaches

Five years into the Grand Bargain, there is a great deal of scepticism on the Grand Bargain. Its technocratic angle will not lead to more efficiency, let alone effectiveness. The last decades' professionalisation of the humanitarian sector has been accompanied by a plethora of marketing efforts framed as guidelines and tools – all of them valid in their own right, but often out of touch with political realities. Whereas the Grand Bargain has been presented around collective efforts and common goals, the incentive system has remained the same. Agencies reward their staff for what they do for the agency, not for what they do for the collective. Some key donors also continue to prefer working with agencies bilaterally, which does not necessarily help towards collective efforts.

A recent example of another technocratic inter-agency initiative is the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF), a tool to develop intersectoral, multi-agency needs analysis. While it may be a great tool *per se*, its technical preoccupation is unlikely to solve tensions between agencies that prefer to assess and analyse humanitarian needs through their sectoral specialisation and data management and resource mobilisation systems. Agencies tend to replicate ('copy-paste') technical solutions used in emergency settings in protracted crises instead of collectively deliberating on how to best respond to people's needs. Technical solutions and bureaucracy have taken over and have gone at the expense of strategic vision and the bigger picture. How to set and agree on (collective) priorities remains a huge conundrum, but it cannot be solved by technocratic initiatives alone.



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Independent and outsiders' views challenge and enhance the coordination environment

For coordination to improve, those with the will and power to instigate long-lasting changes in the system must appreciate the work of those who are outside the 'traditional' UN-led humanitarian architecture. The 'system' may be too absorbed by itself. The prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) of crises-affected people, for example, may be a legitimate concern but if it tops the humanitarian coordination agenda as seen in some countries, it is hardly a progressive benchmark (i.e. to protect people from ourselves). Organisations may also have become too big, which has impacted on their agility. External and independent voices are needed as they challenge the 'system' and create a certain degree of accountability.

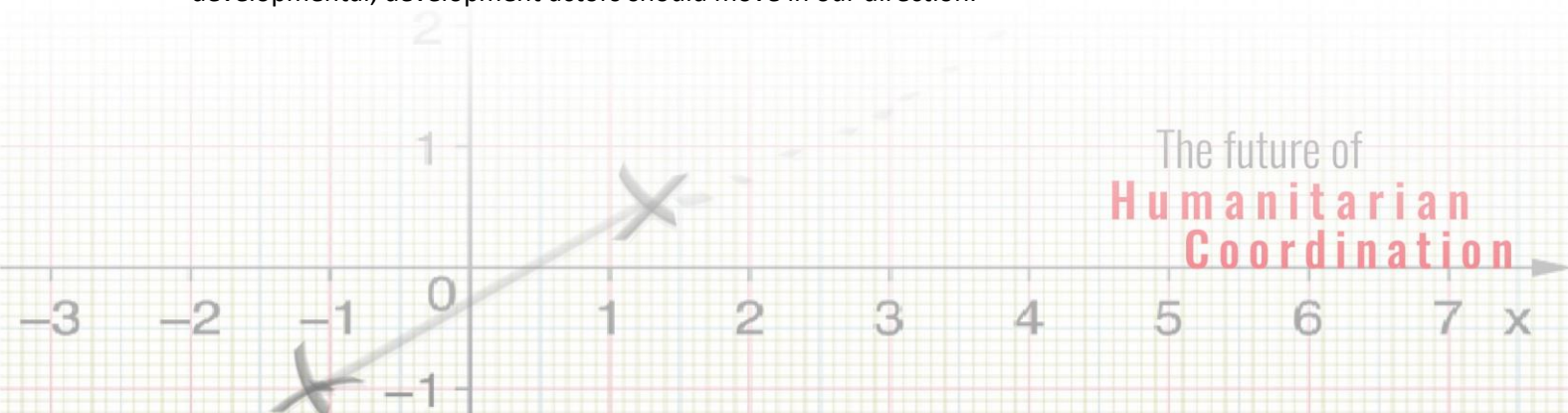
Despite the decline of a long era of Western hegemony, mechanisms in the humanitarian system remain dominated by Western actors. Countries such as China or India have very different views or approaches to humanitarian aid. The system needs to show progress on how it is addressing the critiques of neo-colonialist ways of working and how it works towards diversity. One step is to have a more honest and open dialogue on the opportunities and limitations of the localisation of aid.

Established in 1991, the model behind the Inter-Agency Standing Committee was to serve as the main mechanism for the ERC to discharge his mandate. Thirty years later, the IASC has evolved into a body that in composition is largely similar to that of its origins, that has multiple (coordination) tasks to fulfil, but that has also been increasingly questioned as fit for purpose. The world around us has changed much faster than our mechanisms and their ways of working. While there may be a reform fatigue and lack of appetite for new initiatives, one test case might be the degree to which the IASC (and especially the Principals-only forum) could have an open and honest exchange, for example, on the question of collective goals versus incentives and individual agencies' performance appraisal systems.

Donor intrusion and agency reluctance to push back

Linked to the issue of the Western image of the system is the fact that only a few donors provide the large majority of funding. Meanwhile, donors are also showing increased intrusive behaviour. As it is unlikely that the amount of available resources will further grow, some of them are telling agencies what to do. They forget that the question on prioritisation is also their problem, as different donors have different preferences on what they fund. Donors remain the most powerful players in the system, with the financial leverage to determine how humanitarian work unfolds. Their participation in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) meetings has impacted on the independence of operational actors. While some donors' field presence does provide support and enhances the quality of response, humanitarians all too often lack space and time to collectively reflect on needs and approaches before engaging with the donor side.

On the side of agencies, it is felt that with the humanitarian-development(-peace) nexus in mind, they have too much on their plates. The humanitarian agenda is a narrow one: rebuilding services in Tigray, Ethiopia, is a developmental task. Instead of humanitarian organisations becoming more developmental, development actors should move in our direction.



There is also a feeling that coordination tools such as the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) have become too donor-driven. Agencies, especially OCHA, should have pushed back on the donor intrusion. Instead, we see, for example, humanitarian organisations having large risk registers to comply with the risk averse behaviour from donors. The initiative on [risk-sharing between donors and agencies](#) (led by the Netherlands and ICRC) should continue and should even be stepped up.

Smart advocacy and protection (at the centre)

With the situation in Afghanistan unfolding, and the issue of the relationship of the humanitarian community with the Myanmar military regime on the table, there is ample evidence of the need for smart(er) advocacy. How we relate to the Taliban should not be a question as we have done this before (1996 – 2001). Likewise, in order to continue to operate in Myanmar, we should engage with the new regime. Addressing questions on the legitimacy of the Taliban or the Myanmar military is not a humanitarian responsibility, while it is important to recognise and discuss the views that may exist on these regimes among our staff.

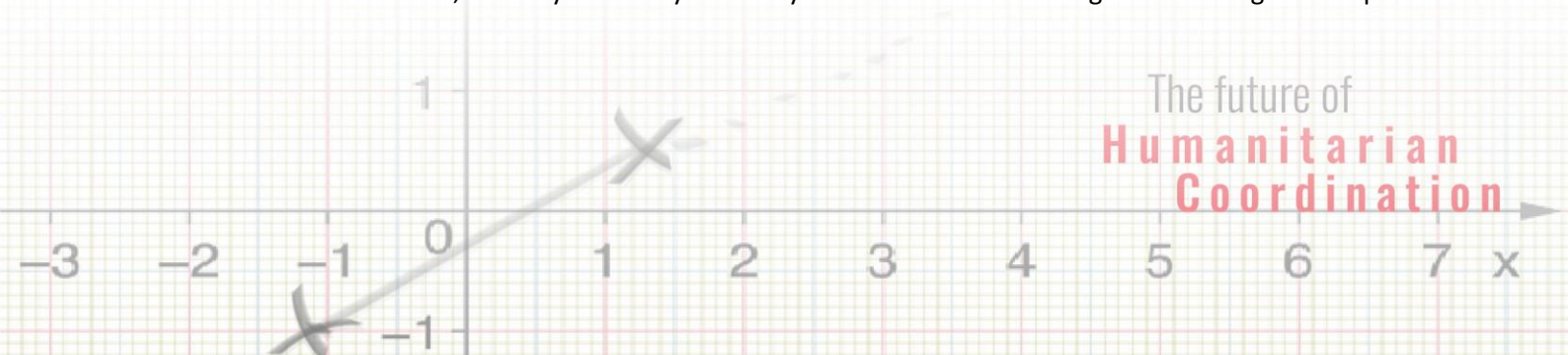
In general, we seem to lack the capacity to engage in smart advocacy and/or lack the negotiation skills that open access, which is needed to be operational in places such as Tigray. Having a presence or office with regional entities or bodies (e.g. AU) is part of such a capacity. Likewise, leadership on protection continues to be an issue. It is ironic that the IASC has commissioned a review on the centrality of protection, when we already know the outcome of this review. Some agencies may find it easier than others to engage with human rights mechanisms, but, in general, we need to find a better balance between raising our voice and the impunity that we see around us.

HERE's reflections

Participants appreciated the space offered by HERE, which allowed for an informal, non-partisan exchange about the gaps and the changes needed, without striving for consensus on what that change may look like. The discussion revealed that there are no quick fixes to some of the most critical challenges related to humanitarian coordination. Longstanding systemic issues in the current international architecture still stand in the way. While it may be hard – and even unhelpful – to try to find a silver bullet solution, addressing these obstacles can only start with an honest exchange.

Several have been the attempts to bring humanitarian actors together to ensure greater alignment and tackle outstanding challenges. The Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative has been trying to play the role of a clearing house for good donor practices to encourage principled donor behaviour. Despite all its shortcomings, the IASC remains the mechanism of choice among the (traditional) agencies. Trying to apply a comprehensive approach in making humanitarian action more efficient, the Grand Bargain brought donors and agencies together but, as noted, did not unpack the political reasons behind the inefficiencies.

How do we truly create a dialogue that acknowledges the political economy of the humanitarian system between donors and agencies? Incremental change could start with a joint recognition that the over-emphasis on technocratic solutions has been counter-productive. They serve our bureaucracies but sound entirely hollow in the World Humanitarian Summit mantra of putting people at the centre. Likewise, an analysis on why the many recommendations calling for a more agile and up



to date humanitarian coordination architecture have not worked, for example in relation to the IASC¹, might also reveal the real, underlying issues that still need to be addressed.

HERE's research on the future of humanitarian coordination aims to develop some ideas on the way forward. We will continue in our attempt to create a safe space for honest exchanges on the systemic problems of humanitarian response. Smart advocacy and the need for frank donor-agency dialogue will be the next instalment in our push for a more honest conversation.

¹ Center on International Cooperation, [External Review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#), December 2003.

