

Humanitarian reform: What's left to do?

Note from a HERE-convended roundtable – Geneva 16 May 2023



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Since the late 1990s, there have been several waves of humanitarian reform, all of which sought better outcomes for people caught up in crises. NGO-led efforts that started in 1997 were aimed at establishing quality standards. The 2005 clusters created predictable mechanisms to coordinate service delivery for specific sectors; the 2012 Transformative Agenda sought to strengthen leadership and accountability; and the 2016 Grand Bargain committed agencies and donors to finding more efficient ways to respond to needs. Each of these reform efforts contributed to a more professional and better coordinated system, but the quality of humanitarian responses still leaves much to be desired in too many places. While leading to greater predictability, the clusters have become silos and have given rise to tedious processes. The one billion USD efficiency gain promised at the outset of the Grand Bargain has gotten lost in the multiplication of humanitarian budgets and appeals. And importantly, there is an unresolved accountability gap. Poor performance by agencies or individuals in leadership positions is hardly ever called out or sanctioned,¹ and incentives, especially in the form of funds, do not reward collective performance.²

There is ample knowledge and evidence of deeper, system-wide deficiencies, including insufficient clarity on agencies' comparative advantages in certain contexts. But are we bold and daring enough to discuss an issue such as mandate reform? Or, as a minimum, are we honest enough to admit that some of the systemic issues cannot be addressed because of political realities? What about accountability for sub-optimal humanitarian leadership?

Returning to the prerequisite that any humanitarian reform should deliver better results for people in need, HERE organised a Roundtable in May 2023 to explore what remains to – and can possibly – be done. Senior humanitarian practitioners from UN and non-UN agencies, donor representatives, and independent experts participated. Hoping to pave the way for the creation of an informal network of change-makers from various constituencies of the humanitarian system, the aim was to allow for an open and frank conversation of the type that would perhaps not happen in more institutional spaces. This note reflects the content of the discussion without attributing statements or views to specific participants.

Thematic summary of the discussion

In view of recognising the bigger picture and systemic issues but still allowing participants to zoom in and discuss concrete steps that can be taken in terms of moving things forward via existing or revitalised platforms (before creating new ones), participants used the following as their starting points:

1. First, **the ERC's flagship initiative** is a recent process to work with Humanitarian/Resident Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams, empowering them to address the plight of affected populations. **Area-based coordination (ABC)** has been put forward as a concept that allows for more flexibility and contextualised approaches focusing on a certain area within a country or region. These two processes could be linked and move in the direction of more localised or decentralised leadership. It might also help make progress in the implementation of commitments such as accountability to crisis-affected communities or the centrality of protection. Participants were asked to consider the extent to which this is a realistic

¹ See also: https://here-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Accountability-report_May2016.pdf

² See <https://here-geneva.org/collective-leadership-vs-individual-agency/>

and feasible forecast, and what other (pre)conditions might need to be addressed for the flagship initiative and/or area-based coordination to deliver and resolve the well-known weaknesses mentioned in the introductory paragraphs above.

2. Second, HERE research has seen that bilateral donor-agency relations may create disincentives for collective and multilateral engagements. These bilateral relations **tend to reward individual (agency) results**. Donor and inter-agency consultations have stayed away from conversations around comparative advantages, yet a system proud of its diversity is not the same as a system in which agencies are complementary to each other. What would it take for Grand Bargain or Good Humanitarian Donorship discussions to take into account practical realities and become more honest on issues of profile and competition? Or on the issue of needs prioritisation driven not by what the system delivers but what people actually need, based on their feedback? Again, some of these issues are well-known ones, but where politics prevail, technical solutions will not be sufficient. How and where do we address the political economy of the system?

Given the open-ended and relatively large topics for discussion, the conversation naturally flowed in various directions, but in terms of the main question of “what’s left to do”, three suggestions came to the foreground as particularly important for any reform effort to truly gain traction.

a) [Connecting the dots in the humanitarian agenda](#)

While there seems to be agreement in the humanitarian sector that change is needed, views vary as to what that change should look like, with different actors working from different perspectives. NGO and civil society actors tend to look from the bottom up, identifying practical problems in the field that the system needs to become better equipped to tackle. Systemic changes tend to be formulated and implemented from the top down however, and participants emphasised that if reform is to be successful, these processes need to meet in the middle. Participants also recognised that any reform process needs to navigate a delicate balancing act: to go beyond technical top-down procedures and allow for true leadership on the ground, affected people would have to be at the table determining the direction of programming.

Currently, there appears to be a **disconnect between what is said in multilateral fora at the global level, and what is done in the field**. It is the responsibility of donors and policymakers to influence their partners in the field, just as it is the responsibility of the partners in the field to raise issues with donors and policymakers, all in view of connecting the dots of the humanitarian agenda. Field teams need to know that HQ has made certain commitments, and HQ needs to know what the reality of the field is when making and engaging towards such commitments. Simple fixes can go a long way, and the impact of individuals should not be underestimated – person-to-person phone calls and changes to performance appraisal forms can provide incentives towards working more collectively. Financial resources are important, but so is the time and attention that key stakeholders invest in the process.

It is not only a question of better vertical connections, but also horizontal ones. Participants emphasised an urgent need to **compare notes on what is happening in various contexts and places**. People tend to focus on their issue and be so overwhelmed by their own job description or organisational mandate that they do not look beyond it. The IASC does not appear to connect the dots sufficiently in terms of change that is called for in relation to ongoing initiatives. There also appears to be a lack of trust. For example, instead of each agency having its own staff working on specific reforms, **there could be more sharing of roles and responsibilities**. This would allow for more insight across various initiatives. A number of participants felt that part of the richness of the early days of the Grand Bargain was the fact that all were sitting at the same table; perhaps the GB 3.0 could recapture some of that energy. To drive change forward, there is a need to better capitalise on the comparative advantages that we have in our respective platforms

in a way that is coherent. This is particularly important in view of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which requires that peace and development actors in general, and the World Bank in particular, also come to the table. It was noted that even though this roundtable was a welcome one, a number of actors including (aid-receiving) states and development actors were absent from it.

b) Diluting the concentration of power

Linked to the importance of ensuring that change processes not only take place from the top down is the recognition that the allocation of power in the sector needs to be re-thought. Indeed, participants emphasised that while the ERC Flagship initiative brings a number of reform efforts together and takes the importance of the field level lens as its starting point, it ironically remains the definition of a top-down initiative: it ‘belongs’ to the ERC and OCHA. Should the project have been called “the IASC Flagship project,” and would it have gained traction if it had?

Participants recalled that thanks to previous policy decisions and reform efforts, the humanitarian sector is ripe with coordination mechanisms and platforms; however, we are at best not using them optimally, and at worst actively avoiding them. ‘Stay and deliver’ or ‘delivering as one UN’ may seem straight-forward on paper, but **in practice agencies work primarily with their own mandate in mind**, and it quickly becomes easier to work in smaller groups with a defined set of actors and to avoid the transaction costs and hard work that come with larger collective fora, especially as having more actors around the table may complicate decision-making.

Participants emphasised that it is not clear who would actually have the power *and* incentive to make sure that reform efforts are brought forward from a collective perspective. More often than not, HC/RCS are not truly empowered to champion change, or even to lead the UN system in an effective way. Accountability to crisis-affected people (AAP), localisation, and protection quickly become negotiable when agencies try to fundraise and get their individual programmes off the ground. It is about setting up operational capacity first, with AAP, localisation, and the centrality of protection to follow, instead of the other way around. The new OCHA strategy speaks very little about partners and does not go into detail regarding who will truly ensure localisation and accountability to affected people. And when the initial resources for such initiatives quickly run out, there is no one left to ensure that they live on.

Any new reform effort should **first look closely at why previous efforts have failed**: arguably, previous efforts have concentrated on changing the system, but let **actors and behaviours remain the same**. In this vein, participants highlighted that one of the main reasons the Grand Bargain has not worked is that the biggest actors have implemented it the least. The GB started with ten areas and is now down to two – localisation and quality of funding – which are looked at as if they are two separate topics, when they are in fact inextricably linked. Indeed, donors – including UN agencies acting as donors – bear a key responsibility. The 2022 State of the Humanitarian System report highlighted how half of all humanitarian funding goes to the three biggest UN agencies, and only a fraction to local organisations. A project like the Flagship initiative, however well-intended, will go nowhere unless the way that funding is allocated in the system is changed. The big agencies will continue to do what they have been set up to do: fundraise and deliver based on their mandate, and as long as that the system rewards them for this, they will not use their power to push for any true change. Ultimately, it is **a question of initiating change among actors who may not have an interest in that change**. This links well to the second example provided at the outset of the conversation, and the question of how to address the political economy of the system.

The donors in the room acknowledged that they have to be bolder in deciding what to fund and what not to fund, including daring to take risks when it comes to investing more sustainably in local actors and organisations. This includes educating their own colleagues and equipping allies to argue within their respective governments for the frequently limited constituency of humanitarian and development

funding. The discussion also recognised that donors have to think more in terms of collective performance, not only of the system generally, but also in terms of how they work together among themselves. Donors could use their own incentives to better align their priorities and results frameworks globally. This would not only allow for more coherence across the system's actors, programmes, and initiatives, but would also increase the political weight that donors have when it comes to pushing for change.

On the side of the agencies, participants highlighted that they have to truly engage in collective processes. The original Grand Bargain included a commitment towards common needs assessments, and it was suggested that the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) be given all the attention it deserves. Rolling it out, for example, as part of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) could allow for more coordination across agencies in a technical, bottom-up fashion. In terms of working more collectively, agencies also need to be more honest about what they can and cannot do.

c) Questioning the ambition to 'do more with less'

There was agreement in the room that the standard motto of "doing more with less" is not only unhelpful but can even be harmful when combined with entropy. When every agency works from its own angle, and fundraises based on its own priorities, the system ends up with a high level of fragmentation and a low level of true change. The GB was raised as an example of where so many issues and priorities were added that the initiative became too heavy to float. Similarly, Humanitarian Response Plans should be strategic, but are now just wish lists with no overarching ambition. And the discourse on the prevention or protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) debate, which is more about humanitarian workers than about affected people, has taken over at the expense of (S)GBV more broadly, which impacts so many more people.

It was suggested that truly effective reform efforts should aim to **do less with less, but to do it really well**. Significantly, **doing less with less means making choices** and possibly accepting trade-offs such as deciding to focus more on one thing than on another. In light of the need to dilute the concentration of power in the system, the questions of "reform of what and for whom" need to be front and centre when such choices are made. Indeed, one straightforward way of doing 'less with less' is to fund local organisations, who are a lot cheaper than UN agencies. The consultations leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) were raised as a positive example of where the system started to take the voices of those most concerned into consideration but then lost its impetus. The discussion emphasised that the humanitarian programme cycle is key in view of including AAP platforms that elevate the voices of affected people, and in providing important counterpoints to traditional institutions.

Given the accumulation of protracted emergencies, humanitarians also particularly have to ask themselves how to provide assistance and protection in the long run. The discussion highlighted that reports, reviews, and evaluations – including a recent Ground Truth Solutions study – repeatedly conclude that communities feel disempowered and frustrated at receiving tents and food in situations where they would prefer livelihood opportunities and education. We can no longer accept to simply address needs without a view to reducing them over time.

To genuinely deliver what people want and need, it is important to make it a nexus story. Arguably one of the reasons we have expanded what we do is because we have to listen to affected people. Importantly, however, participants also emphasised that **the nexus does not mean that humanitarians should absorb more and more functions**, but rather that development actors should be brought into the fold sooner. This again requires donors to be less risk-averse, particularly with regard to their development portfolio. Humanitarians should be allowed to focus on the core humanitarian task of life-saving rather than trying to solve the bigger-picture problems.

Good examples to build on and lessons to look back at in terms of how to pool funding and work across the nexus were raised, including consortia and multi-donor trusts funds. The significance of flexible funding was also raised, with the caveat that moving to flexible funding does not in itself mean that the system will suddenly work in an efficient, coordinated manner. For this to happen, the necessary conditions need to be put in place upstream, with specific asks, reporting requirements, and performance appraisals that incentivise the collective endeavour.

In light of ‘doing less with less’, participants discussed how best to approach the restructuring needed. It was suggested that the question is perhaps not so much “what’s left to do” as “where do we restart”: is it possible to rein in a system that has run away from itself, or is it necessary to start from the beginning and build up the system again, starting from the local level and the needs that are seen there? To go beyond technical top-down procedures and allow for true leadership on the ground, affected people would have to be at the table determining the direction of programming, including what the priorities should be. And indeed, the idea of the ERC’s Flagship is that it would be up to the leadership on the ground to define exactly how to move forward, taking into consideration each context. Perhaps WHS-type consultations could take place to look closer at what communities are looking for; discussions on how the system could be reformed to provide this could only happen during a second phase, rather than the other way around.

Next steps for HERE

The large turnout at the roundtable shows the importance of the issues raised. There is a broad recognition that change is needed, and a genuine interest in finding out how to make it happen. In terms of the question “what’s left to do?”, the roundtable indicated that it is largely about making sure that initiatives and commitments that have already been undertaken gain traction. By better connecting the dots in the humanitarian agenda, by diluting the concentration of power among actors, and by being clearer on how individual agency capacities and donor resources relate to collective priorities, the system will arguably be able to move the reforms forward.

In view of further reform, HERE takes particular note of the following:

- The **key commitments of the reform agenda**, including AAP, the centrality of protection, localisation, and the nexus **need to be seen as part of a bigger integrated effort**, instead of being addressed as separate or individual layers one on top of the other. Taken together, they point in a certain direction: for example, working with local civil society organisations, who frame their engagement with crisis-affected people in terms of a rights-based agenda.
- **Reform processes, whether they are top-down or bottom-up, must take the system’s political economy into account** to be effective in addressing systemic issues. The bigger picture is hard to control, and in day-to-day activities it is easier to zoom in on specific technical details and procedures. Many of the issues that the participants highlighted as standing in the way of change could however only be tackled if the bigger picture is constantly kept in mind. Likewise, **the ‘top-down’ and the ‘bottom-up’ have to address the system in tandem.**
- One of the hopes of the May 2023 roundtable was that it would pave the way for the **creation of an informal network of change-makers from various constituencies of the humanitarian system.** But there is **also a need for more formal processes** through which findings and recommendations that relate to the systemic issues are brought forward. As part of its exchange mission, HERE will continue to engage with the sector in view of this goal.

- The system is rife with coordination fora, networks, and platforms, but there is **no natural platform for exchange on collective (donor-agency) performance in terms of principled humanitarian action and strategic issues**. Discussions tend to be split between donors and agencies, e.g., between the IASC and GHD, or focus on some issues, such localisation and quality funding (in the Grand Bargain) without taking the bigger picture into account. Likewise, reforms have focused too much on technical improvements. There is a disconnect with the leadership level. Would it be possible to conceive of a new platform where donors and agencies meet at the highest level? And how to ensure a connection with locally-led platforms that are inclusive?
- **‘Doing less with less’ should not be understood as simply adopting a service-delivery mindset**. The ERC Flagship’s focus on contextualised, area-based approaches rather than top-heavy processes is highly valuable, but it has to be accompanied by 1) appropriate incentives for all actors to truly contribute, and 2) careful consideration of what it is that defines the humanitarian endeavour, looking at the basics of in terms of principled humanitarian action.
- Going forward, HERE will continue to **enhance value-based coordination**. Immediate next steps in this vein include a **review of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, together with the Humanitarian Policy Group**; an **advisory role in an ICVA-led effort to look at principles and coordination**; and a closer at the **potential of ABC, together with the Berlin-based Centre for Humanitarian Action**, and **other actors to reform humanitarian coordination**.