



HERE-GENEVA

# STRATEGY 2019-2021

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## Introduction

During the first four years of its existence, the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE) developed its research agenda to highlight gaps in the delivery of humanitarian response to people affected by crises, especially armed conflicts. By pointing to these gaps, HERE seeks to clarify why these gaps exist, who is responsible for filling them, and how they can be filled. HERE's concern for principled humanitarian action, and its position as an informed outsider have proven to be of value when it comes to providing a reality check on governments' and agencies' humanitarian commitments and agendas. HERE has shown that it can deliver honest reflections as to the reality on the ground – a reality which is often very different from that envisaged in policy statements and instruments designed at the global level.

In the next three years (2019-2021) HERE is seeking to become a well-established player in providing evidence on the effectiveness of principled humanitarian action. It will work closely with those who share the commitment of putting humanitarian principles into practice. Following a description of how HERE perceives the current environment and a short explanation of our identity and work, this Strategy sets out three objectives. The first objective is about delivering evidence, including in real-time, on what is happening or may happen in relation to governments' and agencies' (future) commitments to make humanitarian action more effective. The second objective speaks to making this evidence better known in order to ensure that it has the widest possible reach and impact. The third objective covers our plans to step up our services to donors who, like us, believe that principled humanitarian action provides the best guarantee for effectiveness. A concluding section refers to the ways in which we will measure progress in relation to the objectives of this strategy.



## Context

Ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, HERE developed a blueprint for the humanitarian community for the years to come. As articulated in the report *On the right track*, “instead of fixing current problems by broadening the humanitarian agenda, the answer is to reassert a limited set of key priorities: principles, protection, and accountability.” For an organisation such as HERE, in fact, three aspects of the current humanitarian environment stand out:

- > The decline in respect for fundamental humanitarian norms and the shrinking space for principled humanitarian action;
- > The number of perennial issues in humanitarian response which remain unaddressed;
- > The low investments in humanitarian quality assurance.

First, the international community is failing to reverse the trend of targeted attacks on hospitals, education facilities, or more generally on civilians – atrocities which have become pervasive across many different contexts of war, from Yemen, to Syria, to Afghanistan, and Nigeria. In upholding humanitarian norms, it should not be forgotten that there has never been a golden age for international humanitarian law (IHL) and principles; humanitarian access has never been completely unimpeded and the facilitation of the delivery of relief never entirely efficient. That said, it is more than troubling that in spite of the increased evidence of attacks on civilians, this has so far not led to more (international) accountability. Impunity is the norm. Further to this, a growing number of countries are invoking the principle of sovereignty and moving away from multilateral agreements. Populism, nationalism, and xenophobia have contributed to a decline in international solidarity. The criminalisation in some countries of assistance to migrants or refugees is probably the most visible manifestation of these trends. Today’s context is characterised by numerous threats to the multilateral framework that underpins principled humanitarian action.

This grim reality has to be juxtaposed with the opportunities and progress created by the adoption of new frameworks and commitments in the last five years. Of relevance to HERE’s work and environment – as for the humanitarian community as a whole – are the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals and the related 2030 Agenda; the outcomes and commitments of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit; the Grand Bargain Agreement (2016); and the Global Compact for Refugees (2018). Several of these recent instruments have given impetus to initiatives such as the “new way of working” that is expected to work towards collective outcomes on the three axes of humanitarian, development, and peace. Whether this is the case remains to be seen. Other particular areas of relevance to HERE include gender mainstreaming and addressing sexual and gender-based violence; the emphasis on accountability to affected populations; and the localisation of humanitarian action. While these priorities are highly critical for the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian action, delivering on them is far from straightforward. It appears that there is a mismatch between global commitments and the needs on the ground.

Second, systemic issues continue to impede more effective humanitarian responses. In the context of its work HERE has seen various reasons for the dysfunctionality, which were

highlighted in a discussion paper that preceded this strategy. These dysfunctionalities range from gaps in data and evidence, to problems around strategies that are confused with funding appeals, and tensions between collective performance and individual agency accountability. The asymmetrical relationships among donors, agencies, and affected populations create a situation in which the sector has few incentives to highlight the gaps. For one, the sector is not fit to deal with bad news; humanitarian action is supposed to do good. While celebrating successes in terms of humanitarian achievements is appropriate at times, humanitarians should be equally concerned with what remains to be done. The sector finds it difficult to hold honest and frank exchanges on what does not work well. Humanitarian agencies also have a tendency to embellish their achievements to remain in favour with the donors. Donor governments for their part, are mostly interested in knowing whether things were done right. While more investments have been made in communicating with affected communities, acting on the feedback provided remains the weakest link.

As noted, the implementation of commitments to enhance the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian action remains elusive. And, what is more, the institutional memory of them is dwindling. For example, the 2012 IASC-led Transformative Agenda sought to strengthen accountability for collective performance, but its commitments for (collective) reviews and evaluations to deliver this accountability have hardly been implemented. The return on investment in the (often) lengthy and extensive policy processes that produced the commitments seems minimal. On the ground, HERE has witnessed a widening gap between policy and practice. The sector continues trying to address political failures through technical solutions. It follows that HERE's mission to collect and publish evidence of humanitarian responses on the ground is as important as ever. Accountability starts with a reality check.

Third, quality and accountability in humanitarian action remain underfunded. While humanitarian budgets have multiplied in recent years, investments in quality assurance have not gone up in a similar fashion. The size of the total budget for evaluations in the sector is extremely difficult to measure but it does not appear that there is a significant increase as compared to a decade ago. The same can be said for the combined budgets of the sector's joint quality and accountability initiatives, such as ALNAP, CHS-Alliance, SPHERE, and HQAI, which also remain very small. Real-time evaluations seem to have fallen of the map.

Related to quality and, especially, accountability is risk. For several years now, donor governments have shown a tendency to transfer all risk to operational agencies, while risks are inherent in humanitarian response. In addition, in 2018, the discussion on risk and accountability shifted to addressing the (mis)behaviour of those involved in the delivery of assistance. There is no question that the prevention of sexual exploitation is an essential part of risk management and, thus, accountability, but quality assurance in humanitarian action must take a collective and broader perspective and involves several tools. Practice reviews and real-time evaluations are essential tools for quality assurance. The question is not only whether agencies did things rightly, i.e. followed protocols, policies, and procedures, but also if they are doing the right thing, i.e. are the protocols, etc., the right answer to addressing certain challenges. HERE provides insight into the latter question, but for it to have an impact in strengthening quality and accountability more work is needed.

## About HERE

Founded in the autumn of 2014, HERE is a Geneva-based independent think-tank addressing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice. In a world where humanitarian needs remain unmet, HERE's mission is to contribute to improving collective performance and the effectiveness of humanitarian action. Working in close collaboration with humanitarian actors, HERE provides the humanitarian community and other actors with independent reports, policy papers, and studies based on applied, mixed-methods research and analysis. The aim is to stimulate reflection, fuel debate and dialogue, and change policy and behaviour. HERE's particular focus is on situations of armed conflict and complex emergencies, where the most urgent needs are found.



In developing this strategy HERE reached out to several of its stakeholders to discuss its relevance and added value. Based on these consultations and the feedback received during regular exchanges, HERE can articulate its added value, as follows:

- > Its strong institutional memory of past reform efforts and changes in the sector;
- > Its independent position and emphasis on the continued relevance of humanitarian principles;
- > The practical relevance of its evidence-based research and reviews;
- > The synergy between its self-initiated projects and commissioned pieces of work; and
- > Its ability to review the implementation of commitments on the ground in real-time.

Taking these assets into account, HERE has positioned itself as a critical but constructive voice for principled humanitarian action. It believes that principled humanitarian action provides the best guarantee to assist and protect those who are most affected by disasters and conflict. The May 2016 publication *On The Right Track* that was submitted as HERE's contribution to the World Humanitarian Summit and that saw the participation of a range of experts, has served as HERE's reference in developing its agenda. HERE remains committed to defending and promoting humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability, as three elements that are indispensable to delivering effective humanitarian action.

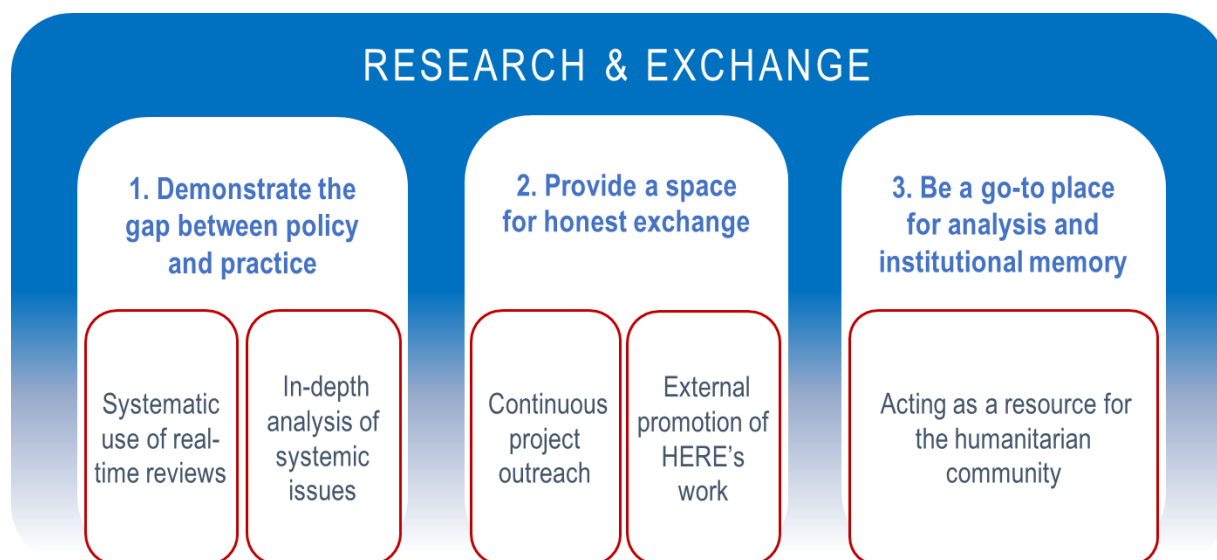
HERE will strive to publicly promote all of its work – whether commissioned or self-initiated – in an effort to spark critical thinking and action from within the system in a transparent manner. When choosing commissioned pieces of work, HERE will follow internal guidelines to ensure integrity and independence, while navigating the expectations of the commissioning agency.

An October 2017 internal SWOT analysis revealed that HERE's future is not yet secured. It has had to find commissioned pieces of work (CPWs) to sustain income while some of this time could have been devoted to HERE's self-initiated studies. That said, increasing the number of donors willing to provide core funding is a challenge as some prefer supporting larger players and/or seek to keep the number of partners limited to lessen their administrative burden. If HERE is to achieve its mission, it will have to mobilise more core funding, however. It needs to demonstrate to new or potential donors that:

- 1) HERE's analysis and assessments are part of the sector's work in quality assurance. HERE delivers evidence that is not found elsewhere; and
- 2) HERE's added value outweighs administrative and control issues.

## Strategic objectives

This strategy includes three objectives. They find their roots in HERE's experience and recent reflection. The three objectives are intimately linked, closely reflecting the inner working of the humanitarian system. As illustrated in the figure and text below, the three objectives embody HERE's overall mission to bridge the gaps between policy and humanitarian practice through research and exchange. As such, they guide HERE's priority activities in 2019-2021.



### 1. Demonstrate the gap between policy and practice with a view to stimulating immediate action and systemic improvements

Gaps in humanitarian responses are inherent in the field of action. Caused by armed violence, insecurity, the lack of travel authorisations, or insufficient financial resources, etc., they come with the environment in which humanitarian action is delivered. But these challenges do not tell the whole story. The key question is what actions agencies are taking to address them. Are they sufficiently bold and principled enough in their thinking and actions in confronting these challenges? Have they adapted their strategies sufficiently to the context? How do agencies manage competing demands between assistance and protection concerns and other dilemmas? Do they share their challenges with donors? Too often, the prevailing narrative on a crisis set by the UN and/or the host or donor governments does not sufficiently reflect the hard reality on the ground. And, what is more, donors and agencies are not keen to acknowledge where they fail. Gaps in humanitarian responses are uncomfortable news.

Many of the gaps in donors' and agencies' responses are not only quantitative in nature. They are (also) qualitative and should ideally be addressed and redressed as the humanitarian response unfolds. *Ex post* comparative analysis can also point to where the system is failing the most. HERE's research and studies can make a difference, both by helping to stimulate immediate action and by bringing up suggestions for systemic improvements. Previous HERE



reviews, such as the one on principled humanitarian action in Iraq (2017) and the real-time evaluation of the DEC-funded response to the Rohingya refugee crisis (2018), have been well received because they provided an honest appraisal of the situation on the ground.

Against this background, in the coming three years, HERE will demonstrate gaps and highlight the need for immediate attention and action and, where needed, systemic improvements. It will do so through real-time reviews and in-depth research and prospective analyses on thematic (policy) commitments. The body of evidence deriving from these reviews should convince decision-makers that they need to do better, while HERE will also offer perspectives on how to do better.

### **Promoting a more systematic use of real-time reviews**

A HERE-convened consultation among experts on Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs) in September 2018 revealed that there is agreement that inter-agency RTEs looking at collective performance need to be brought back to the humanitarian agenda. One reason why they have fallen off is that they became too large and heavy processes with too many issues to cover. Experience has shown that RTEs are a tool in humanitarian quality assurance that complement other tools, such as data collection, monitoring and reporting, as they provide evidence in real-time of the state of the response on the ground. An RTE should look at larger, overarching questions instead of more detailed technical issues that play a role in the delivery of humanitarian action. Conceived as a learning exercise, an RTE is particularly well-suited to address collective performance.

In the coming three years, HERE will continue to promote initiatives with donors and agencies to undertake RTEs. RTEs allow for rapid course-corrections and their findings can also be fed into policy debates on structural or systemic issues. RTEs cannot be done as HERE self-initiated initiatives as they require the collaboration and buy-in from agencies on the ground. HERE recognises the importance of sharing findings from its work with policy forums such as the GHD-initiative, Grand Bargain discussions, or the OCHA donor support group, especially when the reviews raise systemic issues. It will also push for evaluations to be seen as something much more valuable than a simple ‘tick-the-box’ exercise.

### **Providing insights and prospective analyses on systemic issues**

Part of HERE’s mission is to carry out a reality check on the relationship between policy and humanitarian practice. Many commitments have been made over the years towards better and more effective humanitarian action. The question is whether these commitments have fulfilled their promise. What is the return on investments in the (sometimes) lengthy and extensive policy development processes that produced these commitments? Following a study in late 2016, HERE has worked to develop a model and approach that reflects on the feasibility and reality of certain commitments. It appears that at times there is a mismatch between global commitments and the needs on the ground. This is why HERE will undertake in-depth, detailed reviews of certain commitments, for example in the areas of gender-based violence, protection, or accountability to affected populations, to understand and provide insight on what has happened in practice.

The next step is to offer suggestions for the future. Prospective analyses can be done when commitments have been properly examined and compared with the actual situation. In reviewing practice where it happens, HERE has come across opportunities to develop and share its understanding of the potential impact of new policy and policy instruments on humanitarian practice. There is no lack of new policy initiatives in the humanitarian domain, but the way these policies play out on the ground is not always understood or anticipated. Take for example the localisation agenda that is part of the Grand Bargain, or of the implementation of the Global Compact for Refugees and its related Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. These concepts or agreements carry the support of a wide range of governments and humanitarian actors, but it is much less clear what they look like on the ground. HERE plans to consider the practical implications of such policy initiatives and, especially, what living up to the commitments would entail. By undertaking such an exercise, it should become clear what actions are needed to implement new policies or why some new policies may fail if not sufficiently linked to the reality on the ground. It will also enable HERE to point to possible, unanticipated, negative side-effects,

The specific topics for insights and prospective analysis exercises will be further detailed in annual (or bi-annual) plans of action.

## 2. Provide a space for honest exchange

HERE's exchange function could be conceived as an end in itself – stimulating mutual learning and critical thinking among humanitarians through informed policy debates and continuous engagement is part of HERE's core mission. Deriving from our experience, one issue that HERE has seen is that too often collective exchanges on policy and practice fail to recognise the reality on the ground. The systemic issue, as explained in the context section of this Strategy, is that bad news is not easily shared. Agencies feel that they need to look good towards donors and, in turn, donor governments may fear counter-productive reactions from parliaments when they disclose that their funding was not spent optimally. This reality asks for a safe space where donors and agencies feel free to be honest about their (possible) mistakes and where there can be real learning.

In the period 2019-21, HERE will step up its role in convening meetings, events, and workshops that bring humanitarian actors together to discuss policy and practice. For HERE however, the exchange function also goes deeper, constituting alongside research, one of the two main tools to be used to bridge policy and practice. As such, in the coming years, HERE will stimulate mutual learning and critical thinking by:

### Ensuring continuous project outreach to relevant stakeholders

For HERE's research projects to be anchored in reality and to be of practical use, continuous dialogue and mutual learning must be an integral part of all reviews and studies. The exchange function is not only relevant at the end of the research process, in the dissemination phase, but also during the research through participatory and interactive methodologies. It further plays a significant role at the start of the research, before the data collection, to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the key research questions.

### Promoting HERE's work externally

Linked to HERE's current limited size, there is a risk that HERE's research remains insufficiently known. Consequently, there is a need for HERE to increase its communications capacity. This increased and continuous exchange with the humanitarian community will also enhance the knowledge and use of HERE's research products. Further to prioritising HERE's communications capacity as part of future expansion plans, HERE will also make more use of social media communication tools for writing blogs, and other short contributions, including one-pagers that summarise HERE's findings in a non-technical fashion. At least once a year, possibly in collaboration with partners, HERE will organise a larger event, such as a round-table or public debate, in conjunction with its research.

As part of its effort to secure a more solid base with structural income from a group of donor governments, HERE will step up its exchange with new or potential donors. Where relevant and feasible, it will also devote attention to European-based foundations. It has been HERE's experience that grant-making foundations are relatively unfamiliar with humanitarian work. Where they provide support, this is mostly done in the context of the response to natural disasters or pandemics. It should be noted, however, that foundations' added value could particularly be in the area of independent funding that supports initiatives that strengthen quality and accountability.

### 3. Be a go-to place for analysis and institutional memory for humanitarians

Those who make up the humanitarian community are in constant need of well-informed analysis in order for them to take better informed decisions. In addition to this, institutional memory on developments, reform efforts, and initiatives of the past that sought to increase the effectiveness and improve the quality of humanitarian action is certainly not present in every organisation. Turn-over of staff in donor governments and agencies is a well-known phenomenon. In addition, it is HERE's experience that for a number of donor governments it may be a challenge to navigate the various, sometimes overlapping, agendas of policy fora, such as the OCHA donor support group, the GHD-initiative, or the Grand Bargain discussions.

Thanks to its research and exchange portfolio and institutional memory, HERE's analyses can allow interested stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of topical issues. For HERE, supporting colleagues in the humanitarian community at large with independent analysis that is grounded in humanitarian principles is an appropriate and constructive way to also remind them of their responsibilities, whatever these may be.

In the next three years, HERE will therefore continue to work towards better informed humanitarian decision-making by:

### Acting as a resource for the humanitarian community

HERE is planning to further develop its function as a resource for the broader humanitarian community in the next three years. Building on its institutional memory, HERE will develop historically informed analysis and positions on a range of humanitarian issues. Previously, several HERE partners have sought HERE's expertise and HERE's analyses have been made available to a number of government donors and agencies. HERE will therefore seek to further

develop this function and make efforts to enlarge the group of partners with and for whom it works. A related ambition is to ensure that the engagement with these partners become more systematic HERE and its partners to know what they can expect from each other.

HERE's support function can also extend in other ways, such as to facilitate or provide input to informal consultations. Such an active role can be played with a donor government, for example in relation to a new strategy or country policy, or among governments on specific humanitarian issues.

To achieve the objective of "better informed decisions" HERE will also actively engage with the donor governments concerned to understand the way in which its thinking and analysis has been taken into account and has led to new directions or adjustments in their policies.



## Where do we want to be at the end of 2021?

HERE's ambition is to become a reference for humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers on principled humanitarian action, known for sharing analyses on the reality on the ground in terms of commitments to deliver more effective humanitarian action.

It is HERE's goal that principled humanitarian action is recognised as the best way to deliver effective aid of high quality. HERE can contribute by preserving the humanitarian ecosystem's institutional memory and discovering new knowledge. Naturally, if space for principled humanitarian action is restricted, HERE's space to operate and impact will also be negatively impacted.

In terms of HERE size, the aim by 2021 is to be an organisation of six-seven core staff with stable sources of income from a relatively small but engaged group of donor governments. HERE will be governed by a gender-balanced Board of five to eight Trustees, who meet four times per year, of which up to two meetings are in person.

### Companions and Competitors

As noted, HERE's added value is not found in being another mainstream research institution but in its active contribution towards advancing a principled agenda and strengthening accountability for upholding humanitarian norms. It is only in collaboration with others, however, that we can make a difference. The groups or think tanks that carry out work more or less similar to HERE is consistent, they include ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group in London; Groupe URD in France; GPPI in Germany, Humanitarian Outcomes in the US and UK, and a few others. They can be a partner in a research project one day and a competitor for another project the following day. HERE will maintain its efforts to distinguish itself in terms of its emphasis on humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability as overarching themes in its work.

Other partnerships that HERE will continue to develop are those with academic research institutes such as the Graduate Institute, Boston University, and CERAH. HERE may benefit from the work of their students, as interns, and/or the contents of their research projects.

Another partnership in which HERE will actively participate is the Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian (H2H) network, set up by ACAPS and hosted by DRC. H2H seeks to develop complementarity among a number of small organisations that deliver (technical) support services to operational organisations. In this network, HERE will emphasise its experience and expertise in carrying out RTEs looking at collective performance. HERE will also play an active role as member of the ALNAP network.

### Putting this Strategy into Action

By its nature, a strategy is broad and ambitious. It is not a work plan with specific activities and indicators for progress. That said, just as every other organisation, HERE will want to know how it is doing in reaching its objectives. In annual plans and project documents, HERE will make it clear how these planned activities fit with this strategy.

In relation to achieving progress in implementing this Strategy, further recognition of HERE being on the right track when it comes to promoting principled humanitarian action will be sought. The following indicators will provide guidance:

- > More organisations using HERE materials on principled humanitarian action.
- > Stronger recognition as an organisation in its own right, removed from the Executive Director.
- > More visible standing in GVA and beyond as the go-to place when it comes to doing RTEs, policy-practice studies, and short papers for providing institutional memory and analysis.
- > Progress in the number of actors referring to or turning to HERE for advice.
- > General recognition in the humanitarian system of the value of RTEs looking at collective performance rather than individual evaluation.