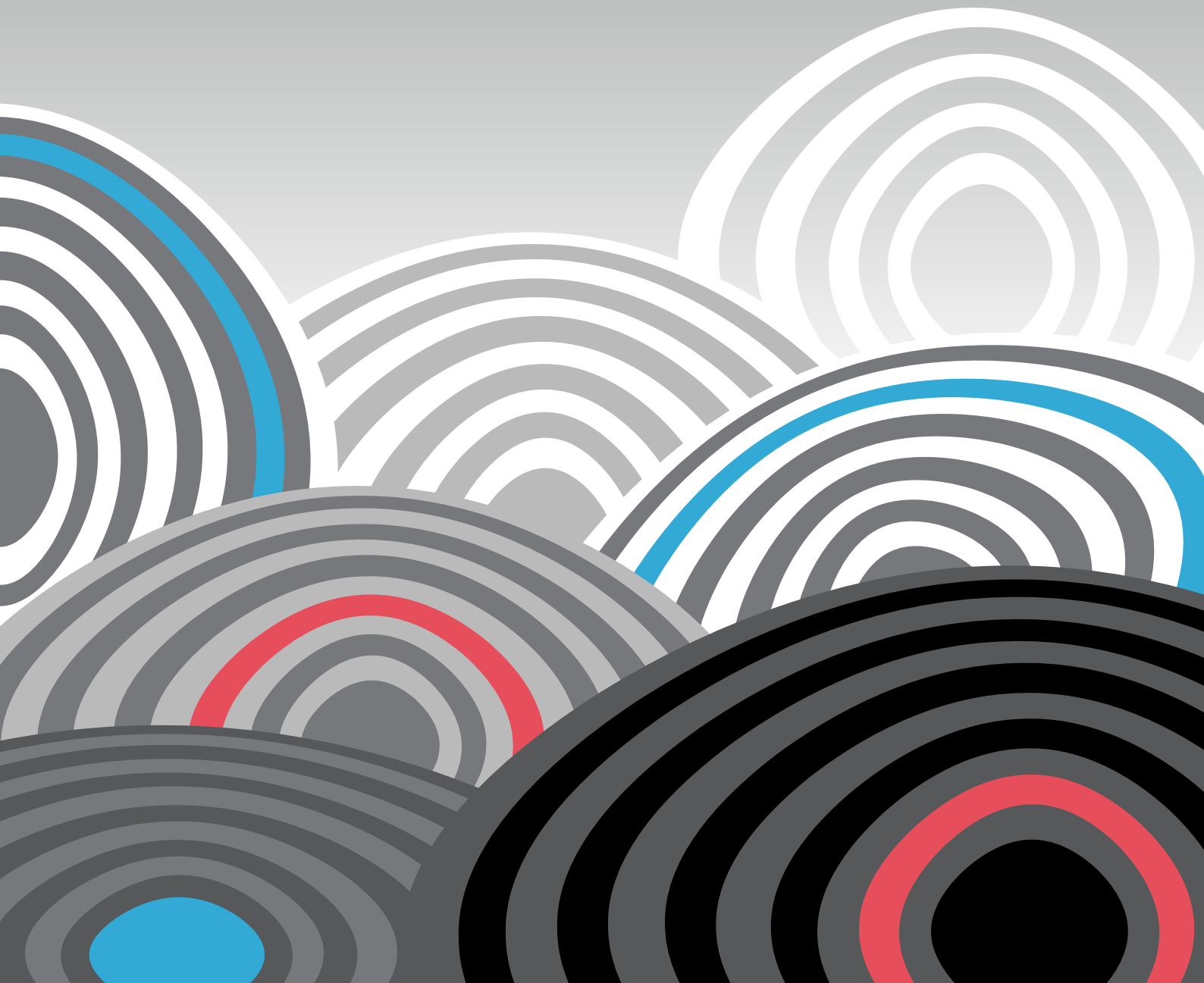




# Beyond the Pandemic

Concept Note - August 2020



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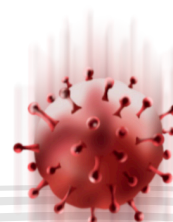
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HERE-Geneva 2020



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## Background and Scope

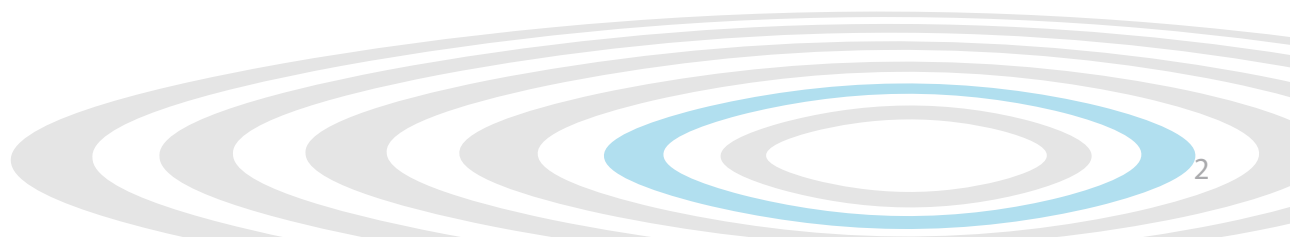
The COVID-19 pandemic created vast new needs and has exacerbated those already in existence. The pandemic has had an enormous impact on health systems, and is increasingly destabilising global food security and nutrition, education, and livelihoods. The devastation wrought by the COVID-19 crisis is significant, growing, and is likely to have a lasting impact. First among the challenges the pandemic has laid bare is the role of local actors, which will only become more prominent as travel remains restricted, something that is unlikely to change until a vaccine becomes widely available. Secondly, COVID-19 has highlighted the inequality and inequity among communities and populations. This, together with anti-racism demonstrations following the death of George Floyd in the US, have led to a deep introspection in (parts of) the aid community with regards to power imbalances and neo-colonial attitudes. Thirdly, and linked to the first two issues, as some governments have (ab)used public health measures to (further) restrict fundamental rights and freedoms, aid organisations have been confronted with a range of ethical and rights dilemmas. Many of these issues are not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic is throwing new light on them, raising the question of whether lessons from the past have been learned and if this crisis is providing the impetus for (further) reform in the humanitarian sector.

In light of these developments, a number of reform trends and commitments from donors and agencies appear particularly relevant. For example, as part of the 2016 Grand Bargain agreement, donor governments committed to reducing the earmarking of

funding. While there is anecdotal evidence of some increased flexibility in donors' funding practices in the COVID-19 response, it should be noted that the trend until now has been increased conditionality.<sup>1</sup> Another commitment was made to strengthen the linkages (known as the nexus) between the domains of humanitarian and development aid (and peace building – the triple nexus). COVID-19 responses require closer collaboration between various actors, but in conflict situations where the government is usually one of the conflict parties, the nexus increases tensions between collaborating and maintaining distance from the government. Given the reported general rise in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), the 2013 IASC commitment to the centrality of protection requires closer examination. Whether the COVID-19 crisis has an enabling impact on these (and other) commitments remains to be seen.

In its research, HERE has seen various factors that contribute to the gap between humanitarian needs and the funds/resources available to tackle them. One such factor is that the exponential growth in humanitarian needs can also be traced back to an internal trend in humanitarian action, to continuously expand its agenda. The pandemic has the potential to skew an organisation's strategic approach away from its core mission. Understanding how humanitarian actors prioritise their work in the COVID-19 response is therefore essential. HERE's previous work has highlighted that humanitarian actors are diverse and refer to widely different criteria to prioritise

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020.



investments and interventions. In its “Unpacking Humanitarianism”,<sup>1</sup> for example, HERE pointed to the fact that using ‘life-saving’ as a concept to define humanitarian action does not translate into coherent operational guidance since organisations interpret the term quite differently. In addition, organisations may need to sharpen their focus in the near future. Especially at a time when aid budgets are likely to reduce due to widespread economic recession, organisations should be clear on how best they leverage their strengths.

Part of HERE’s mission is to facilitate a reality check on the relationship between policy and humanitarian practice. Through this project, HERE aims to contribute additional evidence to a changing landscape.

## Purpose and Expected Outcome

The purpose of the project is to capture evidence and provide insights into the changes the COVID-19 pandemic is anecdotally forcing on the humanitarian sector and the implications for humanitarian organisations. As noted, the COVID-19 pandemic may have a lasting impact on humanitarian action as the potential for organisations to stretch their mandate and/or disregard ethical issues in decision-making increases, which could contribute to expanding the gap between needs and resources. The project will ‘take the temperature’ of the situation, monitoring the impact of COVID-19-related trends and developments on humanitarian action, and exploring the ways in which the sector needs to adapt to this new reality. Using a range of research, both current and historical, HERE will also examine how organisations are leveraging their comparative advantages and organisational strengths at a time when many are seeing a decline in available resources.

More specifically, the project will aim to answer the following questions:

- » What impact does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the existing humanitarian landscape and its ways of working?
- » What decision-making processes and prioritisation approach(es) are agencies taking in light of the pandemic? If there has been an increase in flexible funding, has this had an impact on humanitarian prioritisation exercises? How?
  - What are humanitarian organisations prioritising in view of compounding needs? Are there different approaches in how agencies label crises (e.g. health crisis, food security crisis...)? If so, why and what are the implications? How are agencies framing programmes in relation to donors’ preferences?
- » How do organisations address humanitarian ethics in their decision-making? Are there tensions between funding pressures and ethical decisions? If so, which? How are humanitarian organisations handling them?
- » What possible (further) change should be considered in order for the sector to remain fit for purpose?

The expected outcome is a public report which will aim to provide insights into the likely changes experienced by the humanitarian sector as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more specifically, into humanitarian agencies’ strategies and decision-making processes to leverage their strengths – and the role that funding and humanitarian ethics play in this regard.

It is expected that the project will be carried out between August 2020 and March 2021.

<sup>1</sup> <https://here-geneva.org/the-role-of-mandates/>

## Methodological Approach

The project will be undertaken using qualitative research methods, incorporating the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data. The suggested units of analysis will be:

1. Purposive sample of humanitarian actors (including a selected number of donors, INGOs, national/local NGOs, UN agencies);
2. Networks/coordination mechanisms to capture the aggregated experience of a wider set of humanitarian actors and funding mechanisms;
3. A maximum of four country case studies, selected using the following criteria: protracted humanitarian crisis; armed conflict; mixed displacement; urban context; low-middle income; 'clusterised' or not; local actors.

The use of both primary and secondary sources will allow for the triangulation of findings by capturing both the perceptions of the individuals interviewed and the official positioning and strategic choices of the broader sector.

Building on HERE's exchange mission, this research project plans to benefit from the input and guidance of an advisory group made up of representatives from donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and NGOs. Two small (virtual) roundtable discussions focusing on the changes witnessed and/or expected within the humanitarian sector as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic will contribute additional insights. These exchanges

are expected to culminate in the HERE Conference, scheduled for January/early February 2021. While focusing more broadly on the future of humanitarian action and its priorities, the conference will present an opportunity to discuss the initial findings and test the preliminary change scenarios emerging from the research. It will also provide an opportunity to analyse the implications of the current approaches to prioritisation by humanitarian organisations. Further details on the analytical framework and the methodological approach are available in a separate methodological note.



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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