

COVID-19: Vision or Fashion?

Note of the HERE roundtable discussion, 30 November 2020

This Note provides a summary of a three-hour virtual policy-consultation among humanitarian practitioners, donor representatives, and independent experts on the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian actors and existing opportunities for (further) change towards a better fit-for-purpose sector. The roundtable provided a platform for participants to exchange, specifically to identify emerging themes and priorities for humanitarians in addressing the pandemic, and was meant to feed into the broader HERE research project – Beyond the pandemic – culminating in a conference in 2021. This Note also provides a number of reflections on behalf of HERE on the discussions and the way forward.

Summary of the discussion

Leveraging the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, and through a combination of short exchanges and thematic breakout group discussions, the meeting first explored system change (what has to change and why in the humanitarian sector?) and then delved into how to best manage change and address inequalities as the most visible outcome of the pandemic. The points below summarise some of the main insights that were collected during these exchanges.

Transformation vs. adaptation

There are different points of view as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a ‘black swan’ event with severe and widespread consequences to the humanitarian sector, or a temporary alteration of traditional humanitarian ways of working. Is it about transformation or adaptation? The answer to this question varies somewhat when looking at different realities across the sector (whether geographically or by actor), but the discussions pointed to two broad trends that merit attention: 1) humanitarian actors have tended to focus inwardly, especially in the first phase of the pandemic; 2) the pandemic has validated or largely accelerated pre-existing trends in policy (e.g. localisation of aid) or practice (e.g. digitalisation).

On the first, humanitarian actors have largely been caught unprepared by the scale of the crisis and the differential impact it has had on HQ vs. traditional operational contexts. They have therefore tried first and foremost to focus on internal adjustments, building where possible on existing and/or already underway decentralisation processes and grappling with duty of care responsibilities. On the second, the pandemic has confirmed the rationale for questioning a mode of delivery focused on international staff and has accelerated discussions around the role of local actors (and to some extent linking it to questions of decolonisation of aid) as well as progress on digitalisation. The pandemic has also confirmed the need for a global approach to the needs of populations and their inclusion into social protection safety nets wherever possible. However, practice has not always followed. Participants pointed to their perception that a relatively small percentage of the COVID-specific funding went to non-UN organisations, and even less so to national and local ones. In this sense, the role that philanthropy has and could play further in support of the localisation agenda has yet to be fully recognised.



Participants also noted that overall, in humanitarian response terms, COVID-19 has not been as prominent as expected. Indications are that measures to contain the pandemic taken in a number of countries with ongoing humanitarian crises, have had a more severe humanitarian impact than the virus itself. This is reminiscent of the Ebola crisis. The recession in China and closed borders had a much bigger impact on the West African countries where the outbreak took place than the health crisis itself. It was also noted that the world is witnessing a transition to different systems of governance, even though it is not yet clear where that transition is leading to. Politics trumps humanitarian action yet again.

Leadership for change

Change and leadership appear as inextricably linked. When reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on the humanitarian sector and the opportunities for change, participants offered a number of different perspectives on this issue. First and foremost, with the expectation that the traditional humanitarian funding environment will deteriorate, it is expected that there could equally be an appetite for change provided there is political leadership to capitalise on it. There was a broad recognition that the humanitarian sector is highly competitive and that if resources diminish substantially it may end up looking more fragmented than ever. Looking at the general retreat from multilateralism, existing fractures between UN agencies and NGOs are expected to deepen. Despite an increased appreciation for the role of national and local actors, participants argued that no substantial difference has been noted in the way national and local actors are able to access resources. The consensus among humanitarian actors stops at the fact that humanitarian action is to save lives and alleviate suffering. No change can happen if humanitarian actors do not decide what they want as a system. Funding continues being a critical element of that equation. For change to happen, there needs to be leadership for change.

The question becomes rather where that leadership may be situated. With the greatest impact in many contexts where traditional humanitarian actors operate being socio-economic in nature, there could be increasing challenge and disruption coming from host countries and national civil societies, which could both create the necessary tensions for change and challenge existing leadership structures.

Accountability for change

Driving real and lasting system change begins with cultivating accountability. Participants linked the notion of accountability both to the broader dynamics underlying the current challenges to multilateralism and to the long-standing sets of relationships within the humanitarian sector. On the first, the conversation centred around the consolidation of specific centres of power – big powers have seized the opportunity of the pandemic to gather even more – and the current state of international affairs and the restructuring of traditional cooperation models. Political and diplomatic cooperation at times of increased nationalism and isolationism has mostly been seen in the form of thematic alliances, such as those around food insecurity or COVAX for the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines. There are concerns, however, as to what this means for global accountability as none of these alliances rely on an accountability framework such as that provided by an international treaty or IHL. Where do human rights, as a global accountability framework that delineates specific roles and responsibilities, stand?

On the second, the long-standing sets of relationships, the conversation focused in particular on financial resources as a lever for change and the relationship between international and national and



local actors. Looking at the multilateral humanitarian system, it is striking how in effect four top donors manage about 50% of the total humanitarian finance. While there is broad agreement on what the humanitarian system should do, and the direction of travel, systems and incentives are not yet or insufficiently aligned with a number of policy directions. There are interests in the system that run counter to reform, for example when it comes to collective action. One of the problems is that the focus is more about the money than about the people. What to do about that? Should there be a value-based reckoning? The system is unequal in itself, and it perpetuates that inequality. Ultimately, political will changes if public opinion shifts. There is a need to recentre the discussion around what accountability to affected populations truly means.

Building on existing commitments

The participants argued that the humanitarian sector has been undergoing numerous different reforms in the past decades, including the introduction of the cluster system, the Transformative Agenda, and the Grand Bargain. Donors and operational humanitarian actors have signed up to several commitments underpinning such reform efforts. But why have these efforts failed to lead to meaningful change? Have we even given ourselves enough time to review the impact of these previous reforms or to analyse and reflect on the question why they were unsuccessful? The discussions highlighted that change requires time especially if the political will to honour existing commitments wavers. Instead of continuing to push for new initiatives, it may be more effective to look back at what humanitarian actors have already committed to and take as much time as necessary to do it well.

Participants also pointed to the risk of bureaucratising change. The clusters, for example, were meant to tweak things that were not working very well, not to create whole new systems of sub-clusters, working groups, and a multitude of technical guidelines. Equally, the Transformative Agenda, instead of focusing on accountability as intended, was eventually reduced to a set of protocols and checklists. Building on existing commitments, it is time now for humanitarian actors to do better. Humanitarian actors are not expected to always have a solution. They should listen to the people they serve. Participants in fact noted that there is a simple question that should guide the humanitarian sector's attempts at upholding existing commitments: are we doing the right thing for the people we target? It is not about creating a new system as much as ensuring and empowering humanitarian actors to uphold prior commitments, including by ensuring that funding is where it should be for change to happen. Alternative sources of funding, such as philanthropy, should not be underestimated but the system needs to become more flexible and nimbler to fully take advantage of them.

Beyond humanitarian action

The participants highlighted that one of the major impacts of the pandemic has been to point to trends and factors that lie beyond humanitarian action but that are closely interconnected, from climate change to decolonisation movements. It is notable, for example, that the pandemic has been framed by some international actors more as an inequality crisis rather than a humanitarian one. The role of social safety nets and the inclusion of vulnerable populations into existing social protection schemes irrespective of the context is one of the big lessons from the pandemic. Participants argued that social protection needs to be addressed in a major comprehensive way rather than in isolation and through silos within the international aid system. Human rights actors, for example, have not been part of humanitarian discussions around policy and practice as much as they could or should have, especially with regard to addressing inequalities. What will likely have repercussions on humanitarian crises



around the world is the impact of COVID-19 on the international economic infrastructures, including international trade. How and where, however, do humanitarian actors step in to take on what is essentially government responsibility?

The discussions concluded that for change to happen, humanitarian actors could look at the dominant narratives that are emerging so to influence the conceptual framework in which we work. The question is: how can we influence those narratives?

HERE's reflections on the consultation

The discussions brought to the fore themes that are a core part of HERE's work. Part of HERE's priorities, in fact, is to discern the lines between individual and collective accountability and to explore how much existing commitments for more effective humanitarian action are being upheld and contributing to clear outcomes. The insights shared at the roundtable also helped HERE crystallise some reflections – as presented below – that will be further articulated and expanded on in the final report for the “Beyond the pandemic” research project. First and foremost, however, with this roundtable and in line with its mission, HERE wanted to offer a space for an informal collective stock-taking of how far the humanitarian sector has come, and the direction it should continue taking. Not only did the discussions provide helpful insights on the emerging themes and priorities for humanitarians in addressing the pandemic for HERE's research project “Beyond the pandemic”, but they also suggested that there is an intrinsic value in reflecting together on what we have learnt from the pandemic thus far, and in testing collectively our individual theories of change for the humanitarian sector. This is surely a lesson HERE will take forward for its conference in 2021.

Vision or fashion? It remains unclear to what extent the pandemic has acted as a transformational event, and it may still be too early to tell. It has proven to some extent the validity of existing narratives around change. It has also provided an opportunity to test new ways of working and it has accelerated some processes that were already under way. As we are still in the midst of the pandemic, the question, however, can be equally seen as a forward-looking reflection. With every challenge that the pandemic is presenting the humanitarian sector with, it is equally providing opportunities. The time is certainly now for the sector to decide whether to use the pandemic as a lever and a vision for change. For this to happen, two considerations appear of paramount importance: 1. It cannot be only about technical solutions; 2. No common end goal – whether of reform or humanitarian action itself – can be taken for granted.

Technical solutions can provide part of an answer but are never the full answer. The sector has often invested massive resources in doing things right at the expense of deeper strategic questioning. Are we doing the right thing? Have we identified what the real obstacles for change in the sector to make it more effective are? COVID-19 has caused high levels of uncertainty, and while operating in uncertain times and environments should be the humanitarian sector's trademark, it has surrendered to a technocratic discourse of systematic risk assessment and mitigation of uncertainty's challenges.

Similarly, previous reform efforts have been dominated by introducing technocratic solutions and results-based management using quantitative reporting. Too often, the political level also demands ready-to-use solutions and quick fixes, but they leave current ways of working unchallenged. HERE's research demonstrates that deeper, systemic issues can only be resolved through a different approach.



The lack of a common vision within the humanitarian sector is not in itself the problem. The problem is the lack of honesty and transparency as to what drives each humanitarian actor – the why. The pandemic is one exogenous force among others shaking old habits at the moment. The current context is pointing to the need to focus on the notion of complementarities as the interconnectedness of various dynamics that build on one another to influence – no matter how – the outcomes humanitarians (and other actors) are working towards. It is time for leaders to ask themselves honestly: “what does it mean to be a humanitarian actor?”

As noted, on 16-18 March 2021 HERE is convening a larger event to stimulate an exchange of diverse experiences and visions for humanitarian action to chart a way forward. One possible outcome could be to define new criteria for reform of the sector that reflect lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, the decolonisation and Black Lives Matter discussions, and more. Essentially, what is needed is not another technocratic reform framework, but one that builds on the core humanitarian values and is qualitative in nature. These criteria should also incorporate the notions of diversity and complementarity, and require humanitarian actors to demonstrate their added value and relevance continuously.



Annex 1

Concept Note for the Meeting

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new needs and exacerbated existing ones, touching on health systems, but also on food security and nutrition, education, and livelihoods. There is lack of clarity however as to what the longer-term nature of its impacts will be. Some see COVID-19 as a temporary disruption while others see it as having a more structural impact. This is both due to the nature of the pandemic itself, and to the related global humanitarian response. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic is amplifying already existing gaps and issues in humanitarian responses and it is worth exploring what the humanitarian community is learning from the challenges faced in responding to the pandemic.

The HERE roundtable will reflect on and define the parameters of fit-for-purpose humanitarian actors in times of COVID-19. What is the impact of the pandemic in this regard, and what changes should be prioritised?

Suggested questions for discussion

- ✓ What does a fit-for-purpose humanitarian sector look like in view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – now and in the future?
- ✓ What changes need to happen? Who is responsible for making them happen?
- ✓ Is it still about making technical tweaks (as has happened for decades)? Or is it about a new paradigm and entirely new system (which is not a system but a network of systems) altogether?
- ✓ What are the leverage points for system change?

Format

The format will be that of a virtual roundtable over 3 hours. Discussions will happen both in plenary and in small break-out rooms. Participants include the members of the advisory group for HERE's 'Beyond the pandemic' project, as well as a mix of practitioners and policy-makers from within the humanitarian ecosystem. Participation will be on an invitation-basis.

Desired Outcome

The desired outcome of the roundtable is two-fold:

1. Contribute insights to HERE's ongoing research project "Beyond the pandemic";
2. Initiate a conversation towards finding common ground on what makes today's humanitarian sector fit-for-purpose.

