



HERE-GENEVA STRATEGY 2022-2024



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Introduction

Founded in Geneva in 2014, the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE) works to close the gap between policy and humanitarian practice. We work with all humanitarian actors – including governments – to identify and propose solutions to such gaps. Through research, evaluation, and dialogue, we promote comprehensive, transformative, and sometimes radical action.

This strategy covers the period 2022-2024, and it sets the direction for our own dedicated programme of research and the type of assignments that we carry out at the request of partners. It reflects our fundamental conviction that humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability are more relevant than ever, and critical to the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action. Demanding respect for principled humanitarian action may seem idealistic or naïve – yet HERE believes that a principled approach still provides the best guarantee of reaching everyone in need.

This strategy is based on our commitment to honest analyses of humanitarian responses; our willingness to propose transformative and system-wide change; and our conviction that political problems cannot be addressed through technical solutions. Over the period 2022-2024, we will continue, as we have done since we were founded, to provide a mirror to the humanitarian sector, to stimulate debate, and to generate meaningful change. Consolidating our achievements through lessons and partnerships is critical to our success and to expanding our reach.

This strategy begins by describing the context in which humanitarian action is taking place. It then highlights our three strategic orientations, including the objectives and outcomes associated with each. We view this strategy as an articulation of our values, an overview of what we plan to achieve and a tool for measuring learning and progress.



Context

There have been a number of global and country-related developments since HERE's last strategy. While not all may be relevant to our work, it is important to situate our ambitions within current and expected changes in the environment in which we work. Long-standing challenges have been coupled with new ones. Our concerns range from the macro to the micro: there are global uncertainties stemming from the world's inability to tackle global crises; long-standing systemic issues within the humanitarian architecture; and issue-specific challenges to humanitarian action.

While humanitarian action is designed to address situations of uncertainty, we see several developments that are particularly worrying because of their scale and potential impact. The climate crisis is taking increasingly alarming proportions. Changing weather patterns and extreme weather events will have severe impacts on livelihoods and are expected to exacerbate existing inequalities. Pledges and commitments have been made, but the key issue remains their implementation. The growing gap between rhetoric and reality is becoming increasingly significant in numerous policy areas.

Long-standing issue-specific challenges persist while new ones have emerged. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated current trends, such as the securitisation of public health, and shed new light on

unfulfilled policy commitments in humanitarian responses. The credibility and effectiveness of global (UN) mechanisms for crisis management and response appear seriously diminished, with ripple effects for related fields of action, including those in the humanitarian sphere. The trends of continued impunity for war crimes or crimes against humanity, and the flagrant disrespect for humanitarian and human rights norms, often under the disguise of sovereignty and non-interference, have not been reversed.

In the area of forced migration and displacement, we see the confinement of displaced communities in overcrowded camps and settlements or invisible but exploited in urban areas. Border closures or restrictive migration and asylum policies stand in contrast not only to commitments and pledges made by states in the context of the Global Compact for Refugees, its related Global Refugee Forum, and the Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, but they also undermine the respect for international law.

Digital technologies offer opportunities to improve the lives of individuals and communities affected by war and violence. They can also, however, create new or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Unsuitable design or usage of digital technologies can lead to stigmatisation, increased vulnerability and fragility, discrimination, persecution, and attacks on the physical and psychological integrity of certain populations in insecure environments.

This background is shaping our research agenda and thematic priorities for the years 2022-2024. To bridge the widening gap between policy and humanitarian practice, we focus our research on the actors who set the framework for, or deliver, humanitarian responses. We take the humanitarian principles, together with the key elements of protection and accountability, as the premise for effective humanitarian action. For example, how do vulnerabilities change in a digitally disrupted world? And how can humanitarian actors ensure the responsible use of fast-evolving digital technology and the data trail it creates? What does the localisation agenda imply for our ability to hold authorities to account when space for civil society has been curtailed? How does one ensure that the red lines and safeguards are in place to limit the instrumentalisation of the humanitarian agenda, while enhancing the heterogeneity of the humanitarian community? These are but some of the questions in our evolving environment that will guide our research and priorities in the coming years.



Our starting point

The 2019-2021 three-year strategy cycle has been an opportunity to establish HERE more solidly, following our start-up phase. Before focusing on our strategic priorities for the next three years, it is important to reflect on our role, relevance, and achievements.

By 2021, we sought increased recognition and a more visible standing among humanitarian policy and decision-makers, in Geneva and beyond. We also wanted to be recognised for our work on principled humanitarian action. Further to developing our track record through studies, evaluations, and reviews, we prioritised investments in our communications capacity and strengthened our exchange pillar. Going into our next strategy cycle, we plan to build on the following achievements:

- Our combination of self-initiated and commissioned projects has enabled us to develop in-depth knowledge of the functioning of a wide range of humanitarian actors.
- We have gained a deep understanding of several of the systemic issues that inhibit overall progress. We have seen that an exclusive focus on technical solutions at the working level may even lead to perverse outcomes.
- We have found confirmation that effective humanitarian action depends on the three core elements: humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability.
- Leveraging our exchange function has allowed us to make dialogue and sharing of views an integral element of our research agenda.
- Our investment in increased communications capacity has allowed us to engage in interactive debate and enhance awareness of our publications, such as our reports, but also our regular blog posts, and podcast series.

Understanding our current positioning also helps us pinpoint outstanding priorities, goals, and targets.

- Many internal agency incentives and appraisal systems are still focused on the performance of their organisations, despite the commitments to collective objectives and results. In our previous strategy, we set ourselves the target that, by 2021, we would have done more real-time evaluations (RTEs), looking especially at collective performance. We noted that such exercises could best be done were they to be commissioned. However, there have been very few opportunities for such work; reviews of collective performance remain an exception rather than standard practice. Though we maintain our keen interest, it appears to require a systemic shift with a longer time horizon.
- Our in-depth analyses often point to systemic issues, which do not lend themselves to quick fixes. As an independent think-tank, we are well positioned to help reflect on the bigger picture and provide paths for solutions, but we still need to formulate policy solutions that can be easily understood and that reach the right audiences.

Building on our current state, this strategy will help us articulate where we would like to be in 2024.



Strategic Orientations

This strategy provides the articulation of what HERE would like to achieve in the period 2022-2024, and how. HERE will work along three strategic orientations. These orientations have been formulated based on an internal assessment of HERE's achievements and challenges; a critical reading of the environment, and the conditions for more effective humanitarian action; and consultations with Board members and friends of HERE. Each strategic orientation leads to specific objectives/actions, which will guide HERE's priority activities in 2022-2024.

Strategic orientation 1 – Contribute to the respect for, and protection of, principled humanitarian action

HERE's added value is found in our active contribution to a principled agenda and strengthened accountability for upholding humanitarian norms. The respect for principled humanitarian action is under increasing pressure: amid access restrictions, counter-terrorism measures, and the tight earmarking of funds, many organisations are reluctant to speak out, and technocratic solutions have become standard practice. For example, policies and commitments such as the humanitarian-development-peace nexus or anticipatory financing have found wide support policy-wise, but their relevance and purpose should be carefully considered, as they may create tensions with several of the humanitarian principles.

Objective 1A: Provide in-depth analysis around the relevance of principled humanitarian action

Our experience has taught us that: 1) agencies and donors refer to the delivery of principled humanitarian responses but do not necessarily explain the basis for their claim; 2) the variety in so-called principled approaches is significant; and 3) protection and accountability are closely related to humanitarian principles.

With this in mind, we will continue to develop and look for opportunities to review principled humanitarian action – including references to protection and accountability – and engage in reflection and debate on the need for further clarity. We will also engage in dialogue and debate with those who promote different principles to guide humanitarian action.

Outcome/Result:

- HERE's work on principled humanitarian action receives attention and inspires thinking within or among organisations.

Objective 1B: Challenge (humanitarian) policy assumptions

Recent commitments or pledges such as those made in the context of the World Humanitarian Summit, Grand Bargain, or Global Refugee Forum are often based on partial evidence or wishful thinking, ignoring practical realities. In addition, policymakers tend to tackle challenges to humanitarian responses through siloed approaches.

As an independent think-tank, we are well positioned to point to conflicting priorities and/or flawed assumptions. We will provoke reflection on the part of policymakers as to whether their policies provide for solutions.

Outcome/Result:

- HERE's work is used in developing new policies or in adjusting existing policies.

Strategic orientation 2 – Provide analysis that advocates for meaningful systemic change

Through our work, we have seen that the systemic issues underlying gaps or flaws in practices require deeper and more thorough changes, rather than solely the issuing of new guidelines or a management response. Through our independent research agenda and targeted support to different humanitarian actors by means of commissioned pieces of work, we aim to stimulate critical thinking and mutual learning among an array of diverse actors. Increasingly, we have integrated our research with exchange events, and in so doing we have been questioning technocratic solutions that often ignore deeper systemic problems. Our target audiences are both at the senior leadership and working levels. In fact, we are particularly interested in forging better links between the two, as currently we see this as a major disconnect. A specific group of interest is policy and decision-makers in traditional humanitarian organisations and the ministries of donor governments. Many of these groups are responsible for the current policies and policy initiatives, which, as noted, need to be better aligned with the reality on the ground.

Objective 2A: Point decision-makers in the direction of meaningful change

Many of the most significant gaps between policy and humanitarian practice are systemic in nature. The humanitarian community has been faced with cyclical and incremental reform efforts over time, which have sought to tackle recurring challenges. Our experience points to the need to raise the deeper questions that go beyond technical solutions. A humanitarian organisation may be assessed as performing well, but what if the plan they are being measured against was flawed in the first place? Similarly, global policy discussions can prioritise and zoom in on specific policy details while ignoring of the bigger picture.

We play a role in bringing forward the institutional memory of past humanitarian reform attempts, their limitations, and the opportunities to reconsider/adapt them. Thanks to our independence, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to reflect on these shortcomings and point decision-makers in humanitarian organisations and donor governments in what we consider to be the right direction. We will nurture the trust of donors and agencies to enable them to share their challenges with us and to accept our analysis, which may potentially require deeper reforms.

In 2022 and beyond, we will continue to engage in dialogue with humanitarian actors and convene roundtables and exchanges with a diverse group of policymakers and practitioners, enabling frank dialogue and mutual learning.

Outcome/result:

- HERE's expertise is requested to provide analyses towards transformative and system-wide change

Objective 2B: Stimulate interactive debate and honest exchange

Trust is a prerequisite for effective partnerships in humanitarian action. Being honest and transparent about why humanitarian organisations agree on certain trade-offs or compromises is essential to building that trust. We have seen that institutional agendas are often an obstacle to honest exchange. Many senior humanitarian leaders engaged at the political level shy away from speaking up or taking risks. The need for frank conversations and a space for exchange is twofold: to find common ground for systemic solutions going beyond existing institutions, and to connect senior leadership with working-level practitioners, both at HQ and at the field level.

We will look for opportunities to convene informal events, possibly including a recurring yearly event, with senior leaders. Meanwhile, we also commit to listening to the feedback of our target audiences and act on it in order to create a dynamic and trusting policy environment. Building on our previous investments in our communications capacity, we will continue to experiment with different ways to engage with humanitarian policy and decision-makers, as well as practitioners, both directly and indirectly (e.g., through blog posts, podcasts, video summaries, etc.) Following this overall strategy, we will also update our communications strategy, if deemed necessary.

Outcome/result:

- Increased participation in, and interaction with, HERE's products and roundtables by an increasingly diverse group of actors.

Objective 2C: Expand HERE's agenda to new issues when relevant to meaningful change.

Change is by nature dynamic. For HERE to remain an effective change contributor, we need to be open to expanding our expertise to other policy areas beyond those which are core. Our ambition is to explore any other policy issues/initiatives that appear to have real potential for change.

Outcome/result:

- HERE's work remains relevant to donors, policymakers, and humanitarian practitioners.

Strategic orientation 3 – Consolidate HERE's achievements

In the past three years, we have managed to create a substantial portfolio of research consisting of self-initiated and commissioned projects from reputable partners. Frequent requests for our involvement in evaluations, ('technical') support, or advice are a sign of the recognition of HERE's track record. We also continue to see a synergy between our self-initiated research agenda and commissioned work, and we are continuously building our experience and insights based on both streams of work. We see a certain degree of evidence that humanitarian practitioners and policymakers know what we stand for, and seek our expertise. Yet, with principled humanitarian action at risk, the acquired niche is not a given. Although we have heard that our independence, research agenda, and network give us credibility, the space for 'free' policy work and research has not increased. In addition, we cannot and will not rely solely on commissioned work. In the coming three years, we will continue our search for those donors willing to support an independent humanitarian research agenda. We will also further develop our partnerships, including with like-minded think-tanks and, under certain circumstances, for-profit entities in evaluations.

Objective 3A: Consolidate HERE and secure a sustainable finance flow

With the ambition to have greater influence in shaping humanitarian policies, we must ensure that HERE's structure is fit for purpose. This requires securing a diverse financial base and thinking about HERE's size and impact.

As part of our efforts to secure a more solid base with structural income from a group of donor governments, we will pursue not only core funding, but also explore opportunities for hybrid pieces of work, whereby we will initiate and propose terms of references to donors, including the objectives and the scope of the project. We will be mindful of our independence and protect our ability to deliver the level of critical analysis needed, as well as the suggested way forward.

Further to this, as initiated under our 2019-2021 strategy, we will continue to consolidate, especially as part of annual reports, the lessons that we learn through our studies and reviews and share these lessons with our donors and other audiences.

Outcome/result:

- Donors and other audiences see our added value and invest in our independent humanitarian analysis.

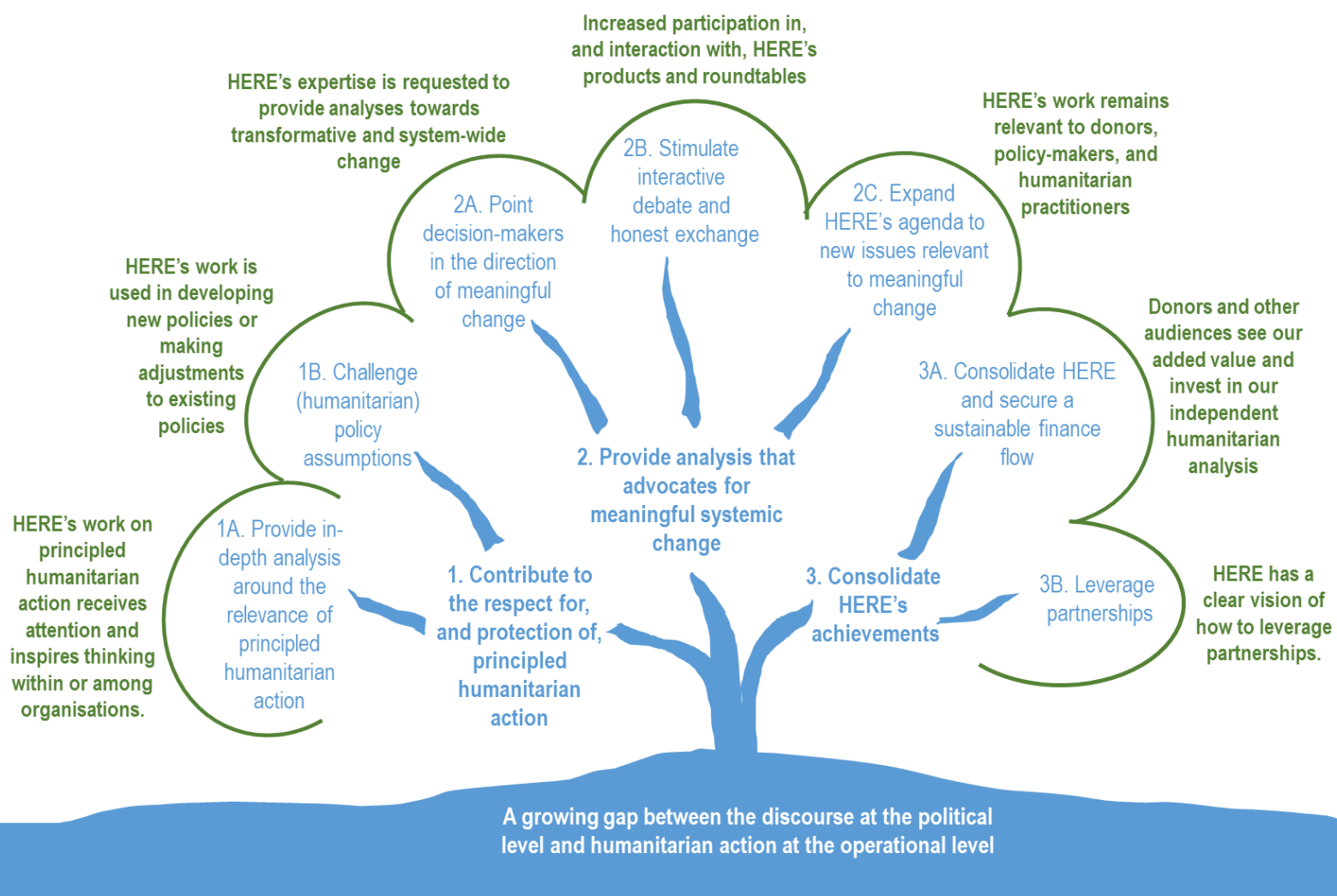
Objective 3B: Leverage partnerships

Partnerships with other think-tanks, research organisations, operational organisations, and advocacy groups can be an effective way to complement and amplify our work and extend reach. They are also often critical to our understanding and analysis of the evolving humanitarian landscape, both globally and locally. This could include partnering with an organisation with the intention accessing opportunities covering issues that are on our research agenda and/or on topics where there are significant complementarities.

Recognising that we are dependent on the broader ecosystem to create value, we will deepen our thinking around those with whom we partner, where and how. Partnerships will become an integral part of our way of working both in terms of our research agenda and our exchange plans.

Outcome/result:

- HERE has a clear vision of how to further leverage partnerships.



Putting this Strategy into Action

Our ambition is to build greater recognition as a reference for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers on principled humanitarian action, with a reputation for sharing analyses of the reality on the ground with regards to commitments to deliver more effective humanitarian action.

By its nature, a strategy is broad and ambitious. The strategic direction proposed here offers an opportunity to consolidate our achievements and build on our challenges. Like every other organisation, we will want to know the extent to which we are reaching our objectives. We will formulate annual objectives with indicators that will help us implement and monitor progress against our strategy, and publicly report on it. The HERE Board will oversee this process and provide accountability.