

#### **WE ARE HERE**

Founded in 2014 and celebrating its tenth anniversary, the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE-Geneva) is an independent organisation that examines the gaps between policy and humanitarian practice. Our team of experienced researchers and analysts is dedicated to gathering evidence and conducting constructive analyses on the gaps and improvements needed for governments and agencies to fulfil their humanitarian responsibilities and commitments.

Unconstrained by affiliation, we do not shy away from speaking truth to power and propose radical and transformative changes. Too often we see that time and energy are wasted when persistent political problems are tackled with technical solutions. Such solutions also risk losing sight of the values and principles that orient humanitarians to do the right thing and not only do things right. The systemic issues that our research unearths point to the continuous relevance of humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability, which are critical to the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

Find out what we did in 2024 in this report.

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### **Message from the Executive Director**

"What do you think of the efficiency proposals?" a humanitarian donor representative asked me in early January 2025. Answering, it took me a moment to realise that a recently released set of suggestions for reforming the main international body for humanitarian coordination - known by its acronym, IASC - had been called "high level recommendations for making the humanitarian system and OCHA more efficient." The new Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher had asked a predecessor, Jan Egeland, and his deputy, Joyce Musa, to draw up these proposals shortly after he had entered office.

Six months later, at the time of the production of this annual report, these proposals look even more insufficient than when they were released. The humanitarian sector, or system, is facing a funding crisis, largely reducing its capacity compared to previous years. Not only will the proposed efficiency gains hardly be a mitigating measure given the scale of the crisis, equating proposals to reform the IASC with improvements in the functioning of the humanitarian system is an incredible overestimation of the relevance and impact of the IASC.

In 2024, celebrating HERE-Geneva's tenth year, we revisited the findings and recommendations from our decade of reviews and studies. Our work has continuously highlighted that the main barrier to improved humanitarian response is not an inefficient IASC. Rather, they are political in nature. Governments and humanitarian organisations alike have yet to engage in the deeper political conversation needed to address the real obstacles to effective action.

The politics of governments, be they donors or the heads of aid-recipient countries, are hard to change. 2024 saw international aid-sceptical parties and politicians winning general elections in a number of key countries. Multilateralism, on which the humanitarian system as we know it is vested, is at a low point. A number of governments of aid-recipient countries are well-known for how they continue to ignore their international obligations. Released in June 2024 and carried out by a HERE team, the inter-agency humanitarian evaluation (IAHE) of the response to the war in Tigray reports on the denials of the federal government of Ethiopia to grant humanitarian access in spite of the robust advocacy, at least, by some agencies.

The politics of the humanitarian system are something on which aid agencies have direct influence. They are at the heart of it. In fact, the IAHE of the response to northern Ethiopia also points at the politics among agencies and their differences in aligning or opposing the government's policies and practices. Where agencies could stab each other in the back, they did not hesitate to do so. Alarmingly, there has been no collective inter-agency meeting on the report since it was released. The humanitarian country team drew up a management response without consultation with the review team, while many of the measures the report recommends are to be taken at the global level as they speak to the system as a whole and are relevant to responses in other

countries.

This annual report synthesises key findings and recommendations from ten years of work. Donors and partners rightly ask about outcomes and follow-up, which is why we commissioned an external review of our impact. Its insights will inform our new 2025 strategy.

In essence, there is little we can do to change factors that are beyond our reach, especially the hard realpolitik driven by governments. But we can influence their behaviour and that of humanitarian organisations and other actors when it comes to their support and commitment to effective humanitarian action. This report provides ample evidence. Happy reading!

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop HERE Executive Director



The humanitarian sector has evolved in this past decade, shaped by a reckoning with its colonial legacy, and in an atmosphere of declining faith in multilateral institutions and insufficient funding. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain, once sources of hope, fell short of expectations. The launch of Grand Bargain 3.0 in September 2023 barely registered—many were unaware there had even been a 2.0.

The picture is not all bleak. Localisation is now central to the humanitarian agenda; pooled funds are seen as more relevant; there is greater emphasis on diversity, accountability, and commitments like the Global Compact on Refugees and the New Way of Working. Yet, whether these will translate into meaningful change remains to be seen.

Many of these developments are external however, and at its core, the system and its dynamics have changed very little. Looking back at HERE's work over the past decade, five critical themes were brought to the fore in our work in 2024. These must inform the sector's transformation in the years ahead.

# > 1. For evaluations to effect change, they cannot be tick-box exercises

For evaluations to effect change, they cannot be tick-box exercises, as these do not move anything forward and just play to the inertia of the system. HERE has consistently advocated for evaluations to include a collective strategic vision.

For humanitarian evaluations to be meaningful, they cannot be mere box-ticking exercises, carried out to satisfy procedural and internal requirements or to create the illusion of accountability with donors and crisis-affected populations. Reduced to such superficial exercises, evaluations risk reinforcing systemic inertia rather than diminishing it.

Our work in 2024 reaffirmed our conviction that evaluations must be rooted in strategic thinking, stimulate collective learning, and be driven by political courage to be open to critique and take action to learn lessons. For example, while significant results were achieved in a difficult operational environment, we noted a disconnect between planned programmes and operational realities in the evaluation of UNICEF's Level 3 response in Yemen, The lack of disaggregated data prevented the UNICEF response from consistently targeting the most vulnerable, especially during the first phase of the response. Additionally, the lack of direct programme oversight was a key impediment to understanding quality and impact. Institutional gaps in terms of articulating a humanitarian vision and strategy in a specific context, independently of coordinated Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), were compounded by the fact that the L3 designation had lost its scaling up function in 2022. Building on these findings and those from other two L3 evaluations for northern Ethiopia and Afghanistan, UNICEF initiated an internal review of their emergency procedures.

In the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the response in northern Ethiopia,

our findings showed that the UN-led response suffered from a profound absence of interagency agreement on how best to persuade the Federal Government of Ethiopia to let impartial aid into the besieged region of Tigray. With humanitarian principles largely sidelined, the evaluation revealed a lack of accountability for those who undermined collective humanitarian advocacy. The followup to the evaluation fell by the wayside. There has been no IASC meeting at the global level discussing the findings and recommendations. Instead, several organisations and donor governments asked for an informal briefing. An op-ed published in the New Humanitarian warned against the risks of this evaluation being shelved without further action taken at the global level.

In our self-initiated follow-up of the IAHE, we hosted a discussion issued as a podcast, "IAHEs: No Sticks, Many Carrots," to openly question why evaluations rarely lead to accountability and how to reimagine them as catalysts for change. We also argued that for evaluations to be effective, they must be anchored in a strategic vision, shared and jointly championed by agencies and donors. As the only type of evaluations that review the collective action of the system, IAHEs are highly valuable, but very resource intensive. There is a need for rethinking the approach to assessing inter-agency performance effectively and cost-efficiently.

In November 2024 we organised a Roundtable to celebrate our 10th anniversary, and to discuss the next steps in reforming humanitarian action. Accountability was a main theme of the discussion, which emphasised that the problem is not the absence of texts or policies, but the lack of consequences when they are not implemented or upheld. In this vein, as long as evaluations do not lead to taking difficult decisions – be it e.g. related

to changes in leadership, redeployment of funds, or suspension of partnerships – they will remain symbolic.

In 2024 we also began a review of the work of World University Service Canada (WUSC) who worked as a partner offering technical assistance to the Mastercard Foundation in rolling out their work with refugees and displaced persons (RDPs) in several countries in Central and East Africa in the period 2020 - 2024. This review is part of our larger role in assessing the implementation and outcomes of the Mastercard Foundation's RDP strategy, Promoted by the Foundation's approach of co-creation, we worked with their operational RDP partners in helping them develop and align their theories of change and establish frameworks for measuring impact. This participatory approach illustrates how evaluations and learning exercises can become tools for co-creation and empowerment, rather than compliance. And reviews such as this one with WUSC and Mastercard Foundation underscore our view that evaluations should be used as a moment of pause, reflection, and reorientation, not as a procedural hurdle to overcome.

# > 2. Humanitarian actors should be more transparent and honest with one another

There is value in the diversity of the humanitarian community: humanitarian action can be made more effective by leveraging comparative advantages. Too often, unfortunately, humanitarian actors seem not ready to be transparent and honest with one another about the choices they make and the reasons behind them.

Transparency and honesty are essential for effective collective action, but they remain elusive in many humanitarian contexts. Despite the widespread discourse on collective action

and coordinated responses, humanitarian actors are too often reluctant to share their key considerations in how they came to a certain decision or the challenges they face. Sharing these considerations is crucial in understanding how and where agencies (and donor governments) can be complementary in their work. There are several reasons for this lack of openness: institutional survival, competition for funding, or fears of reputational risks.

In 2024, we began looking into how international NGOs ground their operational choices and decisions in the response to the massive crisis in Sudan, and early on we detected a significant lack of constructive collective engagement. The agreements and compromises that were reached by individual organisations with one or more warring parties were not shared, making it easy for these parties to play their divide and rule tactics. Similarly, the lack of frank dialogue between actors contributed to a fragmented and ineffective response.

HERE has worked to create spaces for honest exchange, using roundtables and policy discussions to foster openness. Humanitarian effectiveness requires more than coordination or funding-it needs a cultural shift toward transparency. Humanitarian actors need to be candid about their decisions and tradeoffs, which are too often obscured by interagency competition. The roundtable HERE convened to mark its 10th anniversary, "Taking the Next Step in Reforming Humanitarian Action", brought together senior practitioners from UN and non-UN agencies, donors, and independent humanitarian leaders. The discussion focused on three interconnected priorities: the centrality of protection, leadership and accountability, and working collectively. Despite their importance, these remain weak points in humanitarian response. A key takeaway from the discussion was that collective action requires not only incentives, but also system-level listening, trust, and transparency.

# **3. Collective leadership: from aspiration to implementation**

Collective leadership calls for everyone in the humanitarian system to take responsibility for the success of the system as a whole – not just for their own area of interest or mandate. Even with this recognition, there is much to be desired in the sector when it comes to collective leadership.

Over the past ten years, we have seen that while collective leadership is frequently cited as essential for effective humanitarian action, its full potential remains untapped. At its heart, this approach requires all actors to embrace shared responsibility for system-wide outcomes, complementing their individual mandates with a commitment to common goals. Yet, a significant gap persists between theory and practice.

HERE's work on the IAHE on northern Ethiopia revealed the costs of this gap, as well as pathways for improvement. The evaluation found that strategic divergences and a lack of accountability within the Humanitarian Country Team weakened the overall response. Instead of acting collectively in a complex, politicised crisis, agencies largely retreated into their individual mandates. This inertia can be partly explained by a lack of safe and constructive spaces where agencies, donors, and other stakeholders can openly discuss their dilemmas, blockages, and contradictions in carrying out their responsibilities. Without formal mechanisms to address strategic existing divergences between agencies, coordination structures fail to produce effective collective leadership. Indeed, the UN's failure to reassess its relationship with the host government—once it became a party to the conflict-highlighted the absence of a unified stance amid escalating violations of humanitarian principles. However, the evaluation also pointed to opportunities, notably the potential of area-based coordination mechanisms to bridge institutional divides when adequately supported.

HERE particularly focused on enabling solutions through its support to the PROSPECTS partnership — an initiative that engages five multilateral organisations to transform responses to protracted refugee crises. In 2024, HERE helped develop a global accountability framework to strengthen clarity, monitoring, and reporting across the programme. Together with ECORYS, HERE also contributed to developing country-specific monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) sessions to promote joint programming and move beyond bilateral reporting.

For HERE, the path forward is clear: collective leadership must move from aspiration to practice. This means addressing the structural barriers that currently discourage collaboration, integrating humanitarian principles into MEL assessments and frameworks, and modelling leadership behaviours that prioritise the collective good over individual institutional gain.

# > 4. Prioritisation starts with the humanitarian principle of impartiality

Prioritisation in humanitarian action is all the more urgent as resources are declining. As a considerable degree of diversity can be found in the way humanitarian organisations set priorities, especially in situations of armed conflict, this prioritisation should be undertaken collectively.

In a humanitarian environment marked by significantly reduced funding and intensifying crises, the issue of prioritisation has become both urgent and sensitive. Effective humanitarian aid requires a principled approach to ensure that those most in need receive assistance and protection. Yet, in practice, the way priorities are established

remains heterogeneous, sometimes opaque, and often influenced by political or institutional considerations. For HERE, it is imperative to refocus prioritisation on its foundations: the humanitarian principle of impartiality and an objective analysis of needs.

The principle of impartiality asks humanitarian organisations not only to deliver their services without discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, but also to prioritise those most in need first. In 2024, at the European Humanitarian Forum in Brussels, HERE, along with other members of the European Network of Humanitarian Think Tanks (HuT), co-organised a briefing for donors on the challenges of prioritisation. The briefing highlighted the need for conceptual clarity on what prioritisation efforts should be about as the risk is a lack of coherence amongst donors on the most effective approach to prioritisation. The politicisation of aid needs to be further acknowledged in any discussions about humanitarian priorities.

# > 5. Closing the protection gap

The primary protection gap exists beyond operational actors: the protection agenda cannot be tweaked into effectiveness without states taking action against the reality of impunity or non-compliance with IHL and other humanitarian norms.

In crises such as Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine, the scale of violations of international humanitarian law—and the impunity surrounding them—has reached alarming levels. This growing protection gap is not due to a lack of programming or operational capacity, but rather to political inaction and silence in the face of failed implementation of established norms. Humanitarian organisations can only fulfil their protection mandate or responsibility when governments do their part and put an

end to impunity and double standards. An attack on a hospital is (likely) a war crime in Ukraine and in Gaza.

The final evaluation of the COMPASS programme, which covers a part of IOM's work in protection, provides an example. Migration has become a number one political issue for many governments, who appear more concerned about stopping migrants coming to their countries than offering opportunities for migrants. Despite COMPASS allowing for strong operational frameworks and effective programming across 14 countries, the sustainability and impact of IOM's protection efforts were often constrained by limited political ownership and weak institutional accountability. Our report shows that while community-level and individual interventions demonstrated tangible results, structurallevel change, particularly in legal and policy frameworks, was uneven and heavily dependent on national political will.

The roundtable "Taking the Next Step in Reforming Humanitarian Action" also explored this issue and highlighted the need to reposition protection as a political and leadership priority, rather than relegating it to technical or bureaucratic mechanisms. Today, protection is often sidelined within humanitarian coordination structures, especially in non-international conflicts where it is too frequently compromised in the name of access. This trend must be reversed. Protection must be championed at the highest levels, including within the IASC and Humanitarian Country Teams. Donors also have a key role in supporting principled humanitarian diplomacy and applying pressure where technical mechanisms fall short.

The response in northern Ethiopia illustrates the risks of failing to adapt to political realities—where despite widespread violations, the humanitarian system maintained a depoliticised approach that undermined





## > Building partnerships

The impact of our work will only be multiplied if we work with partners to mutually reinforce our respective efforts. In 2024, we continued engaging closely with the informal network of Europe-based humanitarian think tanks (HuT). Initiated by our Berlin-based partner, the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA), this network involving French Groupe URD, Madridlene Instituto de Estudios sobre Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria (IECAH), Dutch KUNO, and ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), offers a platform to exchange our research findings and build on the work of each thinktank, Additional information about the HuT is available in the network's one-pager. In March 2024, for example, HERE together with the other HuT members organised a donor briefing about efficiency and prioritisation in humanitarian action during the European Humanitarian Forum in Brussels. The briefing highlighted the need for conceptual clarity on what prioritisation efforts should be about as the risk is a lack of coherence amongst donors on the most effective approach to prioritisation. The politicisation of aid needs to be further acknowledged in any discussions about humanitarian priorities. Most of all, prioritisation requires a collective effort as it should address the variety of needs and diversity of approaches in responding to those needs.

Outside of the HuT network, we also continued engaging closely with other think tanks such as the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and Humanitarian Outcomes. Such partnerships allow us to build on each other's expertise and maximise synergies whether for specific projects or as part of our convening and influencing agenda. The ambition to expand such partnerships to non-Western think tanks is one that we will pursue in 2025 and beyond.

In 2024, we moved offices to join ACAPS. The move has allowed for increased opportunities for deepening our research and analysis and widening our exchange. Such opportunities are expected to be leveraged even further into 2025.

# > Participating in policy discussions and other fora

In addition to HERE-organised exchange, we also took part in exchange opportunities organised with our partners, at least some 30 events, including also the IAHE report presentations.

Other events involved presentations including a contribution to a UNDP-NRC convened roundtable discussion of how to address the "grey zone" between the triple nexus pillars in coordinating and financing responses to fragile and conflict affected contexts; a contribution to a consultation on ACAPS' new strategy; a presentation at an internal ECHO senior-level regional meeting for East and Central Africa; and the moderation of a high-level event convened by the Danish Refugee Council in Geneva on the opportunities and challenges involved in displacement forecasts and foresight models using Al.

Presentations on the relevance and value of following a principled humanitarian approach building on our research findings were given at the ICVA Conference and the CCHN summit on humanitarian negotiations.

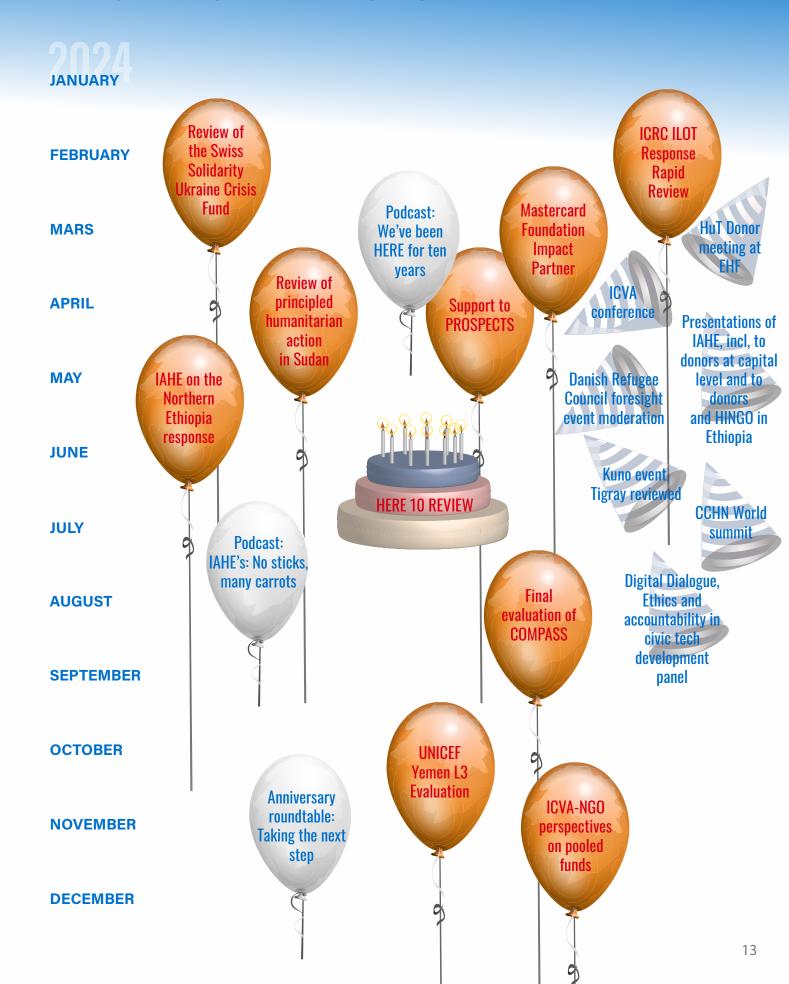


its peers, we underwent an evaluation to assess our influence on the humanitarian system during our first ten years of existence and to draw key lessons for the future. This external and independent evaluation, conducted by Humentum, was not only a retrospective exercise but also a strategic tool to help us develop our new 2025 strategy. It highlighted our role in bridging gaps between policy and practice, particularly in areas such as principled action, protection, and accountability.

Humentum presented several examples of how our stakeholders have successfully incorporated our recommendations. However, the evaluation also highlighted the need for a more intentional approach to increase our impact. Moreover, the evaluation reaffirmed the importance of independent and critical analysis to challenge the status quo. By aligning our research and advocacy with policy windows of opportunity, we aim to amplify our impact and drive meaningful reforms. Going forward, we must let these lessons guide our efforts to foster systemic change and ensure the relevance of our work in an increasingly complex and politicized humanitarian landscape.

We've been here for 10 years, and the lessons learned from this decade of work must help shape our next chapter, where we hope to see a humanitarian system that prioritises principles over politics and action over rhetoric.

### HERE'S ANNIVERSARY YEAR AT A GLANCE



## FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

| ASSETS                                     | 2024 (CHF) | 2023(CHF)     |
|--|------------|---------------|
| Cash & equivalent                          | 224,560.40 | 28,106.43     |
| Debtors                                    | 94,404.90  | 9,249.97      |
| Prepaid expenses & accrued income          | 18,385.26  | 97,272.22     |
| Total current assets                       | 337,371.42 | 2 134,628.62  |
| Tangible assets - net                      | 1,816.27   | 533.93        |
| Total fixed assets                         | 1,816.27   | 533.93        |
| Total assets                               | 339,187.69 | 135,162.55    |
| LIABILITIES                                |            |               |
| Trade creditors                            | 32,995.43  | 16,945.50     |
| Other current liabilities                  | 13,436.30  | 19,297.42     |
| Accrued liabilities                        | 187,009.30 | 30,722.94     |
| Total current liabilities                  | 233,441.03 | 66,965.86     |
|  |            |               |
| Foundation capital                         | 50,000.00  | 50,000.00     |
| Retained earnings/accumulated loss:        |            |               |
| - results/accumulated loss brought forward | 18,196.69  | 12,253.04     |
| - result of the period                     | 37,549.97  | 5,943.65      |
| Total equity                               | 105,746.66 | 68,196.69     |
| Total liabilities and equity               | 339,187.69 | 135,162.55    |
|  | CEMBE      | BALANCE SHEET |

| Total revenues        | 849,592.67 | 821,019.05 |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|
| Other revenues        | 835.35     | 815.35     |
| Projects              | 598,757.32 | 570,203.70 |
| Revenues Core funding | 250,000.00 | 250,000.00 |
| REVENUES              | 2024 (CHF) | 2023 (CHF) |

#### **OPERATIONAL EXPENSES**

| Operational margin                          | 133,856.63  | 120,164.10  |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Total operational expenses                  | -715,736.04 | -700,854.95 |
| Project related travel expenses             | -58,044.68  | -41,580.71  |
| Project related salaries and social charges | -548,013.51 | -489,850.30 |
| Project consultant costs                    | -109,677.85 | -169,423.94 |
|   |             |             |

#### GENERAL EXPENSES

| Total general expenses | -82,010.34 | -80,405.86 |
|------------------------|------------|------------|
| Administration costs   | -44,636.26 | -42,217.06 |
| Rent and maintenance   | -37,374.08 | -38,188.80 |
|                        |            |            |

| Operating result before interest, taxes & depreciation | 51,846.29               | 39,758.24  |
|--|-------------------------|------------|
| Depreciation   | -663.66                 | -957.10    |
| Operating result before interest & taxes               | 51,182.63               | 38,801.14  |
| Financial income                                       | -                       | -          |
| Financial expenses                                     | -13,877.61              | -28,147.13 |
| Current operating result before taxes                  | 37,305.02               | 10,654.01  |
| Extraordinary income, out of period                    | 205.85                  | 1,901.44   |
| Extraordinary expenses, out of period                  | -40.90                  | -6,611.80  |
| Result of the period                                   | 37,549.97               | 5,943.65   |
|  | PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT |            |

#### **WHO IS HERE?**

#### **Board of Trustees**

#### Chair:

**Daniel Toole**, Strategy and Management Consultant, development & humanitarian professional

#### **Board members:**

**Laetitia van den Assum**, former Netherlands Ambassador, independent diplomatic expert (HERE Board member until Oct. 2024)

**Kathleen Cravero**, Distinguished Scholar, City University of New York, School of Public Health and Public Policy

**Niels Dabelstein**, former Head of Evaluations at Danida

**Adelina Kamal**, independent analyst, former Executive Director of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (HERE Board member as of Oct. 2024)

Áine Markham, independent expert

**Martha Maznevski**, Professor, Ivey Business School, London, Ontario

**Eva Svoboda**, Head of Policy and Humanitarian Diplomacy, ICRC

Monette Zard, Director of the Forced Migration and Health Program, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health

#### The HERE team in 2024

**Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop**, Executive Director **Marzia Montemurro**, Research Director

**Sophie Parron**, Admin. & Finance Manager (until Nov.) **Mercy Akatujuna**, Finance Advisor (as of Nov.)

Anna Bruma, Admin. & Finance Manager (as of Dec.)

Karin Wendt, Senior Researcher/Evaluator

**Joseph Kasoma**, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Expert, based in Kampala, Uganda

**Valentine Hambye-Verbrugghen**, Research and Communications Assistant (until Nov.)

Freda Agah, Research Assistant (until Feb.)
Rigmor Tholstrup, Research Assistant (as of April)
Jonathan Zurbriggen, Research Assistant (as of Dec.)
Raphaël Gorgeu, Senior Research Associate

#### Special thanks to:

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- Julia Steets at GPPi for providing quality assurance for the Northern Ethiopia IAHE;
- Anja Willemsen, our ECORYS partner for the PROSPECTS project and the COMPASS evaluation, together with Joana da Costa Reis and Kinde Teshome. Further thanks for the COMPASS evaluation go to Michelle James, Hannah Mishan and Fiona Remnant from Bath Social and Development Research Ltd, Hamzeh Hadad and Davina Gounden and Soraya Douider;
- Humentum for their work on HERE's 10-year Review.

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