



HERE-Geneva

ANNUAL REPORT 2018

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ASSESSING GOOD INTENTIONS:  
WHY DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION  
FAIL TO LIVE UP TO ITS PROMISE?

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## HUMANITARIAN EXCHANGE AND RESEARCH CENTRE (HERE)

### MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop

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HUMANITARIAN AID is rarely delivered under optimal circumstances. The threat of violence and insecurity, bureaucratic obstacles, and barriers of a political nature will continue to hamper effective delivery. This is nothing new; what remains is the hesitation of humanitarian actors to confront these issues. Lack of access should not be met with resignation, but rather with the resolve to find better solutions. Too often, humanitarian agencies' self-censorship and risk aversion have become the rule, not the exception. And the reasons for this is the subject of much of HERE's work.

Evaluating humanitarian action has become as much of an industry as humanitarian action itself. And while there's plenty of work for an organisation like HERE, we aim to be selective. We are interested in researching whether an organisation did the right thing, rather than whether the action an organisation took was technically done well. The former, though more challenging to assess, is also more appropriate, as it looks at the choices and decisions that were made throughout the response and challenges the organisation to account for itself. And being accountable is at the heart of another key project of ours: the Role of 'Mandates' study, which looks at the degree to which mandates obstruct or enable organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts.

Sean Lowrie, who until recently directed the START Network, once said that humanitarian action is about "managing dilemmas." He was right. There is rarely anything so simple as a good or bad decision. What matters is how an organisation arrives at its decision. Does it take into account the principles and pledges to which it has committed? And what are the trade-offs that it makes? Who judges whether crossing a red line can be justified? These are the questions evaluators should be asking. Much of the debate on accountability in the humanitarian sector appears to jump over these fundamental questions.



*"Evaluating humanitarian action has become as much of an industry as humanitarian action itself. And while there's plenty of work for an organisation like HERE, we aim to be selective. We are interested in researching whether an organisation did the right thing, rather than whether the action an organisation took was technically done well."*

In 2018, HERE saw a number of examples where organisations did not do enough to push back on bureaucratic and political obstacles that impacted the realisation of principled humanitarian action. Agencies' explanations in Bangladesh, where they sacrificed much-needed advocacy on urgent refugee protection issues out of fear for reprisals from the host government, were not sufficiently convincing. In the Central African Republic, we experienced agencies preferring to work in areas with which they were familiar instead of trying to improve their flexibility to ensure that they could be active in areas where the needs of the population were most urgent. These are but two of the many examples of challenges that agencies face and where, too often, their response is directed not by need but by ease.

These dilemmas continue to abound and seem inherent in humanitarian action. But the humanitarian community must get better at addressing them, instead of pretending that it can address equally all competing priorities everywhere. In 2019 and beyond, we will continue to interrogate the humanitarian system to ensure that humanitarian organisations maintain their resolve to work for those that need their assistance and protection the most.



ED SCHENKENBERG VAN MIEROP  
Executive Director





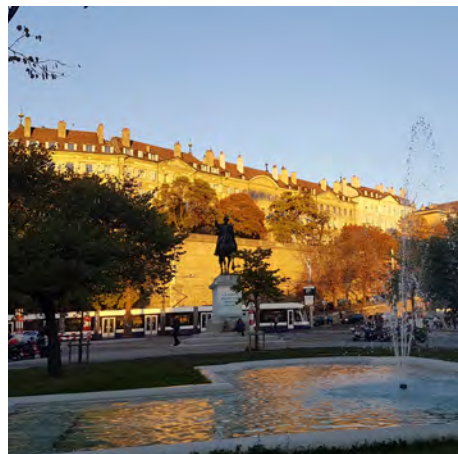
*“Our research demonstrated that while progress has been made at the policy level, improvements in practice remain inconsistent. Despite decades of rhetoric, there remain significant disparities between policy and practice in regards to adherence to humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability.”*



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## WE'RE HERE

HERE IS A GENEVA-BASED RESEARCH INSTITUTE DEDICATED TO IDENTIFYING CHALLENGES FACED BY THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM, AND FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THOSE CHALLENGES.

TODAY'S HUMANITARIAN NEEDS remain unmet. Humanitarian performance remains uneven. And humanitarian effectiveness remains an aspiration. We collect data and analyse humanitarian action to drive evidence-based dialogue in order to foster a more efficient and effective humanitarian ecosystem.

Independent from operational humanitarian actors, but with a network that spans the globe, we bring together diverse entities operating in the fragmented humanitarian space in order to ensure that policy-level discussions result in tangible and effective changes in practice on the ground.

With a focus on highlighting the gaps in the delivery of aid to people affected by crisis – and by armed conflict in particular – we try to better understand why these gaps exist, with whom the responsibility for addressing them lies, and how such shortfalls in the provision of aid can be overcome.

We deliver products that provide an honest and constructive reflection of the reality on the ground – a reality, which is often very different from that envisaged in policy statements and instruments designed from afar.

**Working both independently and in partnership with humanitarian organisations, we specialise in delivering:**

- **Research:** We use applied and mixed-methodologies to document and analyse gaps in the delivery of aid and other humanitarian challenges.
- **Solutions:** We publish reports with clear, actionable findings aimed at addressing some of the systemic issues that stand in the way of more effective and principled humanitarian action.
- **Engagement:** We convene humanitarian policy and practice discussions in order to facilitate improvements in humanitarian action.

[FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR WORK](#)







## HERE IN 2018

2018 WAS THE YEAR WE  
CONSOLIDATED OUR RESEARCH  
AGENDA TO FOCUS ON THE BARRIERS  
TO EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION AND THE IMPACT MADE BY  
COMMITMENTS FROM DONORS AND  
HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONERS TO  
OVERCOME SUCH BARRIERS.

OUR RESEARCH DEMONSTRATED that while progress has been made at the policy level, improvements in practice remain inconsistent. Despite decades of rhetoric, there remain significant disparities between policy and practice in regards to adherence to humanitarian principles, protection, and accountability.

In 2018, we established ourselves as a key partner to UN agencies, INGOs and governments when looking critically at the performance of the humanitarian system – particularly as it operated in relation to armed conflict. Formally and informally, we have sought to advance a critical understanding of some of the most pressing challenges to humanitarian action.

This report details how HERE's portfolio and research agenda developed in 2018, both through our own research and through work that that commissioned from us by our partners.

*“Little attention has been given to operational mandates and the degree to which they obstruct or enable organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts”*

### ROLE OF 'MANDATES' STUDY

The Role of 'Mandates' Study seeks to better understand the factors that enable humanitarian organisations to achieve the shared goal of protecting and assisting those populations who are most affected by armed conflicts. While the humanitarian sector has grown exponentially over the past decade, its capacity to operate in highly insecure settings – in particular during armed conflict – remains limited. Indeed, its failure to provide assistance to those most in need undermines its relevance today.

Studies have been undertaken which attempt to explain why such needs are not met, and how they could be – primarily looking at gaps in funding and issues around access. However, little attention has been given to operational mandates and the degree to which they obstruct or enable organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts. For the past four years, we have been engaged in a process of attempting to understand how mandates impact action through our Role of 'Mandates' Study.

In 2018, we conducted interviews with staff from Welthungerhilfe in Bonn, the International Rescue Committee in New York and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. These interviews further shifted the focus of the research from the strategic orientation of participating organisations at headquarters' level to the operational translation of an organisation's identity and mission on the ground.

In consultation with the participating organisations, the research team visited Mali. The Malian study rapidly demonstrated the need for nuance in discussing the humanitarian-development nexus, since such a dichotomy fails to acknowledge the varied and diverse landscape of approaches found in organisations mandated to undertake humanitarian and development work. Indeed, in spite of their mandates, organisations could be found to be operating in ways that were, at times, almost identical.

However, how they interpreted humanitarian principles and how they prioritised needs were vastly different. Consequently, while the questions being addressed by the nexus are the right ones - who does what? who decides? – the answers require more than commonly agreed outcomes and indicators. A technical approach needs to be accompanied by a strategic reflection on how to achieve these outcomes.

Owing to circumstances that restricted the space of humanitarian organisations in Pakistan (originally the site of the second country-level study) the research team travelled instead to the Central African Republic (CAR), which had initially been slated for a desk-based study. The CAR presented a context that was both similar but in many ways significantly different to that of Mali. Similar, because needs were deeply rooted in failed governance, marginalised populations, growing resentment among different communities and the presence of UN integrated missions. Different because of the specific dynamics of the conflict. The choice of CAR was also made because all participating organisations had a presence in the country, making it an ideal setting for comparative research on their approaches.

[READ THE MALI STUDY IN ENGLISH](#)

[LISEZ LE RAPPORT DU MALI EN FRANÇAIS](#)

[READ THE CAR STUDY IN ENGLISH](#)





## HERE EXCHANGES

HERE FACILITATES THE SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE ON GAPS  
BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND PRACTICE AND  
LEADS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING HOW TO BRIDGE  
THOSE GAPS. 2018 SAW SOME GREAT EXCHANGES.

### REAL-TIME EVALUATIONS: ARE THEY WORTH IT?

Real-time evaluations were supposed to be the answer to the humanitarian sector's monitoring and evaluation prayers: rather than pointing out problems with a programme in its aftermath, they were designed to address issues as they arose. But do they work?

In September 2018, HERE convened a policy conversation between humanitarian practitioners, governments and independent experts to discuss the value of real-time evaluations (RTEs) in the humanitarian sector. The conversation demonstrated that interest in RTEs remains high across the sector, and came to the following conclusions:

- RTEs add value as they facilitate necessary course corrections during humanitarian programming.
- RTEs work best when they are narrow and focused in scope and are undertaken between three and six months after the start of a programme.
- The ownership of an RTE matters: the commissioning agency needs to view an RTE as a means of learning and development and not simply an assessment, if the results are to be effective.
- RTE results should be shared among other agencies so that they become part of the data ecosystem of a response, rather than being the sole property of the commissioning agency, in order that they be of value to the response as a whole.

[READ THE FULL REPORT](#)

[HERE-GENEVA.CH](#)

### MEETINGS WITH MISSIONS

Being based in Geneva offers HERE the possibility of exchanging views and experiences with a wide number of UN member states' permanent missions. HERE's exchanges with missions in 2018 have included a meeting with several senior mission representatives on the role of Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators in leading system-wide humanitarian efforts in situations of armed conflict. HERE also played an active role in a meeting hosted by the Swedish Ambassador to the UN in Geneva at which the response to sexual and gender-based violence was discussed, with a particular reference to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

*"RTEs work best when they are narrow and focused in scope and are undertaken between three and six months after the start of a programme"*



# HERE'S COMMISSIONED WORK

AS WELL AS UNDERTAKING OUR OWN RESEARCH WE ALSO PARTNER WITH OTHER HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS AND UNDERTAKE COMMISSIONED STUDIES ON THEIR BEHALF. HERE'S SOME OF THE WORK WE DID IN 2018.

## EVALUATING THE RESPONSE OF UNICEF AND THE DEC TO THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

HERE allocated significant capacity to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh in 2018. Cox's Bazar, one of the poorest districts in Bangladesh, was already home to more than 200,000 Rohingya refugees when violence and intimidation forced an additional 700,000 people across the border from Myanmar in 2017. This was one of the largest and fastest movements of people in recent history, and efforts to stabilise the refugee situation and resolve the crisis are ongoing.

In the UK, an appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee – a consortium of 14 of UK-based NGOs – had raised more than £25 million from members of the public, and additional matching fund of £5 million from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). To support its member organisations in improving their response, and as part of its public accountability for the use of these funds, DEC commissioned a Real-Time Response Review from HERE early in 2018. The review took stock of the achievements of DEC members and partners, and highlighted learning and key recommendations, which were then used by organisations to make improvements to the response. Part of the evaluation outcome was a letter to the CEOs of the DEC members warning them of a situation reminiscent of the refugee crises in the mid-1990s following the Rwandan genocide, if no further action was taken.

As one of the three largest humanitarian agencies of the United Nations, UNICEF assumed major responsibilities in nutrition, preventative health care, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), child protection and education in the Rohingya refugee response. It asked HERE to lead the evaluation of its response using an innovative method that included elements of a real-time evaluation while also looking back at the achievements up until May 2018.

While the evaluation found that UNICEF rose to the challenge and provided many Rohingya children and their families with essential services, its initial response also failed to address some critical issues, such as gender-based violence. Its voice on behalf of refugee children could also have been stronger. Most of all, UNICEF realised that its focus on coverage should have been matched by a resolve to focus attention on the quality of the response – something that was only addressed several months into 2018.

[READ THE REAL-TIME RESPONSE REVIEW OF THE DISASTERS EMERGENCY COMMITTEE \(DEC\) EMERGENCY APPEAL FOR PEOPLE FLEEING MYANMAR](#)

[READ THE EVALUATION OF UNICEF'S RESPONSE TO THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS IN BANGLADESH](#)



## ENSURING THE PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IN DECISIONS THAT AFFECT THEM

It has long been recognised that participation is crucial in any humanitarian or development intervention. Indeed, during the displacement of people, the engagement of aid decision-makers with the affected community has been shown to be critical in finding durable solutions. And yet, the participation of refugees on a political level has been highly uneven. Some governments may be willing and able to guarantee the conditions that allow refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) to participate in political processes. They may also dictate approaches that severely restrict such participation.

HERE was commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council to try to understand how to better ensure participation of refugees in political process that affect them. The resulting report focused on, in particular, durable solutions processes, such as global and regional policy discussions, and the making of national and local legislation and plans of action that concern local integration, resettlement, and voluntary repatriation or return.

[READ 'LISTEN TO OUR VOICES' WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO IMPROVE REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN DURABLE SOLUTIONS PROCESSES?](#)

## REVIEWING THE STRATEGY OF MSF'S OPERATIONAL CENTRE BARCELONA-ATHENS (OCBA)

In 2014, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), the respected provider of medical assistance in emergencies, designated one of its five operational centres – its Operational Centre Barcelona-Athens (OCBA) – as the hub for its operations in highly insecure environments. The decision was not without challenges: staff needed to be prepared, ambitions for the quality of work had to be adjusted owing to unpredictable conditions, and the organisation's capacity to negotiate unimpeded access with relevant actors would be tested. It was on these and a range of further issues that OCBA asked HERE to assess the impact of the strategy on the organisation. Did the strategy facilitate results? Answering this question, HERE concluded that OCBA's strategy had created a strong sense of alignment and direction for the organisation and the choice of focus had been the right one.

## HERE PARTNERSHIPS

HERE IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE HUMANITARIAN POLICY DEBATE. WE COLLABORATE WITH GOVERNMENTS, WITH THE UN SYSTEM AND OTHER HUMANITARIAN ACTORS AND WITH ACADEMIA TO ENSURE THAT THE ADVICE WE OFFER AND THE RECOMMENDATIONS WE MAKE ARE INFORMED, ARE ROBUST AND HAVE BEEN TESTED.

### WORKING WITH ACADEMIA

In 2018, HERE entered strategic partnerships with two academic institutions: the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva and Boston University, supporting students' projects for the former and welcoming interns from the latter.

**Graduate Institute:** HERE teamed up with IHEID to review the current challenges faced by humanitarian organisations to implement practices that enhance accountability to affected populations in situations of armed conflict and/or generalised violence. A group of three students carried out research at the Institute on the topic as part of their Applied Research Seminar programme. Each student dedicated approximately 150 hours to the project between April and December. HERE provided guidance to the students throughout the project, from the framing of the research to the methodology and a review of the conclusions. The final outcome of the research was presented in December. This work will be used by HERE to inform a broader piece of research due to be undertaken in 2020.

**Boston University:** HERE partnered with Boston University (BU) in 2018 to increase its research capacity. International Relations and Public Health students from BU have the opportunity to gain valuable real-world experience through the Geneva Internship Program. During eight weeks in February/March and October/December, the interns contributed to HERE's self-initiated studies by delivering background research on country-specific humanitarian responses.

**Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report:** HERE contributed in 2018 to the drafting of the Grand Bargain annual independent report led by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) as an independent expert on earmarking. The Grand Bargain in 2018 comprises 51 mutual commitments across ten thematic workstreams aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Workstream 8 of the Grand Bargain foresees a commitment from donors to reduce earmarked contributions so as to enable more flexible funding arrangements.

## HERE IN 2019: THE OUTLOOK

HERE HAD A FULL AND BUSY SCHEDULE IN 2018, AND THIS CARRIED FORWARD INTO 2019 WITH AN INCREASED FOCUS ON THE 'MANDATES' STUDY, THE FINAL REPORT FROM WHICH IS DUE OUT LATE IN THE YEAR.

HERE IS DEDICATED to identifying not only challenges in humanitarian action, but also to providing solutions. We look forward to engaging with our current and prospective donors to discuss how to address the most pressing questions that the humanitarian system faces today. As outlined in our Strategy for 2019-2021, we aim to shape this work around three priorities:

- **Demonstrating** the gap between policy and practice with a view to stimulating immediate action and systemic improvements;
- **Inspiring** mutual learning and critical thinking among humanitarians through informed policy debates and continuous engagement; and
- **Offering** analysis on humanitarian policy issues related to collective performance.

Instrumental to its strategic vision, the HERE Board of Trustees is also expected to undertake some changes in 2019 with the addition of new members and enhanced roles and responsibilities.

*Thank you!*

Our work would not have been possible without the generous funding from the governments of Switzerland and Norway, and the OAK Foundation. Thank you for your continued support! With thanks also to the Syni programme of the Emploi Lausanne Office of the City of Lausanne, Switzerland for their continued collaboration with us in 2018.



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## WHO'S HERE?

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### BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Chair: **Niels Dabelstein**, former Head of Evaluations at Danida  
**Kathleen Cravero**, former President, OAK Foundation  
**Tania Dussey-Cavassini**, former Swiss Ambassador, Global Health  
**Martha Maznevski**, Professor, Ivey Business School, London, Ontario  
**David Noguera**, President, MSF Operational Centre Barcelona-Athens  
**Balthasar Staehelin**, Deputy Director-General, ICRC  
**Daniel Toole**, former Head of emergency operations at UNICEF (from September 2018)

### THE HERE TEAM

Executive Director: **Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop**  
Programme Manager: **Enrique Jimenez**  
Research Director: **Marzia Montemurro**  
Researcher: **Karin Wendt**  
Research Assistant: **Céline Studer**

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Complete financial statements are available upon request.



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