HUMANITARIANISM IN TREATMENT:
ANALYZING THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT

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In the wake of the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul and at the approach of the September 2016 UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in New York, this briefing examines how humanitarianism has arrived at its current crisis and what it signifies for personnel, aid agencies, and world politics. It concludes with a set of six recommendations for humanitarian organizations.

According to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), in 2016 there are some 97 million people in need of humanitarian assistance spread across 40 countries. And about 65 million people (or one in every 113 people worldwide) are displaced; and of these many are in “protracted refugee situations”—meaning displaced for over five years; some situations have already lasted over thirty years. Furthermore, with violence escalating within and across states, and climate-change and other environmental disasters impending, an increase in victims and requirements is certain.

Moreover, the sense that humanitarianism, aid to the vulnerable and needy, has been manipulated into complicity through selective application and transformed into a grotesque caricature is dispiriting for humanitarians. While different views as to the nature of the challenges fires debates about neutrality and impartiality, a deeper despair is found in recognizing dysfunction within the humanitarian sector when organizations and operations work at cross-purposes. The perennial realization from the 1990s that “there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems” has taken yet another depressing turn. The ambition to right wrongs with mercy remains, but it is overshadowed by a brooding mourning within the humanitarian sector that can be distilled into a pensive question: how has the solution become the problem?

The context of mushrooming humanitarian crises coupled with a snowballing crisis in humanitarism has generated calls for reimagining and re-engineering. For the most bereft and conflict-prone countries, the professed “world we want,” the mantra of the campaign to reform development practices, would certainly require basic humanitarian assistance and better governance, and yet this does not register in the halls of power. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 of September 2015 represented a global demand to formulate new methods for addressing inequality and underdevelopment, but none of the 17 goals or 169 targets addressed humanitarian issues. Alas, although the SDGs showcase progress in development thinking, the tragic irony of how the philosophy of “no one left behind” was actually articulated is that the displaced were displaced from these objectives.

Hopes were for the WHS to take stock of the responsibilities of the international humanitarian system and proffer new commitments to help. Yet, despite the packaging of “One Humanity, Shared Responsibility” and the proposal for an Agenda for Humanity, the outcome can be more accurately characterized as “One Excuse, Absolved of Responsibility” given the collective shrug, facile vows, and prioritizing of other issues by donors, as well as tunnel-vision deference by participating humanitarian organizations. With the WHS debacle as prologue, in September humanitarianism is poised to revisit its place in the world with a high-level meeting on the eve of the 71st General Assembly.

HUMANITARIAN ASPIRATIONS

The central principle of humanitarianism is the protection and improvement of human welfare, first embedded in the modern international system with the 1864 establishment of what soon became the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Since then the humanitarian agenda consists of four general tracks: Humanitarian action provides relief and assistance to victims. Humanitarian intervention addresses sources of distress and establishes secure conditions. International humanitarian law regulates the recourse to war (jus ad bellum) and conduct in warfare (jus in bello). International refugee law governs movements of displaced populations. These are not mutually exclusive pursuits, but they have often been segregated as different sets of actors, within and outside the UN system, carrying out their respective missions.

The evolution in humanitarian aspirations has stirred contestation within the sector. A first area of the unfolding transformation is about how political humanitarian action can be. During the Biafran War (1967-1971), the Nigerian government refused to grant access; and the ICRC went along because of its commitment to neutrality, impartiality, and consent. Consequent outrage spurred the creation of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an organization that speaks out and provides assistance regardless of the interests of states. In the 1990s this debate was revisited, especially with regard to responses to the Rwandan genocide (1994); staunch advocates of a seemingly apolitical approach were labelled as providing a “bed for the
A second development stems from reactions to refugee flows. The quintessential principle of international refugee law is non-refoulement: those who have escaped violence cannot be forced to return from whence they fled. This principle has meant building camps and devising paths to resettlement. However, the political reverberations—from resentments of host societies to complaints over financial burdens—have propelled new strategies, mostly to keep refugees within their home or neighboring countries. This aim was furthered in the 1990s with a shift from “bringing people to safety” to “bringing safety to people” by instituting “safe areas.” However, as seen in Bosnia (1992-1995), safe zones were often not safe and offered no long-term solution, which in turn nurtured the belief that humanitarian intervention was necessary to tackle the root causes of conflicts. The application of this logic was successful in Kosovo (1999), but without Security Council authorization, it was illegal. However, the 2001 “responsibility to protect” (R2P) doctrine helped by delineating criteria for the use of force for purposes of human protection.

A third area in the growth of humanitarian ambition was in establishing accountability for war crimes and other major violations of international humanitarian law. After World War II, the Nuremberg Tribunal and the Tokyo trials created a vehicle for adjudication, and in the 1990s a variety of tribunals were established. Yet, these ad hoc bodies had narrow spatial-temporal parameters—crimes had to be committed within a specific territory and within a particular window of time. The cry for universal jurisdiction and also to obviate discrediting claims of a “victor’s justice” inspired the founding of the International Criminal Court, which commenced in 2002.

The contemporary obsessions of humanitarian aspirations can be traced to confronting the challenges associated with fragile states and climate change. Although conflicts in the Middle East and Africa are usually connected to terrorism and counter-terrorism, these areas are afflicted by structural political-economic problems of livelihoods, governance, and violent extremism. The result has often been hundreds of thousands dead with millions displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. Environmental degradation and disasters have also contributed to strife and uprooted populations. Whereas 58 million were displaced due to political and military turmoil in 2013, at the same time 107.3 million were displaced due to ecological hazards.

The lightning rod for humanitarian crises has been the European refugee crisis, which peaked in 2015; those fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Afghanistan have braved the Mediterranean or walked through southeast Europe to safety. The perception of this crisis is overblown relative to previous post-war refugee flows—after WWI there were about 10 million displaced out of a total population of 480 million; after WWII nearly 55 million out of 540 million. In the last two years, in contrast, perhaps as many as 1.8 million refugees have arrived in Europe, which presently has a population of over 742 million—while others host far more; Turkey, for example, with a population of 74 million, harbors over 2.5 million refugees. This crisis prompted aid agencies, governments, and publics to re-examine humanitarian aspirations, and the WHS was a largely unsuccessful attempt to do just that.

**HUMANITARIANISM ANGST**

The WHS illustrated that humanitarianism is at a forlorn crossroads. Aid workers are anguished and confounded; they lament what has been lost and express hopeless abandonment. The promises of protecting rights, bringing relief, providing rescue, and bestowing refuge have been dissolved by the acidic politics of fatigue wars, circumspect pocketbooks, and nativist ideologies. The WHS brought together around 9,000 participants from 173 countries to articulate the duties of the international humanitarian system. After outlining core responsibilities, seven sweeping commitments emerged and are found in Box 1.

**Box 1: Commitments from Agenda for Humanity**

1. “Political leadership to prevent and end conflicts”: Act early, develop international and local capacities, and address root causes.

2. “Uphold the norms that safeguard humanity”: Promote international humanitarian law, civilian protection, access, and protection for aid workers.

3. “Leaving no one behind”: Decrease the vulnerability and increase the self-reliance of refugees, promote durable solutions, provide aid for host countries, and share responsibility.

4. “Women and girls: catalyzing action for gender equality”: Recognize women and girls as agents for change, and protect sexual and reproductive rights.

5. “Natural disasters and climate change: managing risks & crises differently”: Increase preparedness and promote resilience.

6. “Changing people’s lives: from delivering aid to ending need”: Anticipate needs, transcend humanitarian-development divides, and develop coherent financing.


The WHS did little to alleviate humanitarian angst—in fact, it has heightened the intense feelings of foreboding that relate to one’s position in the world, often invoking factors beyond the control of the individual. In other words, beyond the day-to-day perturbations of preventing or halting atrocities and gaining access to vulnerable populations, there are larger and looming existential questions. There are four key elements to the malaise of humanitarians: priorities, role, coherence, and meaning.

Despite the global concern for refugees, other priorities trump humanitarianism. Resource allocations are telling. The most recent figures state that annual global military expenditures total nearly $1.7 trillion whereas global humanitarian assistance is $24.5 billion. The world spends sixty-eight times more killing and coercing population than providing them with emergency relief. While this is perhaps not shocking, the comparison with the UN’s peacekeeping budget (about $8.3 billion) offers a different sort of surprise: the world spends about three times more than cleaning up the bloody aftermath of conflicts and debilitating crises.
than it does promoting and protecting peace. While it is too soon to comment on the pledges made at the WHS, the fact that discussion of the issue is segregated from a conversation on global priorities is suggestive. This weakness was further illustrated by the fact that few heads of state from G-8 countries attended (only Germany and Japan), and Russia boycotted the event.

A second fear revolves around the relegation of humanitarianism to a role in sustaining an unjust world order in which assistance merely copes with inequality and relieves political pressure to change the conditions that produce victims. This anxiety informed MSF’s critique of the WHS and its decision to oppose the meeting: “The summit has become a fig-leaf of good intentions, allowing these systematic violations, by states above all to be ignored.” And, Oxfam-GB’s chief executive fretted that it was to be an “expensive talking shop.” The promise made at the WHS to “leave no one behind” is well-received, but prospects are bleak. The term “humanitarian” sets a standard of equality, but this has never been met. Furthermore, there has been much talk of capacity-building, but this, too, has been eyed warily for two reasons. First, locals may have political agendas, and aid without oversight may contribute to inequalities and power machinations among recipient populations. Second, strengthening local capacities can be a pretext for shifting the burden and shedding responsibilities of global actors. When the world does take notice and supports humanitarianism, aid workers have become skeptical as to what end these interests and resources serve.

The third worry concerns the degree of coherence among humanitarian organizations and operations. The cultural divide between the classic neutrality-based agencies and the more explicitly political ones is troubling—if there is no agreement on what to achieve and how to achieve it, how effective can humanitarianism be? Most divisive are the debates and dilemmas raised by the problem of protection in the context of atrocities; does R2P save the vulnerable or reiterate a violent imperialism? The WHS concentrated on refugees, and implicitly Europe, but was conspicuously quiet on how other parts of the international humanitarian system fit together; and it ignored completely the interface with the UN development system.

Furthermore, competition within the sector and with other actors that intersect with its work undermine coherence. Development agencies as well as militaries often stake a claim to humanitarian work. On top of that, humanitarian agencies engage in turf wars and vie amongst themselves for resources. The WHS assurance to “work differently” in this regard is not only a departure from history but a departure from reality. In any case, no blueprint was offered.

The final dread surrounds the meaning of humanitarianism. The essence of the phenomenon is a social relationship between providers and recipients that is intended to nurture both—the former affirm their humanity through compassion, the latter are comforted in having their humanity respected. The treatment of those in distress—mostly disregarded until they threaten the privileged—demonstrates that far too often agencies have been used as tools for population management rather than conferring a shared humanity. The conflation of aid workers with Western political or military operations, and often consequent attacks upon them, reveals the recast meaning of humanitarianism. The WHS mouthed all the right things but made no binding commitments and requires no accountability. Humanitarianism is an ethical impulse but its politicized, militarized, and marketized realities have at a rudimentary level tainted it. The triumphant tones of the WHS are another indication that the well-founded jeremiads of victims remain unacknowledged; indeed, these bromides take the victimization to another level—despite failures, the international humanitarian system offers an insulting assertion of success.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING BEYOND ISTANBUL AND NEW YORK

The WHS was a hallmark of survival mentality and evinced that humanitarianism exists to be channeled within established constraints. Despite flaws and distorted outcomes, for true believers, faith in cardinal beliefs endure, but to champion the dysfunctional requires treatment. The soul-searching of the past twenty-five years generated a diversity of principles and practices more than it galvanized a singular vision, resulting in a fragmentation of efforts and a muddled profile. For humanitarian organizations struggling with the multitude of challenges, from access and atrocities in war zones to funding and manipulation in board rooms, they would do well to embrace a model for reinventing themselves. Therefore, after the WHS and the September Summit, it is time for humanitarians of all stripes to join in common cause, to share their collective struggles, and to forge a new identity to ground future action at the system, organization, and individual levels. The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is instructive and can inform a program of critical introspective analysis. To build solidarity and start anew through self-reflection for this often silent but distraught community, there are six steps for those in treatment, for what might be “Humanitarians Anonymous”:

1. Admit a higher power: Ethics can be powerful but are no match for politics. Opportunities to act are context specific, but every effort should be made to follow a common standard with the hope of reconfiguring power.

2. Take an inventory: Agencies must know their capacities (resources and tools) and situate their comparative advantages. Aid organizations may seem weak relative to great powers but in comparison to recipients they have tremendous influence. Humanitarian power has an impact, for better as well as for worse.

3. Acknowledge mistakes: Agencies should call attention to their own poor performance not as a sign of weakness, but contrition is a confidence-building measure.

4. Make amends: Accountability has been minimal. When mistakes or malfeasance occurs, agencies should provide redress. Agencies cannot rectify past errors or damage, but intent and symbolism matters.

5. Develop sensitivities: The analytical capacities of agencies are woefully underdeveloped, not only for risk analysis but also for monitoring and evaluation. Greater investment is essential; humanitarians must understand the situation before they act on it.

6. Express values: With global communications, replete with Internet traffic and social media, the means of making (and remaking) the humanitarian narrative is readily at hand. The image and
mantle of humanitarianism is the greatest asset of aid agencies, and they should not only practice what they preached, but preach what they practice.

Recovery is never easy. The first thing to do is to admit there is a problem, and humanitarians long ago crossed that threshold. But they have been far more focused on coping rather than solving problems. The SDGs were supposed to represent a refreshing and universal departure, but at best they will deal with symptoms of humanitarian distress not its causes, except to the extent that enhanced development forestalls certain kinds of violence. Moreover, there is no evidence in the Agenda 2030 of the urgent necessity to bring together the humanitarian and development components of the UN system. The Istanbul Summit did nothing to alleviate this shortcoming, nor does it appear will the September high-level meeting in New York.

So it is up to humanitarians to kick-start this process. Acknowledging fumbles and failures is the only way for humanitarians to once more begin the hard work of earning back trust. Being self-aware and candid is a prerequisite for respect. The goal of humanitarianism is to save people, yet before UN agencies and NGOs can effectively resume pursuing this vital and valiant objective, they must first save themselves by accepting that their staff are human and in the process rediscover their own humanity.

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