

The World Humanitarian Summit: What lies ahead?

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After February's inaugural release of *Humanitarian Alternatives*, it was obvious that this second issue could only be devoted to the first major event of its kind: the World Humanitarian Summit. Many of you will be present in Istanbul on May 23 and 24 to attend this great international gathering organized by the United Nations in partnership with NGOs and Governments. But what exactly will it all be about?

First of all, if we take a look at the two opening roundtables, the ambitious topics to be addressed will have us duly put in perspective the questions of "Political leadership to prevent and end conflict" and "Changing people's lives: from delivering aid to ending need". The idea of ending needs is indeed thought-provoking, but is it realistic? But in taking an overall view of such an issue, isn't there the risk of being carried away from today's realities? Five other "high-level" roundtables are scheduled to run over two days, punctuated by fifteen special sessions. These sessions will cover a wide range of topics as varied as humanitarian principles, media coverage in times of crisis, religious engagement, education in emergencies, migration, upholding of the norms that protect humanity or the creation of regional humanitarian networks like ROHAN (Regional Organisation Humanitarian Action Network). This is to say that everyone should be able to find at least one topic of interest in this broad agenda! Especially considering that the long drawn-out preparation process was designed to allow all governmental and non-governmental stakeholders across all five continents to get fully involved, so that each and every one would have the opportunity to contribute to the foundations for the future of humanitarian engagement in this 21st century!

There is no doubt that the Summit portends to be the fruit of consensus, since its approach was meant to reconcile most major divergences so that as many participants as possible could work together on key themes of common interest. Thus, the matter concerning the deleterious aftereffects of UN missions has not been put on the agenda, probably so as not to openly broach a subject of discord that would end up having us fall back, as it has been so often the case, on the thorny issue of the UN's role on the international scene. As the UN, without dispute, represents the most fitting organization for the management of international security, we can argue over the assumption that the same holds true for the management of humanitarian relief. But when the UN simultaneously handles both security matters and humanitarian assistance, it more than often relegates the latter to the back burner. This, *de facto*, generates problems for NGOs, which, once assimilated to this political organization, become fettered in their work with vulnerable populations.

Let's frankly ask ourselves a question: the standardization of international humanitarian practices that has been creeping up upon us for years may gain momentum once again in Istanbul. But is this a guarantee that humanitarian principles will be consistently applied? Is standardization compatible with the diversity of humanitarian approaches required to closely adapt to each

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context, thus allowing people in crisis to be targeted as efficiently as possible and in an impartial way?

In any case, this standardization is undoubtedly an extension of the approach undertaken in 2006 by the Global Humanitarian Platform. This conference, incorporated as part of the UN's 2005 humanitarian reform, brought together for the first time, in Geneva, those who were considered to be the three operational pillars of international humanitarian action: NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and UN agencies¹.

Having been organized three consecutive years in Geneva to specifically discuss the implementation of clusters, the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF), and the formalization of a partnership framework², this first large gathering was the occasion to review the stakes at hand for the UN. There was the perception that, to counter the overwhelming dominance of big transnational humanitarian NGOs, the UN was ready to reinforce its commitment with national country NGOs, more flexible and less restrictive than the "Top 30" of the major Western NGOs that are more powerful financially-speaking, active in all countries in crisis, and all too often extremely judgmental. All this with questions remaining around the jostling for position of the various UN agencies, their mission, their growing access to resources, as well as their bureaucracy³. In the last ten years, it is undeniable that the professionalization of humanitarian practices has made progress. This was endorsed, after the Cold War, with the establishment of ECHO in 1992 that comforted the financial development of a large number of NGOs. Admittedly, the cluster approach, even though this was initially contested by many NGOs, has also borne some fruit. The solution finally arrived at was not to impose anything and to give NGOs free rein in finding their place within the cluster framework. So what can we expect from this World Humanitarian Summit?

Some think that the Summit will celebrate the consecration of a partnership between UN agencies and the many national organizations in developing countries.

There is no doubt anyway that the building of local capacities and the claiming of ownership of humanitarian concerns must inevitably pass through more structured independent national organizations, disposing of increased resources. How could NGOs ever possibly be opposed to such a logical approach that aims to enable civil societies in crisis and developing countries to develop a greater capacity to fulfill the needs of those who are the most vulnerable? Even if the term "capacity building" has enjoyed special favor for decades, it has been overtaken in the last few years by the notion of "resilience" that calls for the populations concerned to set themselves at the heart of humanitarian action. How can we not want to give to those who are experiencing crisis situations the capacity to act and to manage their destiny, instead letting them depend on outside relief? So from what angle are we planning to address the issue of partnership-building in Istanbul in May? Will it be one where links are established in terms of subordination, provision of services, and outsourcing? Or rather one that puts all partners on an equal footing, where each one is recognized on the basis of skills and added value, and where, in a spirit of complementarity, they work in association from initial diagnosis to final implementation, each

¹ It is interesting to note that in 2005, in response to the UN's call, MSF International stated that it was not its role to collaborate in the humanitarian reform of the United Nations.

² Definition of the "Principles of Partnership" at the 2007 meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) in Geneva. These "PoP" – Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity – are meant to form a policy framework that humanitarian agencies must account for in running their activities.

³ The High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Antonio Guterres, had openly criticized the internal procedures that were not adapted to today's realities, using as an example, the complications he had to overcome to merely fly on a low cost airline!

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one partaking in successes as well as failures? The components of good practices, required to be recalled so as to go in the right direction, are well known. But it is in their effective implementation and in the operational modes applied on the field that their relevance can be appreciated. From the Istanbul Summit to the humanitarian fields of operation, one can expect on line losses concerning the application of forthcoming resolutions, if these are not focused on the interests of vulnerable populations.

Does emphatically advocating a strong connection between national NGOs and UN agencies represent a “risk” for major international humanitarian NGOs? Not in regard to a position to defend but taking into account the resources, skills, combativeness, and the resolve to act as a counterweight, all of which are of value. It seems that there is no real risk to speak of, as long as international NGOs continue to move forward in this domain, and give way in priority to national NGOs in situations where they have insufficient comparative added value. Yet the role of transnational NGOs is vital in most countries in crisis, given their overall capacity to intervene, unlike that of many national NGOs that lack the financial and human resources to operate in several countries at the same time. Therefore, given the world’s countless humanitarian needs, transnational and national NGOs need to work in a complementary fashion with each other, rather than get engaged in a meaningless competition. We should expect governments and the United Nations to facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations by adopting appropriate regulations and allocating the necessary funding for humanitarian concerns, rather than to try to implement programs themselves. Indeed, national and international NGOs are the ones that are the closest to people on the field, while it is not within their competence to manage crises under the administrative angle or conduct security missions. Should we therefore endorse the complementarities between the various governmental and non-governmental agencies that are involved in humanitarian operations in the field? A complementarities totally focused on the most vulnerable populations, simply because they are the ones who must receive the most attention and resources? But actually, can we objectively determine humanitarian needs country by country, region by region, in cities and villages, as a way to identify those who are the most vulnerable? Beyond the concepts of emergency, rehabilitation, and development, which are insufficiently indicative of true vulnerability, it is essential that we should be able to first help, as a priority, those who are the most in danger, whatever the context may be, such as in a conflict like Syria or a health crisis such as witnessed with the Ebola virus.

Tension between governmental and non-governmental agencies is one basic feature of the development of international humanitarian action. Limiting the need for humanitarian aid – whenever possible – thanks to efficient advocacy is also at the heart of the mission of humanitarian organisations. In the same vein, questioning the organisation of the international humanitarian system is becoming a major stake that does not escape the logic behind our review, *Humanitarian Alternatives*.

Many of you have applauded our initiative and have encouraged us to pursue it. For us to carry on, we need you, because this review will survive only if it is embraced by humanitarian practitioners themselves. We fully appreciate the support of the *Fondation de France* who has recently joined us. Various universities, likewise, have expressed the desire to become involved in our forthcoming issues. They are attracted by one of our priorities, which is to give the opportunity for humanitarian practitioners and researchers from all disciplines to co-author articles. Humanitarian action is not an exact science. It is made of multiple components. We must encourage a systemic approach in answer to the question of what *is being* undertaken globally in relation to what *should be* undertaken. A requirement that brings us back to Istanbul because there is only one horizon to target for this Summit: increased efficiency in the face of the stakes that

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the millions of vulnerable people whose life is menaced represent. *Humanitarian Alternatives* is in line with this approach, complementary with field action and advocacy.

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