

World Humanitarian Summit: a lost opportunity?

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Did the World Humanitarian Summit which was the major topic covered in the last issue of Humanitarian Alternatives - published just a few days before the event - hold all its promises or only give birth to a mouse, as we then feared? Antonio Donini delivers here a more subtle analysis, to be true, slightly less disenchanted, but redoubtably argued. Mentioning at the same time the very recent United Nations summit relating to migrants, the latter being the main theme of this new issue, major cause for which there is unfortunately so little to rejoice about, the author brings forward the hidden stake of the actual humanitarian system: its institutional reform.

The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was held in Istanbul on May 23rd–24th 2016 to great pomp and ceremony. Reportedly, there were more than 9,000 participants from a diverse set of stakeholders. Civil society was well represented, including many local and national NGOs. State representation was a mixed bag: 173 were present, but none of the permanent members of the UN Security Council sent their heads of state or government. Apart from Angela Merkel no G-8 head of state attended. Russia and China stayed on the sidelines as did many states from the south: they were there, listening rather than participating. Because no negotiated outcome or political declaration was anticipated, the process was seen by many as more divisive than unifying the community of states around critical issues. Some (southern) states were reportedly put off by the jamboree feel of the meeting and their perceived lack of visibility.

Perhaps the greatest success was that WHS happened at all and the energy that it mobilized across the humanitarian community. It is too early for a balanced assessment of the more than 3,000 commitments made by governments, aid agencies, the private sector and other stakeholders and even more so to gain a clear understanding of the outcomes of the Summit. Most of these commitments were individual rather than collective. Many were exhortatory rather than measurable or action-oriented. For example, 48 states - mainly OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries - reaffirmed their support for and adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL) - which begs the question about the remaining 125: were they uninterested in signing up? Because of the nature of the meeting - a multi-stakeholder event with hundreds of high, mid and low level meetings where much of the energy was concentrated in the basements where the civil society side-events were happening - WHS did not lend itself to any kind of final declaration or new compact.

More detailed assessments and follow-up actions will emerge in the coming months. In the following paragraphs we give a personal take on what the Summit tells us about the state of the humanitarian enterprise. Overall, the Summit was long on rhetoric but short on details. Or, as one donor representative put it, “there were many little good things, but no big outcomes.”

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On the positive side...

Perhaps the most important signal was the widespread recognition, by all stakeholders, that conflict and protracted crises were their greatest concern and that the respect of IHL was a central responsibility of states. Much rhetoric, and applause, re-affirmed the importance of humanitarian principles and protection. But in terms of being a defining political moment, the Summit was disappointing. While governments, particularly those of western states, restated - emphatically and unequivocally - their commitments to the important foundations of humanitarian action, states fell short of committing to explicit actions to prevent and end war, address human suffering, including by curbing arm sales to belligerent countries, putting in place a watchdog and sanctions mechanism for upholding IHL and improving the conduct of war, such as by preventing the targeting of medical facilities.

The Summit's centerpiece was the "grand bargain" (which technically had been agreed beforehand). The sector's power houses - its 15 largest donors and 15 largest agencies receiving of their funds - agreed to increasing the use of cash and market mechanisms, directing more funding to national and local organizations, funding more flexibly and with simplified reporting in exchange for more transparency on how the money is used. Measurable targets or a monitoring system have yet to be agreed and the devil may well be in the details. Some are convinced that the grand bargain and the increased emphasis on cash are a "back door" route to reform of the humanitarian system as this will change the way humanitarians do business. Others see a strengthening of the big players' hold on the system. Either way, it is too early to tell.

Localisation was high on everyone's agenda and was underscored by the launch of the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) of southern NGOs just before the summit. The target of up to 25% of direct funding to national and local NGOs was endorsed, sometimes enthusiastically, both in the more formal sessions and in the side-events. However, much ambiguity remains on how this target might be achieved and, importantly, on how local organizations can protect themselves from overt political manipulation and respect humanitarian principles in fraught or conflict environments.

A number of innovations that were already mostly in the pipeline were "blessed" by the Summit. The new Common platform for education in emergencies and protracted crises¹, launched by Gordon Brown just two weeks before the WHS, gained much support. It set forth a target of close to \$4 billion in the next five years to help put children in crisis back in schools. The Summit launched a new Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN), as well as initiatives on people with disabilities, youth in crisis, among others.

While the main events were largely scripted and did not allow for much debate, the real energy and much of the practical work was in the 115 or so side events, which brought a sense of promise and purpose to the meeting. Initiatives, such as Charter for Change, a new humanitarian data hub in The Hague², or the new Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action³, while fledgling and untested, are initiatives to watch and support. New financial instruments, such as a social impact bonds launched by the ICRC and an Islamic endowment fund launched by the OIC, for example, suggest viable alternatives to supplement the sector's outdated and rigid modus operandi. There was much talk of it evolving into an

¹ Overseas Development Institute, *A common platform for education in emergencies and protracted crises*, ODI, Evidence paper, May 2016, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10498.pdf>

² <https://charter4change.org>

³ <http://humanitariandisabilitycharter.org>

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“ecosystem” where different strands of humanitarian endeavour would work more or less together and where the traditional big players would “let go” of some of their power.⁴

On the negative side...

There was no progress whatsoever on IHL, humanitarian principles and protection, despite the rhetoric. The lack of engagement of southern member states on IHL is seen by some as a harbinger of a greater North-South divide on issues of principle. As one NGO put it, “true humanitarians were definitely the losers”. Moreover, despite the extent to which protection had been flagged as an important issue in the pre-Summit consultations and especially in those with affected people, the Summit itself was much more about assistance than protection. No new ideas on how to advance protection emerged either in the Secretary-General’s report or at the Summit itself. Refugee and migration issues were absent from the Summit, beyond formulaic presentations at high level meetings. The links between, for example, the inhumanity of the war in Syria and the deteriorating asylum conditions in Europe were hardly teased out. There was no outrage at the unwillingness or inability of politics to put an end to wars in which civilians are the first targets. As one participant quipped, “no matter how many op-eds we write, there is no traction. States seem completely de-sensitized to the reality of war.”

Nothing new emerged on the political-humanitarian relationship. Discussions of humanitarian action and peacekeeping or peace-building, and particularly in the difficult contexts of UN integrated missions were notably absent. The same applied to issues around interaction with non state armed actors - which were however a topic much referred to in a number of side events.

In contrast, the humanitarian-development relationship gained a lot of airtime. The issue - or new mantra - was framed in the context of “ending need” with the SDGs as the overarching framework, including for humanitarian action. While there was support for the notion that development agencies should be more active and be seen earlier in protracted crises, the implications of the proposed merger of relief and development were not discussed in any detail whether in terms of architecture or the risks of politicizing humanitarian action in the field. ICRC and other Dunantist organizations had expressed their concerns before the Summit on how this shift would affect principled humanitarian action, particularly in conflict. Much of the discussion revolved around greater development action to prevent, mitigate and assist in recovery from “natural” disasters. This is an important area, but there was much less discussion about the humanitarian-development relationship in conflict and whether principles could be effectively ring-fenced if all international activities in a conflict country are cast in a development framework.

Despite the undercurrents in the pre-Summit consultations that change and reform were to be high on the agenda, very little or specific transpired at the Summit itself. The Secretary General’s report had steered away from any issue implying change in the architecture of the Secretariat, the role of OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) or the power and institutional relations in the UN system. Beyond localization and the role of regional institutions, as one donor put it “UN reform issues just fell off the table”. The current architecture and governance of the system were accepted as a given. Neither coordination nor leadership issues were broached. Nor the possible implications of increased use of cash or of the humanitarian-development conundrum for possible streamlining or consolidation of the (UN) system. The UN

⁴ See Christina Bennett, Matthew folley and Sara Pantuliano (ed.), *Time to let go. Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, April 2016.

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- whether the Secretary General or OCHA - seemed to have abdicated on their prerogative to put forward innovative reform ideas. Many left Istanbul with the feeling that this was a lost opportunity.

Except in the side events, there was no real discussion on what would need to change to make the system more fit for the future and how agencies would need to change to adapt to emerging and potentially escalating threats and risks. The net result was a Summit that dealt with today's challenges, if not backward looking. Even the attention given to innovation was embedded for the most part in the present, rarely venturing beyond what is available today.

A final consideration is that the Summit focus was on big picture issues with comparatively little attention given, in the formal sessions at least, to fieldcraft, to the techniques of saving and protecting lives in the thick of a crisis. A cynic might ask, what did the WHS do for the besieged in Syria or the boat people in the Mediterranean? Or for global vulnerability more generally? Ultimately, these should be the criteria against which the achievements of the Summit should be measured.

The uneven outcomes of the Summit were largely due to the fact that from the perspective of states it was an anomalous animal. Initially designed as a two-track process where ground-level consultations and high-level political momentum would come together in a global agenda for change, the Summit instead became emblematic of the never-ending tension in the humanitarian endeavor between principles and politics. Because there was no intergovernmental negotiation process, there was no pressure on states to heed the sometimes powerful messages that had come through the ground-swell of the pre-summit consultations. This became clear in the run-up to the post-summit ECOSOC meeting in June 2016. A group of member states from the South reportedly refused to even mention the WHS in the ECOSOC draft resolution. In the end a compromise was found and the resolution simply “notes the holding of the first World Humanitarian Summit” without any kind of appreciation.⁵

What does the WHS tell us about the state of humanitarianism?

The Summit did manage to mobilize a global, sector-wide conversation on the need for change. Conversations leading up to the Summit during its official and unofficial events showed that within civil society, at least, there was recognition that, whether “broken” or just “broke”, the humanitarian sector was not delivering and that unless the political powers that be start a process towards a new kind of consensus about what humanitarian action should be about and what it should achieve, things would only get worse. However, in the absence of a strong mobilization of civil society, and affected groups themselves, the pressure for reform may well get lost in the quagmire of institutional politics and posturing. For now, the prospects of meaningful reform are dim, and several reasons stand out.

The disconnect between the rhetoric about IHL and principles and the reality of the growing inhumanity of war and suffering is symptomatic of a general lack of moral courage in the international community. There are no leaders or champions around which courage and solidarity could coalesce and mobilize coalitions and constituencies for change.

Political positions seem to be increasingly polarized. The Red Cross Conference in December 2015 made no progress in setting up an IHL compliance mechanism, reform never

⁵ ECOSOC resolution E/RES/2106/9 of 30 June 2016, para.41.

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really made it to the agenda of the WHS and the same lack of intergovernmental consensus building has plagued the preparations of the refugees and migrants Summit that was held in September 2016. For the most part, leaders used both the UN summit and the Leaders' Summit on Refugees convened by President Obama on 20 September, as an opportunity to emphasise what they were already doing to support refugees rather than to announce new initiatives. Those new pledges that did emerge from the summit will have to be followed up by either the Trump or Clinton administration both of which are likely to see refugees as more of a security threat than a priority. Rather than a holistic focus on displacement, there was a strong suggestion by some countries that “if we want to help the refugees, we have to keep out the migrants”⁶.

Moreover, - once burned, twice shy - after the WHS there were signs that states were keeping the civil society organizations well away from the September summit. Confidence within the state system is in short supply.

Within the humanitarian system itself, power dynamics seem evermore impervious to change. The hold of an oligopoly of a handful of donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and INGO federations on the rules and the network power of the system is alive and well. There is little incentive in changing a system that works well for those who established the rules of the game. Contestation is present in the margins, and is expressed through the push for localization, for example, but by and large the top-down dominant humanitarian system is remarkably resilient. In fact WHS may have resulted in more rather than less barriers to change.

Moreover it continues to grow: the size of the superstructure - all the entities, coordination mechanisms, quality and accountability, transactional and special interest groups that are not directly related to the provision of life saving humanitarian action on the ground - has grown out of proportion. The result is an increasingly complex set of institutions, processes and vested interests that to a large extent just “feed the machine”.

But the elephant in the room remains the question of institutional reform. The WHS and the refugee summit processes have managed to bypass arguably the most fundamental question: what kind of institutional and governance model do we need to address today's and tomorrow's conflicts and crises and their humanitarian consequences?⁷ Are the tools we have the right ones? The humanitarian system we have looks remarkably similar to what emerged from World War II, only much bigger. Yet the world is a much more complex globalised place where the nature of conflict and vulnerability no longer fits the old model. The same is true about large-scale refugee and migratory movements in the 21st century. The fact that neither WHS nor the 19 September refugee and migration meetings made any attempt to address humanitarian governance and architecture issues, not to mention mandates, reflects a combination of inertia, political pusillanimity and lack of a vision. Despite much grandstanding and rhetoric, both gatherings have just kicked the can down the road. But reform is a question that can only be deferred for so long. The waiting game will only make the search for a new model, and an international compact to underpin it, a more uphill struggle.

⁶ Josephine Lebed, of Oxfam, quoted in “Plenty of hype, no new ideas at UN migration summit”, IRIN, 22 September 2016.

⁷ And this despite the fact that a number of reform proposals were circulated before or at the WHS. In addition to the *Time to let go* report (*op. cit.*), the Planning From the Future team, of which this writer is a member, presented its findings and recommendations for an overhaul of the system at one of the side events. The full PDF report and related outputs are available at www.planningfromthefuture.org

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