

The Summit of greater uncertainty

Gareth Price-Jones • Care

Fear and apprehension, just as the expectations that the World Humanitarian Summit inspires are not limited to the French speaking world, let's say to these “French doctor” NGOs, with a reputation for sharpness in international humanitarian debates, which does not necessarily afford them the position they would really deserve. Anglo-Saxon actors such as Care are not without criticism towards this event, on the verge of leading to an “enormous disappointment”. The expression is that of Gareth Price-Jones, in charge of advocacy for this historical NGO, who does not despair nonetheless that somehow the mountain will finally give birth to something else than a mouse.

When the first ever World Humanitarian Summit was called by the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, it was always going to be an ambitious undertaking. A meeting of the key State and non-State actors, backed up by a broad-ranging and inclusive consultation process, it sought big ideas to transform the reality experienced by those affected by war and disaster. Three years later, and on its current trajectory, this Summit is on track to be an expensive oddity, a mostly failed project that created some small changes in the humanitarian system, but which missed – by more than a country mile – anything like an ambitious target. It is unlikely to be replicated again in the future. This is a huge disappointment.

The vain quest for change?

The Summit initially seemed to seek a purpose. Many of the challenges humanitarians faced in 2012 were not necessarily those that would be resolved by an international meeting. And without a clear vision for change, there was limited political engagement in the process. Things certainly picked up over the three-year process, with both States and civil society members investing substantial resources into the consultation process. Hundreds of reports and advocacy papers were developed and submitted to OCHA (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) which led the WHS Secretariat.

By early 2015 it was becoming clear that there weren't any big new ideas that would transform the solutions reaching affected people. Much of the focus of discussion was on the supply of humanitarian aid, focusing on grumbles about coordination, duplication and efficiency. Indeed, a prevailing opinion in the light of the conflicts in Syria, Central African Republic or South Sudan was that the humanitarian system had failed. It was only a concerted effort to push back on this that focused on the improvements made since the 1990s and the millions of people reached with support every year that shifted the discussion from humanitarian actors to those with the power to address the demand for assistance – primarily UN Member States. This was a key shift, encapsulated by the statement that there are “no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems”, and it was further backed up by the publication of the Synthesis report of the

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consultation process, which affirmed that there were no silver bullets, and that supply side gains would come not from new “big ideas”, but rather from more systematic delivery of existing best practice, developed over decades.

For sure, improvements can be made, and they are urgently needed, not least with ensuring that identified best practice is more systematically implemented across the humanitarian ecosystem. But the fundamental challenge with this was that it is simply not transformative. Many of those involved realised that even if we duplicated all the UN agencies, the big international NGOs like Care, MSF or Oxfam, doubled every Disaster Management Ministry’s budget, created hyper-effective coordination mechanisms and cloned each and every trained aid worker, we’d still have no prospect of providing sufficient aid to even meet minimum standards such as Sphere’s, let alone ensure safety and dignity for the 125m people estimated to be in need as of the start of 2016.

A welcome change of direction

The key change that we mentioned nevertheless marked the beginning of a shift towards a much more strategic discussion around how to address the soaring *demand* for such aid. That demand had in effect increased significantly since the Summit was first announced, most visibly with the Syria conflict, but also across Africa and Asia.

Despite huge growth in budgets, the gap between needs and resources widens every year, while recurrent natural disasters in Europe and the Americas, often requiring direct government and NGO intervention, also highlighted the growing impact of climate change and the potential for these disasters to exceed even the capacity of rich states with strong government and well-developed insurance systems.

The discussion has moved in particular over the last year or so, and mostly in the right direction. In all the key documents, including the Secretary-General’s report and the one of the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, we went from simple propositions to amend the humanitarian system to challenging UN Member States to fundamentally reshape the landscape that the humanitarian system operates in.

Some interventions remain disappointing. The main visible action from the eleven most influential donors consisted in a letter calling for improved coordination and cross-sectoral plans, better leadership and a more effective Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), hardly the stuff to inspire a new generation of aid workers or persuade people around the world to reach for their pocketbooks. The “Grand Bargain” on humanitarian financing, for all of the practical suggestions it contains, sent out a discouraging sense that “we won’t address our shortcomings unless you address yours first”.

Nevertheless, the vision outlined by the Secretary-General in his report focuses strongly on the political solutions that effective response requires.

A new political impetus

Combined with calls for concerted political action, the public and media land-scape shifted drastically with the publication of photos of the failed body of the little Syrian boy Alan Kurdi last September, and the belated recognition of the scale of the European refugee crisis. Although largely unremarkable in terms of scale or suffering when compared to the global numbers –

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involving around 2% of displaced people globally –, this crisis has captured the attention of the global media. And the proximity to key donor countries meant that suddenly humanitarian action leapt to the top of the political agenda globally. As spending on refugee hosting in Europe soared, initial suggestions that the Summit might be attended by heads of State no longer seemed wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, almost immediately, many political leaders have openly disregarded humanitarian principles and publicly called for abandonment of key humanitarian tools such as the 1951 Refugee convention. Key donors worsened the crisis by diverting spending from affected regions to financing refugee support services at home. The loss of moral stature has been incalculable: if the richest states in the world are permitted to claim that supporting the most vulnerable is unaffordable, then surely the much poorer states who host the majority of displaced people and refugees could arguably claim the same, with potentially catastrophic consequences for affected people and the integrity of the system as a whole.

However, in recent weeks there have been some signs that strategic calculations are shifting. The successful London Conference on Syria held February 4th 2016 raised \$12bn in funds, suggesting that donor states recognise that investing in response in the region is not only the best way to assist those displaced by the Syria conflict but also in their own interests in terms of ensuring resettlement is managed appropriately and focused on those most in need. Comparisons between the \$250m Sweden spent on assistance to Syrians in the region over four years, and the estimated \$9bn they will spend supporting Syrians and other refugees in Sweden over the next two, provides evidence to suggest that focusing on rapid and generous response to humanitarian crises (both in terms of funding and structured resettlement for the most vulnerable) represents a very cost-effective investment.

The success of the London Syria conference suggests that decisions to invest or retarget aid are being reconsidered in a more strategic light, but need to be followed up by rapid delivery on commitments. Two months later, less than half of the commitments had actually translated to funds committed to programs. Just as one can fear for the WHS itself, there remains a yawning gap between what is said at high level meetings and the policy decisions back in capital cities.

A precariously balanced Summit

So at the time of writing – end of March 2016 –, the Summit could go either way, and there are two main scenarios.

The first is that poor organisation, coupled with a failure of vision and fear of populist (and arguably untrue) narratives, result in key world leaders ducking out of the Summit, and leaving it to junior ministers and aid officials to attend. Currently, no major world leader has committed to attend, and many who might fear that they will be portrayed by their political opponents as naïve and idealistic, potentially replicating what is seen by many as the disastrous recent policy “mistakes” of Angela Merkel: principled and admirable, but not suited to a worsening global situation where the numbers in need of assistance are effectively unlimited.

In this scenario the Summit would still be far from a complete failure: we’d see important innovations in the financing and conceptualisation of aid, some unprecedented commitments to support local actors, and some new energy around improving the IASC “system”. We can expect to see the political narratives focusing on the details, with the major decisions required to prepare for the likely scenarios of the next two decades being postponed, and based on a timid political

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economy of narrow national interests, while minimising harm to economies and rich states. Key indicators would be continued threats to with-hold aid if states fail to block or absorb those fleeing poverty and oppression, and a focus on securing borders rather than the rights of affected people.

For humanitarians, this would see us continuing our efforts to do more with less, tweaking our approaches and improving our impact for sure, but, as we are doing now, constantly chasing a moving target that bounds ahead of us, both in terms of the numbers of people affected and the resources needed¹.

The second scenario, a more exciting possibility, is that a critical mass of world leaders seize the moment and offer some truly visionary leadership, reaffirming humanitarian principles and ideals both from a position of humanity, but also as a pragmatic and economic solution to the challenges that we will face in the coming twenty years. In this scenario the Summit generates the political will to push back against a “put up the barriers” or “charity begins at home” narrative and establishes a new, higher level of support for not only responding to humanitarian need, but anticipating it and heading off the underlying causes at the strategic scale needed.

This first of all requires adopting serious commitments to restore humanitarian norms. This would mean a significant number of States at the Summit committing to formally protest when IHL is breached or humanitarians are attacked, perhaps even taking wider diplomatic, economic and even military action, and doing so when allies as well as rivals commit breaches. It means ensuring that the protection of such norms is given a higher priority than short-term security agendas by everyone from the Head of State down.

This means that all levels of governments (including their militaries) make a clear public distinction between countering terrorism and extremism and impartial, neutral humanitarian aid. This implies staying publicly committed to and reinforcing key treaties and commitments that they have made, and turning down domestic and international opponents when they claim that such treaties are “outdated” or “unrealistic”.

It means significantly more funding – in the billions of dollars annually – not only for response but for preparedness, disaster risk reduction and conflict prevention. It means recognising affected States and populations as genuine partners in addressing global challenges rather than as clients who can deal with humanitarian issues on Western States’ behalf if they simply pay them enough.

It would finally mean serious engagement at a strategic level, investing financially and diplomatically in lower-profile crises like the Sahel, Nigeria, Burundi and Libya.

For humanitarians, this would mean a major expansion commensurate with the scale of needs we see externally. Both national and international capacity would need to expand and become more accountable and responsive. New actors would need to enter the sector, and as the Secretary-General noted, the barriers between development and humanitarian work would need to be torn down. We’d need to become more diverse, forming a coordinated ecosystem of independent actors that can respond flexibly and appropriately to rapidly moving contexts, such as the mid-

¹ See insufficient funding for humanitarian appeals, in *Global Humanitarian review* 2016, p. 12, <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GHO-2016.pdf>

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income countries in the Middle-East that we were generally slow to engage with, or emergencies like Ebola which was dismissed for far too long as a medical rather than a humanitarian crisis.

Many will say that adopting such a vision is out of reach in the current economic and political climate, but the reality is that much of it is already happening and is eminently possible. The entire current global humanitarian budget could be covered by the profits of the six biggest tobacco companies – with \$10bn left over for their shareholders.

The UK has demonstrated that a major economy can deliver on the 0.7% aid commitment even in tough economic times. France, as a permanent Security Council member has made strong arguments that forgoing the country's veto rights in cases of extreme humanitarian need would serve wider geopolitical objectives even when it might clash with more immediate political calculations. Médecins Sans Frontières, responding to repeated attacks on their hospitals and staff, managed to raise an obscure and inactive independent investigatory body into a serious institutional option in just a few short months. The voluntary response to the refugees in Europe, and the vast and largely unrecognised NGO effort within Syria has shown that new actors can form and respond at scale within a matter of weeks or months, while more establishment INGOs have shown they can deliver humanitarian response both cross-border and through Damascus. In recent weeks, the rejection of the unprincipled EU/Turkey refugee deal by UNHCR and NGOs has demonstrated that humanitarians can bring down even the most high-level negotiated deals of the world's largest economic bloc when they clash with core principles.

Time is now running out to know towards which scenario the Global Humanitarian Summit will lean.

Biography • Gareth Price-Jones

He is the Senior Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Coordinator for the NGO Care. Gareth has over 15 years' experience with international NGOs, working in eleven countries, mainly in Asia, and has led operational responses in a number of contexts including the Asian Tsunami (2004), the Haiti Earthquake (2010) and in Syria during the current conflict. He works particularly on joining up development, humanitarian and advocacy programming to ensure a direct impact on people's lives on the field, while also making a significant contribution to the longer term strategic solutions to complex problems. He has been a leader in developing consortium and "umbrella" approaches in several countries.

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