

World Humanitarian Summit: on the road to Istanbul

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To take the full measure of the innovation, challenges and uncertainties that surround the World Humanitarian Summit, it is necessary to retrace the process used in the different steps of its organisation. Outlining a critical history of this first genuinely global symposium dedicated to humanitarian action, Wolf-Dieter Eberwein acknowledges its inclusive nature but draws the boundaries of an enterprise that remains dependant on the political will of States.

Over the past three years, a wave of consultations has descended upon the international humanitarian stage. The large amount of documents produced leaves much room for the analysis of how the global humanitarian system operates and for proposals on how to reform it. This objective of a major reform will culminate with the World Humanitarian Summit taking place on May 23 and 24, 2016 in Istanbul. This process was initiated in 2012 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, on the grounds that the dramatic and correlative increase in the number of people who need assistance and in the financing requirements made these reforms more essential than ever¹. Before we think of assessing the outcome of this process and consider the issues to be solved, a reconstruction of the method itself is necessary, since it is unquestionably the first inclusive process aimed at reforming the international humanitarian system. In other words, it sought the participation of all stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in humanitarian action. Over 22,000 people thus contributed: several beneficiaries, more than 150 governments, international, national and local NGOs, the military, international governmental organisations and representatives from the private sector (businesses and foundations).

An inclusive process

The strategy was based on eight regional consultations held between June 2014 in Africa (Ivory Coast) and July 2015 for South Asia and Central Asia, in Dushanbe (Tajikistan). Their findings are documented in voluminous reports². This process culminated with the global consultation held from October 14 to 16, 2015 in Geneva. *The report Restoring Humanity. Global Voices Calling for Action* contains the summary of the outcomes of these consultations³.

¹ According to the report *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, General Assembly A/70/709, February 2016.

<http://reliefweb.int/report/world/one-humanity-shared-responsibility-report-secretary-general-world-humanitarian-summit>

² These reports are available on the official website of the Summit: www.worldhumanitariansummit.org

³ United Nations, *World Humanitarian Summit secretariat, Restoring Humanity: Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit*, 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Restoring%20Humanity-%20Synthesis%20of%20the%20Consultation%20Process%20for%20the%20World%20Humanitarian%20Summit.pdf>

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At the same time, a series of other consultations took place, including the Global forum for improving humanitarian action, the Civil-military forum and meetings with representatives from the private sector. A number of international thematic dialogues were also held during the process, such as those on the subject of children in crises, collective crisis management or risk management. This process was rounded off by two documents produced in 2016: the special report of the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing⁴ and Ban Ki-moon's report, submitted to the United Nations General Assembly⁵. Participants in the Summit therefore cannot complain that they have not been informed of the process that defines the current state of the international humanitarian system, given how transparent it has been, at least as regards its results. For even if the stakeholders agree in principle on the issues, there is no guarantee that States will be prepared to give up their prerogatives, particularly their sovereignty. For their part, international NGOs and NGOs from the South are far from understanding each other as regards the forms of cooperation and financing arrangements: the latter want their own budget while those from the North are reluctant to accept such a solution. Further evidence of a number of disagreements could be the resignation of Jemilah Mahmood from her position as Chief of the Summit secretariat following the global consultation that took place in Geneva in October 2015, despite the remarkable work she has accomplished. Though their implementation is far from assured, the amount of information thus accumulated since 2012 must now be converted into a roadmap for the years to come.

Seven round tables⁶ will be organised in Istanbul to provide recommendations around the seven themes finally selected: political leadership to prevent and end conflicts; uphold the norms that safeguard humanity; leaving no one behind: a commitment to address forced displacement; women and girls: catalysing action to achieve gender equality; natural disasters and climate change: managing risks and crises differently; changing people's lives: from delivering aid to ending need; and lastly, financing: investing in humanity.

But at this stage of the analysis, it is necessary to get back to the consultations held upstream through a brief summary of five sets of documents: the regional reports, the report of the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, the Communication of the European Commission⁷, the resolution of the European Parliament⁸ and finally the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in particular its appendix "Agenda for Humanity".

The regional consultations were structured around four themes: humanitarian effectiveness, reducing vulnerability and managing risk, transformation through innovation and serving the needs of people in conflict. The results published in the eight regional reports largely overlap one another, though regional specificities can be observed. The dominant theme naturally remains that related to financing. It would be a challenge to identify an institution that does not complain about a shortage in that area, especially in view of the growing number of conflicts and natural disasters. The lack of protection and support from governments towards both the populations and humanitarian actors is also a widespread observation. Integrating emergency and development has become "wishful thinking" and the need to transfer resources to national or local actors an incantation. If regional differences remain, they concern mainly the need to create institutions dedicated to the preparation and management of natural disasters (especially in Asia)

⁴ <http://reliefweb.int/report/world/high-level-panel-humanitarian-financing-report-secretary-general-too-important-fail>

⁵ *One Humanity...*, *op. cit.*

⁶ https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_summit/roundtables

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/smart-regulation/roadmaps/docs/2015_echo_001_whs_communication_en.pdf

⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2015-0459+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

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or the prevention of conflicts (in Africa and the Middle East). It is worth highlighting that the lack of respect for humanitarian principles is not solely due to the bad faith of the parties involved, but also to their lack of knowledge in that regard, particularly in Africa⁹.

As for the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, it adhered, with good reason, to the principle that “no one should be left behind”. The report consequently focuses on three issues: concentrating the amounts allocated on concrete needs, deepening and broadening the resource base, and improving support processes to contribute to effectiveness. The first one may seem in contradiction with the second, unless one accepts the arguments from the Panel. Indeed, according to its members, the issues result from the lack of quantitative and qualitative indicators pertaining to the needs, and from the absence of a common way to assess these needs. More worryingly, the assessments made would appear to be serving the vision and interests of the assessors and their organisations more than their beneficiaries. The members of this Panel are also in agreement when they deplore the chasm between the satisfaction of identified needs (estimated at \$50bn) and the amounts available (approximately \$24bn), and to call on donors to review their allocation criteria. In their opinion, the current system operates based on criteria that hinder more than they improve the satisfaction of needs. Up to what extent will recourse to the famous “new sponsors” (companies and foundations) contribute to improving the current situation? This has yet to be seen.

As for the European Commission, it has opted for a different “angle of attack” to formulate its recommendations for the Summit. It notes that the reform process – initiated in 2005 with the report “Humanitarian Response Review”¹⁰ – is not yet completed. Its view is that to this day, there is still no global partnership for humanitarian action based on common principles. International humanitarian law (IHL) is not respected and its links with Human Rights are still not properly established. The Commission reminds governments that the onus is on them, collectively, to allow humanitarian agencies, through their contributions, to work in an environment that is secure both for them and for the beneficiaries. Similarly, when it comes to financing, the Commission calls on donors and the United Nations to review their practices and needs assessment tools to improve the effectiveness of aid.

The resolution of the European Parliament is even more specific in the demands it addresses to the participants in the World Humanitarian Summit, calling for “specific commitments and priority areas for action while pursuing operational efficiency, [...] better coordination and partnerships with emerging donors, [...] application of humanitarian principles and respect for obligations under international humanitarian law”¹¹). The resolution stresses that current humanitarian challenges require a system that is more diversified, and also more inclusive and encompassing. The Parliament thus calls on the Commission and Member States to present Summit participants with a relatively detailed list of suggestions on concrete aspects, sometimes even very practical, related to the four themes around which regional consultations are structured.

The most recent is the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, genuine highlight of the process, which was submitted a few months before the Summit. It proposes a general framework to initiate a new phase of reform. Acknowledging the frustration, and even the disgust

⁹ The results are detailed in the document United Nations, *World Humanitarian Summit...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/HRR.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2015-0459+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

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that can arise from the overall humanitarian situation¹², Ban Ki-moon largely addresses the issue related to the interdependence of humanitarian action with politics, the issues related to cooperation and coordination between the actors concerned, or to the prevention and resolution of conflicts. This contextualization of humanitarian action is pivotal and the arguments developed in the appendix *Agenda for Humanity*, which accompanies the report, are structured around five responsibility topics (which largely overlap the themes of the round tables). The first core responsibility, “Political leadership to prevent and end conflicts”, calls on the actors involved to demonstrate timely, coherent and decisive political leadership, to act early, to remain engaged and invest in stability, and to develop solutions with and for people.

The second core responsibility, “Uphold the norms that safeguard humanity”, describes the obligation to respect and protect civilians and civil property in the conduct of hostilities, to ensure the protection of humanitarian and medical missions and to guarantee them unimpeded access to people in need, to denounce violations, to take concrete steps to improve compliance and accountability, and to uphold the rules (launch of a global campaign to consolidate the norms that safeguard humanity). The third core responsibility is to “leave no one aside”, by reducing and addressing displacement, addressing the vulnerabilities of migrants and providing more regular and lawful opportunities for migration, ending statelessness in the next decade, empowering and protecting women and girls, eliminating gaps in education for children, adolescents and young people, enabling the latter to be agents of positive transformation, and addressing other groups or minorities in crisis settings. The fourth core responsibility, “Change people’s lives: from delivering aid to ending need”, seeks to reinforce and not replace national and local systems, to anticipate rather than wait for crises, and to deliver collective outcomes by transcending humanitarian-development divides. As for the fifth and final core responsibility, “Invest in humanity”, it consists in investing in local capacities according to risk and in stability, financing outcomes, not fragmentation (shift from funding separate projects to financing a vision), while diversifying the resource base and increasing cost-efficiency, all in the name of shared responsibility, which refers to the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030¹³. At this stage it is yet unclear how these responsibilities will translate in reality.

An overall positive outcome in light of recent attempts at reform

In 2005, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) failed in its willingness to reform the humanitarian system on its own, in particular by imposing the UN as provider of last resort. This assumption implied that during major humanitarian crises where other actors do not have the capacity to provide for the victims, the United Nations would come into play. In fact, the latter – through OCHA – had systematically overestimated their capacities, and quite simply ignored the role of the other two pillars of the international humanitarian system.

The “Global Humanitarian Platform” was subsequently created, and this time, the three pillars of humanitarian action were integrated: UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and NGOs¹⁴. This platform only survived for two years, though without blocking the ongoing process of reform that characterises this field of action since the end of the Cold War. Still, the first major reform in 2005 was notoriously exclusive (in terms of actors involved) compared to

¹² *One Humanity...*, *op. cit.*

¹³ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/fr/objectifs-de-developpement-durable/>

¹⁴ This platform was the result of massive criticism, especially from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as well as humanitarian NGOs refusing to be instrumentalised by the United Nations.

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the process leading to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. It is worth recalling that this is an inclusive process that has not dismissed any actor involved in humanitarian action. For this reason alone, this Summit should at the very least result in a consensus on the problems of the international humanitarian system.

Though a roadmap of the necessary changes is yet to be formulated for the attention of the actors concerned, the list of problems to be solved is as long as the one already drawn up.

This applies primarily to operational and institutional problems: all it takes to be convinced of this is to look at the many themes identified in the various reports mentioned, especially those emerging from regional consultations. But it also applies to the integration of emergency humanitarian action into development policies, risk management, the protection of beneficiaries or the gradual transfer to national or regional actors of both the resources and the responsibility for the management of humanitarian action.

The global mobilisation of all the actors directly or indirectly involved in humanitarian action as part of this process is already a significant success: a global collective consensus has taken shape around the problems to be addressed. In terms of implementation, a number of measures are essential to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, and thus improve the use of available resources. One instance is the proposal to create an international support fund for refugees or to change the way the Security Council operates in the event of humanitarian crises, by excluding veto rights. At the institutional level, the link between assistance and protection is definitely recognised as legitimate and necessary.

But the formulas that will ensure the coordination and cooperation between the various actors are yet to be found. In principle, this is the aim of the “clusters”, but their mode of operation is still far from convincing. Similarly, the necessary integration of humanitarian action in development policies requires an appropriate strategy in the specific contexts of conflicts and natural disasters. Finally, a reform of humanitarian action would only be viable if this action was unanimously recognised as neutral, impartial and independent, and solely based on the principle of humanity. But this presupposes a strong commitment from the actors who are the only ones able to guarantee the respect of such principles. And experience shows that it is highly unlikely that all States and/or parties involved in conflicts would be prepared for this type of commitment.

Less encouraging prospects for the problems to be solved

These last elements indeed lead to a profound question: how can the intentions expressed with a great many statements and reports be translated into concrete policies? The results produced by the process leading to Istanbul show the complexity of a fundamental reform of the international humanitarian system as envisaged for the years to come. The desired changes will be effective only if an international humanitarian order is universally recognised as the foundation of humanitarian action. This order does not have to be invented: it already exists in the form of international humanitarian law. It must however be respected by all stakeholders, and first of all by governments, which is far from being the case. Oxfam thus writes that the Summit “must reaffirm existing international law in the strongest possible terms”¹⁵.

¹⁵—. Oxfam, *For human dignity - The World Humanitarian Summit: the challenge to deliver*, 2015, p. 7.

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The case of Syria – and by extension that of the refugees stranded in Greece or wandering across Europe for several months now – shows on the one hand the need to respect the rules and principles set out in the IHL and how, on the other, States are so reluctant to let this law prevail over their political, security or ideological interests. The European Commission and the European Parliament insisted on this point, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations goes even further by emphasizing the issue of conflict prevention and management. Will they be heard?

When considering the operational and institutional aspects however, the “humanitarian transition” envisaged presupposes that at least two conditions be met: binding decisions and a list of priorities for the implementation of these decisions. Neither of these conditions has been satisfied to date. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the seven round tables in Istanbul, which are meant to draw up the summary of priorities, will each be led by two high-ranking officials, will bring together approximately 35 carefully selected participants and will not last more than two hours. Not to mention that the duty of the chairman of each round table will be to present a limited number of strong recommendations, i.e. around four per round table. In other words, no real debate should be expected from these round tables: they will only have a symbolic function since their outcome will have been decided beforehand.

Hoping that at the end of the Summit in Istanbul the international humanitarian system will be able to change rapidly in the desired direction would be illusory. One should nevertheless bear in mind the progress represented by the collective consensus that appears to have been established itself concerning the problems faced by humanitarian action. One question remains: just how feasible is it to organise humanitarian aid on an international scale which would operate based on the dunantist principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, and which therefore remains isolated from politics? The follow-up from Istanbul will tell us which actors have not only the capacity but also the will to realise the vision of Henry Dunant, while adapting it to today’s realities and to those that lie ahead.

Translated from the French by Marc Duc

Biography • Wolf-Dieter Eberwein

After studying in Berlin, Montreal and Ann Arbor (USA), Wolf-Dieter Eberwein was a Professor of Political Science at the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies until his retirement in 2009. From 1995 to 2004, he was Director of the International Politics Research Group at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB). He worked as a consultant for the German Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. From 2008 to 2012 he was President of VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies), the Brussels-based network of European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. He is now a member of the executive board of the Red Cross Fund in France. He is a specialist in international relations, more particularly in armed conflicts and security, NGOs and humanitarian action.

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