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WHAT NEXT?

The evidence analysed for SOHS 2015 paints a picture of a system that has continued to improve operational modalities but has not increased operational capacity to the level needed to adequately respond to the current humanitarian caseload. The laudable accomplishments in rapid response to sudden-onset disasters like Typhoon Haiyan and to Syrian refugees, the improvements in coordinated planning and the investment in innovation and new technologies unfortunately all pale in comparison to the poor coverage and capacity gaps in crises such as CAR and South Sudan, the impotence in the face of political impediments to humanitarian access and protection inside Syria, and the early failures of the Ebola response.

6.1 Conclusions

It is unlikely that the gap between global humanitarian need and global humanitarian response capacity will be filled by continuing modest improvements to the current funding and coordination mechanisms.

The Transformative Agenda's improvements and the preceding waves of humanitarian reform since Resolution 46/182 have all remained inside the confines of the current institutional architecture. Although some agency leaders and analysts are beginning to raise questions about more radical and far-reaching reform, those with the most influence over the system – the major donor governments – do not appear to be thinking strategically at this level. Rather, interviews for this study suggest that they remain focused on merely gaining new operational efficiencies and making incremental improvements.

Humanitarians, when confronted with mounting operational challenges and needs, tend to reflexively call for more money, as if donors could resolve the principal problems simply through increased spending. This assumption is not supported by the evidence in this report, which suggests structural deficiencies in areas such as human resources (including waning technical capacity and slow recruitment), duplicative administrative systems, and the time-consuming and costly coordination of entities whose incentive structures and lines of accountability are not aligned. This is not to say that major additional funding is not needed, but without major structural changes to the system, new money could not be put to optimal use.

Evidence also does not support the notion that major reform would require a choice between a top-down hierarchical system and a bottom-up, decentralised network of localised capacities. Rather, the wide spectrum of humanitarian needs, contexts and functions demands both a stronger centralised directive capacity for major acute emergencies (where host government capacities are overwhelmed, weak, absent or obstructive) and operating modalities that are more responsive to local realities, continual capacity building and appropriate devolution of responsibility to local and regional levels. All three elements – funding, global-level capacity, and devolution or subsidiarity – would be required at once to enable a meaningful increase in operational capacity.

6.2 Options for the way forward

As with previous editions, the SOHS study is not intended to offer specific, targeted policy recommendations, but rather to point to areas of potential change, with a view to informing the thinking and approaches of all humanitarians.

SOHS 2012 directed attention to a set of glaring but persistent weaknesses in the system that warranted renewed attention. At the time, humanitarian action appeared to be heading, slowly but steadily, in a positive direction. The record of the past three years, however, suggests that the system has in many ways reached its limits, and that while we could, and should, continue on a path of reform, more radical rethinking will be

required if we are to reckon honestly with the scale of the challenge.

Important moments ahead include, but are not limited to, the World Humanitarian Summit, where important and wide-ranging issues of humanitarian principle and practice will be discussed. The following ideas have been put forward to address some of the issues highlighted in this report.

Identifying and remediating humanitarian capacity gaps

Acknowledging weak and overstretched capacity in chronic crises, a few NGOs have floated proposals for the major humanitarian actors (UN agencies and large INGOs) to undertake a systematic mapping of their collective technical capacities, resources and gaps. This could occur with and alongside national governments and local partners, and would allow refocusing and reinvestment in core emergency response capacity. Financially, this could also include establishing a capacity-building grant window in the CERF, funded from donors' development and resilience budgets, and implemented regionally.

Enabling greater humanitarian access and coverage in conflict environments

While reaffirming the importance of humanitarian principles (as many have recently called for in response to Syria and other conflict settings where humanitarian action has been constrained), agencies have also been discussing proactive and pragmatic approaches to gaining and maintaining access. These include increasing support to the actors with the best, most rapid access – often local aid actors – including direct funding from donors (or more flexible means of transferring assets from INGOs) to national NGOs, and generally greater capacity building support. CERF regulations could be changed to provide direct funding to local and international NGOs of demonstrated capacity, which would also increase the speed of response. As a complement to this, government donors would need to examine their counter-terror regulations and other policies, as well as funding relationships, to ensure they do not compromise the neutrality, and by extension the safety, of humanitarian actors.

Making humanitarian action more relevant and accountable to those receiving aid

Humanitarians wishing to turn rhetoric on increasing recipient consultation into more concrete action could develop and invest in joint, ongoing monitoring of humanitarian responses from the perspective of recipients, making use of communications technology for remote polling and crowd-sourced feedback on both recipient needs and humanitarian performance. Donor governments could also increase the number and humanitarian capacity of their representatives working in operational contexts, to improve performance and accountability.



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A model for assessed contributions

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres recently put forward the idea of funding humanitarian action through assessed contributions from the member states. This would address the inherent limitations of the current voluntary financing model, and respond to calls for increased burden sharing by affluent states that contribute at relatively low levels relative to their GDP. Governments could contribute fixed amounts each year, pegged to a percentage of GDP, to a significantly expanded CERF. This could act as a form of insurance for emergency response, replenishable up to the target total, year on year. With universal participation, such a model could do away with the notion of a charitable system that is bifurcated between donor and recipient countries, and serve to increase the universality, predictability and flexibility of humanitarian action in very practical ways.

Rationalising UN humanitarian capacity

While no formal proposition has been put forward recently, another significant structural change to consider would be to rationalise the UN's humanitarian capacity, now dispersed among 10 or so separate agencies, into a more unified emergency system with unified lines of accountability. Short of a single UN humanitarian agency, this could involve integrating and streamlining the separate systems of human resources, finances and contracting. Streamlining could strengthen country-level humanitarian leadership, lighten the coordination burden and allow quicker and more directive action when needed, including through improved consolidation of supplies and logistical hubs at regional levels.

The common thread running through these options is the notion that the current system requires more significant change than the past two decades of reform have accomplished. While some might appear quixotic when viewed through the lens of an entrenched interagency structure, at some point it arguably becomes necessary to take a step back from the system that has evolved, and consider how it might look and function differently if it were designed to achieve the best possible humanitarian outcomes. If the past three years are any indication, the global demand for such re-invention is only likely to rise. ●