
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM CHANGE ROUNDTABLE OUTCOMES

WITH HUMANITARIAN POLICY GROUP AND IRIN NEWS



HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP



INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, Humanitarian Advisory Group hosted a Melbourne-based roundtable to examine humanitarian system change and discuss the implications for Australia-based actors as a follow-up event to the Pacific Humanitarian Partnership meeting in Suva, Fiji.

Christina Bennett, Head of Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and Heba Aly, Director of IRIN News shared their global perspectives on the future of the humanitarian action and the underlying need for broader systemic change. These introductory comments framed a broader discussion about what this means in Australia and Asia and Pacific regions.

IRIN News

IRIN's journalists report from over 70 crisis zones around the world on topics ranging from conflict, natural disasters and migration in order to amplify the voices of those affected and encourage better responses by the international community.. IRIN's journalism engages a range decision-makers and practitioners in governments, UN agencies, NGOs and mainstream media outlets. IRIN's three main objectives include:

- To inform decision makers by elevating the voices of those affected by crisis
- To raise awareness to the wider public
- To promote transparency and accountability.

Humanitarian Policy Group

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is one of the world's leading independent research teams working on humanitarian issues.

HPG are dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality research, dialogue and debate.

HPG's analytical work is directed by an Integrated Program, a body of research grounded in field studies that span a range of countries and emergencies. IP projects cast a critical eye over the pressing issues affecting humanitarian policies and operations.

HPG's dynamic communications and public affairs programme promotes and disseminates HPG's research findings, links their research to current debates on humanitarian policy and practice and works with local and global media outlets to bring humanitarian concerns to the wider public.

HPG provide a critical link between policy and practice through the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), an independent forum for humanitarian practitioners to share and disseminate information and experience.

Learning and academic engagement are central areas of their work. HPG edit and produce Disasters journal, and host an annual course for senior policy-makers and practitioners in the sector.

HPG also offer consultancy services, policy advice and commissioned studies related to our core themes and objectives.

Key themes emerged in the discussion in relation to:

1. Changes in who is funding, organising and delivering humanitarian aid
2. The evolving role of INGOs
3. Accountability and transparency of the system
4. Drivers for and barriers to change
5. What changes do NGOs need to make?
6. What does this mean for the sector?

THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

As part of its [Time to Let Go](#) report that informed the World Humanitarian Summit, HPG identified a 'crisis of legitimacy' within the humanitarian sector. For three-quarters of a century Western donors and non-governmental organisations, the Red Cross Movement and UN agencies have viewed themselves as indispensable to operations and as arbiters of the norms and standards governing the conduct of relief. This has fundamentally shifted in recent years and the report proposed the need to let go of assumptions, structures and behaviours that prevent adaptation, and evolution.

HPG also found that despite a decade of reforms, and an overall increase in the amount of funding channelled to providing humanitarian assistance, the sector is still falling short in responding to crises around the world. In addition to this, despite a commitment to accountability to affected populations, it is not perceived as doing an adequate job in the eyes of those it is trying to serve – it is a crisis of legitimacy.

CHANGES IN WHO IS FUNDING, ORGANISING AND DELIVERING HUMANITARIAN AID

There have also been significant changes in who is funding and delivering humanitarian aid. China has become a more prominent humanitarian actor, both financially and operationally – and not just for natural disasters. For example, it has offered Jordan \$20 million for the management of Syrian refugees. In Ukraine, groups of volunteers, local governments and coalitions of private businesses have been able to respond to high levels of displacement. The role of networks of relatives and diaspora groups is becoming as important as large donors, particularly as remittances can be a more consistent and reliable source of finance than international aid or foreign direct investment. Private sector businesses, both local and multinational are going beyond donations and corporate social responsibility and providing, cash or in-kind donations, or providing new and innovative technologies for response. States themselves may be more open to local private sector involvement in the delivery of relief than they are to traditional aid agencies. The rise of mobile phone and internet use in crisis-affected countries has significantly amplified the voice of affected communities, enabled 'auto assessment' by crisis-affected people, and improved access to financial services and cash-based response.

Agencies discussed how localisation will change the way they do business. Donors are seeking evidence of what needs to change, including barriers that need to be overcome to make significant advancements. In the Pacific region, the localisation of humanitarian response had been a key issue for national governments. For example National Disaster Management Organisations (NDMOs) are now increasingly specific about what resources and support is requested, and decline support where desired.

EVOLVING ROLE OF INGOs

The role of INGOs in humanitarian action is fundamentally changing. Northern NGOs, the UN system and the Red Cross are by no means redundant, however they are just one part of a much broader universe of assistance made up of a myriad of other actors, with their own distinctive traditions and cultures of assistance. Traditional aid organisations are grappling with how they negotiate, and adapt to the changing nature of the sector, particularly as the pace of change is accelerating. This shift will drive change more quickly than can be adequately planned for in many cases, increasing accountability issues for both donors and affected populations.

Agencies present raised a number of key discussion points and questions including:

How can we ensure we get momentum in the right areas to make the changes we need to make? We should be focussing on positive changes and practices, and how we can scale that up.

- Should organisations develop niche areas of expertise - will this alleviate pressure to fund everyone for everything?
- How can the practical tensions of devolving and decentralising power be overcome, particularly as the need for humanitarian funding is outstripping demand which results in a move to consolidation?
- To what extent is the sector learning from the real progress made in other sectors?

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

It is important that the sector has checks and balances in place to help drive some of these conversations further and ensure the sector is moving in the right direction. This change requires a degree of both courage and honesty. IRIN can report real time whilst operations are happening in real life and strives to provoke discussion around best practice and lessons learned. For example, the new Investigative Section within IRIN seeks to uncover, and analyse potential malpractices to increase accountability in the sector. This includes providing a forum in which senior officials can be asked difficult questions and be held to account for their decisions.

How can we fundamentally change power relations within the humanitarian sector?

Whilst there have been numerous initiatives in the humanitarian sector that seek to improve accountability and transparency, there remains a need to unpack in particular how these are contextually implemented, and the relationship this has to shifting entrenched power dynamics in the system. Roundtable discussions centred on the issue of little to no existing progress on deep-rooted issues pertaining to power dynamics such as mandates, respect for International Humanitarian Law, and the continued resistance to fundamental change, particularly by UN agencies.

DRIVERS FOR AND BARRIERS TO CHANGE

What is preventing the type of change and adaptation required in the humanitarian sector to improve performance?

Agencies identified and discussed the following barriers to change that are endemic to the sector:

- The people most affected have the least power to influence the aid they receive
- The sector have a highly concentrated and competitive funding environment of a small number of donors funding many aid organisations
- Institutional pressures discourage investments in prevention and early action.
- Risk-averse attitudes and ‘fear of failure’ push the sector further away from front lines, limit the potential for innovation (and particularly financial innovation) and prompt significant resistance to change.
- It is important for traditional aid organisations to continually examine their added value, be open to change, and reimagine themselves in a new context. The key question is ‘What is the risk if we don’t take that risk?’

WHAT CHANGES DO NGOS NEED TO MAKE?

“Instead of changing the way we work, our institutions, how we play the game, what if we thought about changing the game itself, namely the power dynamics, the incentive structures and the culture that holds us back from enabling and embracing change altogether. The change comes from a combination of revolution and evolution.”



Alternative funding sources

- Tap into private donations, remittances and faith-based giving. There is currently a limited knowledge base on the extent and potential of these funding sources.
- Consider also a social economy approach to protracted crises that involves UN agencies procuring goods and services from local communities/businesses. The profits generated from those contracts are then reinvested back into local businesses and community priorities.



Coordination

- The future of humanitarian action will be about networks – technology networks, social networks, business networks – moving away from centralised sources of power and decision making by bureaucracies and large institutions.



Accountability

- Shifting to a system of downward and upward accountability where upward and downward accountability focused on the performance and behaviour of institutions as well as the outcomes for affected people. The results of such accountability would impact on future funding and demand for services.



Operations

- A future role for the international humanitarian sector should be an enabling one that cultivates the talents that exist outside of the formal system. It should also remain field-ready, highly skilled and a reliable source of timely and impartial assistance and protection for those situations that require speed, scale, expertise and a highly ‘principled’ approach.



Approach and culture

Enacting change should start with the cultural and behavioural shifts that will make the most difference. This includes the following areas:

Understand complementarity

- What does it mean to strengthen capacity? Is it the individual or the organization?
- What relationships and power dynamics promote or inhibit collaboration and complementarity?
- How can the sector demonstrate the positive value in working with a range of actors?

Shift behavior

It is the shift in culture and in behaviour where the most impact can be had. For example, shifting behaviour through more local actor participation in meetings, project planning and budgeting, through HR practices that promote local hiring and staff engagement.

Document it and amplify it

Use global forums, knowledge partners like HAG and IRIN and ODI and Universities to document and disseminate the shifts you are making and your learnings to others.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE SECTOR?



Operations

- Develop high degrees of expertise in niche areas
- Leave the bulk of operations to your local counterparts.



Financing

- Diversify funding base with a focus on anticipatory funding, private giving
- and with an expectation of investing in others and incubating organisations elsewhere.



Coordination

- Engage in a more distributed form of coordination based on networks that formed around specific problems or need.
- Coordinate and collaborate without intermediaries through these networks to deliver services based on community demand.



Accountability

- Be accountable to those receiving services, for engaging with and incubating partners and eligible for additional and renewed funds based on performance in these areas.

What can you do to be the change you want to see?

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Humanitarian Advisory Group is an Australian company founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in the Australasian and Pacific region. HAG provides a unique space for thinking, technical advice, training, research and evaluations that positively contribute to excellence in humanitarian practice. HAG have adopted a social enterprise business model which means the projects we work on and the way we conduct business reflect our core values.