

What's wrong with the humanitarian aid system and how to fix it.

**Remarks by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs,
Mark Lowcock, at the Center for Global Development on Proposal for
an Independent Commission for Voices in Crisis**

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As delivered

I am thrilled to have this discussion at the CGD because a lot of the most interesting ideas on how to deal with this accountability problem have been generated by CGD colleagues in recent years.

I know we'll have a well-informed, challenging and well-motivated discussion.

I'm also thrilled that we have As Sy with us. As and I worked very closely together in his last period as the Secretary-General of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. There's almost nobody I've worked with in the humanitarian world over recent years who I've admired as much as I've admired As.

I'm sure we'll hear a very honest and well-informed and insightful contribution from him. I'm very thrilled As is able to join us.

I am coming to the end of my time as Emergency Relief Coordinator. Only one of my 12 predecessors have served longer. I suspect all of us feel we have done the job in trying circumstances. But according to the UN's official data, the last four years have seen the biggest recorded increase in humanitarian need since this job was created – and that's because of the combination of conflict, climate change and COVID.

The global humanitarian system – tens of thousands of people round the world working for NGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations and the UN - is a really remarkable public good. It certainly saves millions of lives every year, often overcoming huge obstacles. The world would be a lot worse without it.

But the truth is the humanitarian system currently is overwhelmed and over-stretched. The scale and complexities of the crises we face today are putting our system under enormous strain.

Today one in 33 people worldwide needs humanitarian assistance or protection. More than at any time since the Second World War.

Nearly 80 million people are displaced by conflict and violence.

Wars last twice as long as they did in the early 1990s.

So humanitarian agencies have to stay and operate in countries much longer than ever before.

This gets expensive. This year's Global Humanitarian Overview, which I published in early December, seeks \$US35 billion – compared with just \$2 billion in the late 1990s.

Donors are more generous than ever before. But funding has failed to keep pace with rising needs. We have seen an average 40 per cent funding shortfall each year for the past five years.

I think the current trajectory we are on is simply unsustainable.

The truth is, unless we address the causes of crises – mostly conflict, climate change and deadly diseases – needs are going to grow. Funding will be insufficient to meet those needs.

Humanitarian agencies can only ever respond to the symptoms of global crises. We will never be a means to play the largest role in solving their root causes. We can only alleviate the suffering caused by crises – but we cannot stop them from happening.

The challenges that the humanitarian system will face in the next decade are really very daunting.

So, the question that arises is how can we best prepare as a humanitarian system to deal with what is coming, and to provide the best possible help for people in crisis?

I have reached the view that one of the biggest failings of the humanitarian system is that agencies do not pay enough attention to what people caught up in crises say they want, and then trying to give that to them.

It is actually quite rare in all of the senior-level discussions that I have had about various crises that these two basic questions are the focus of attention.

So why is that?

You touched on it, Masood, at the beginning. It's because despite all our good intentions, the humanitarian system actually is set up to give people in need what international agencies and donors think is best, and what the agencies have to offer, rather than giving people what they themselves say they most need.

Let me give you some examples.

In Chad and Cox's Bazar and other places too, people in dire humanitarian need are frequently selling aid they have been given to buy something else they want more. That is a clear indication that what is being provided does not meet people's needs and preferences.

After the Central Sulawesi earthquake in 2018, I remember going there, and almost half of displaced households reported shelter as one of their most important and immediate priorities. But only a small fraction of people got immediate help with shelter.

In Iraq, a 2019 survey shows people want job opportunities, cash and food and household items that help them reduce their dependency. But only 16 per cent of people believe that their opinions are included in aid and service provision.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated examples. And nor am I the first person to say all this.

Over the past decade there has been growing recognition that affected people should have more say over the type of help they get and how they get it.

This has theoretically been part of every reform agenda in the system for the past 20 years.

So, it is not only morally the right the thing to do to give people more say. It gives people greater dignity and control over their lives.

It will also make our system more efficient, and it will offer financiers better value for money if we do more of the things people say they want us to do.

The impact of attempts to address this so far has been limited, unfortunately.

Last year, more than half the people surveyed in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda said that the aid they received did not cover their most important needs.

In Chad, only 12 per cent of people surveyed were positive about the aid they received.

So why is there so little apparent progress despite the efforts that have been made?

First, in many places we have information on what people want and how they want it. So, the problem is that we are not consistently acting on that information.

Second, the approach has been too piecemeal. There has been progress over the past few years. Often individual organizations or programmes are doing a good job. But that is not enough. What is needed is for organizations and decision makers as a whole to make listening and responding to people their real priority.

Third, there is no incentive, really, not sufficient incentive to change. Ultimately, organizations or decision makers can choose to listen to people and be responsive, or they can choose not to. There aren't really consequences for the choices they make. The incentives to push them in the right direction are too weak.

Fourth, the humanitarian system is not held accountable for what people ask for versus what they receive. There is no independent assessment of how agencies perform in this regard. Accountability runs mostly to the donors, not to the affected people.

People's needs are too easily dismissed due to lack of funding or needs being outside the scope of what individual organizations can provide. I think lack of funding makes it even more important that we deliver what people say they most want.

We have a responsibility to overcome these obstacles. But it is rational and efficient for us to do so.

My proposal is that we pilot an Independent Commission for Voices in Crises. An independent body that holds the system to account.

And if we hold up a mirror like that to the system, humanitarian agencies collectively, I think, will see that we are simply not adequately listening and responding to what people say they want.

We need to increase awareness of that gap between what is delivered in a crisis and what people actually want.

And by doing this, we can increase the consequences for humanitarian agencies of not listening.

This has the power to change how agencies make decisions about the support they will provide.

There is a more detailed policy paper available right now on the OCHA website – we've just put it up. But let me summarize the main points.

This Independent Commission (or ICVIC) would have four objectives.

Firstly, it would issue public reports on the needs prioritized by people in a given crisis and advocate with senior-level decision makers on those needs.

Secondly, it would grade the Humanitarian Response Plan as soon as it is issued on how well the planning and programming responds to needs identified by affected people, so we can see as early as possible whether people are being listened to.

Thirdly, the Commission would review and publish interim findings to highlight evolving needs and promote course correction during the course of responding to a crisis by aid organizations.

Finally, the Commission would publicly evaluate and grade the humanitarian response to independently assess ex post how well the response matched people's needs and priorities.

For a Commission like this to be successful, it must be independent from all the operational humanitarian organizations. We can't in humanitarian agencies simply mark our own homework.

ICVIC's findings and grades should be transparent and publicly available.

It should, wherever possible, draw on existing sources of information rather than creating new data-gathering exercises.

So again, finding the right incentives to change the system is the key point.

How the money flows through the system is clearly one of the most powerful incentives.

So actually, the donors, the financiers, hold the most powerful levers.

But we do have some scope for action ourselves within the humanitarian system too. I also propose, recognizing we have some scope ourselves to act, that we start with the funds that my own office, OCHA, manages – the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund and country-based pooled funds, together they generate \$1.7 billion a year – and we can within those funds institute systems to prioritize allocations to programmes that directly respond to affected people’s own expressed priorities.

But the ICVIC should also work with donors and partner organizations to explore what other incentives could be used. The central point is that the behaviour of those who finance the humanitarian system is critical as to whether or not we can change.

I believe that a three-year pilot should be launched to get this going.

I do think this has the power to make a significant impact in people’s lives. Because listening to people, giving them what they say they want and helping them more take control of their own lives should be the way humanitarian agencies do business.

These are my proposals. I look forward to the discussion.

Thank you very much indeed.

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