EMERGENCY GAP SERIES 04

The cost of coherence

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The Emergency Gap Series is a collection of reflexion pieces produced by the MSF Operational Centre Barcelona Athens (OCBA) in the context of the wider Emergency Gap project, which responds to operational concerns over the declining emergency response capacity of the humanitarian sector at large. The analysis is informed by OCBA's operational experience and discussions with key external experts.

The project is further motivated by the current paradigmatic push to relegate emergency response to the status of exception, with the consequent lack of investment in adequate emergency response capacity so necessary in the face of the number of acute conflicts and escalation of violence across the globe. Thus, the Emergency Gap work aims to diagnose the drivers of such loss of emergency focus in current humanitarian action, and to analyse the enablers and disablers for the provision of effective humanitarian response in the context of acute armed conflict. For more information go to https://emergencygap.msf.es

Executive summary

The long history of trying to operationalise coherence has brought to light its inherent inconsistencies and operational costs. The new push for coherence based on the paradigmatic shift announced at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) marks a departure, a vision based not on the building of bridges between humanitarianism and other sectors, but on humanitarianism being assimilated by them. This comes at a time when the global context demands even greater independence if humanitarians are to steer through the interests of power actors towards the needs of people.

This paper questions the basis and wisdom of the WHS's transforming of humanitarian action into a support mechanism for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), realigning the ultimate humanitarian goal towards 'ending need'. After setting forth the issue in greater detail, this paper lays forth three interlinked flaws in the new paradigm: 1) contradiction at the conceptual level; 2) misjudgement of the nature of the problem and disregard for the lessons of history; and 3) underestimation of the impact upon a humanitarian sector that is already slow, rather inflexible, politicised and progressively less able to meet the emergency needs of people in crisis.

The coherence debate in aid circles is an ironically incoherent one – the term refers to an assortment of policies and structural arrangements. Simplifying, the less vertical form of coherence seeks to ensure greater coordination and complementarity among the various humanitarian actors, and between the humanitarian sector as a whole with peacebuilding, military and political / diplomatic sectors. In its more ambitious manifestations, coherence also aims to create a strategically and / or structurally integrated response across humanitarian, development, political and even military actors. However, at the recent WHS, the UN turbo-charged existing thinking by placing humanitarian aid at the service of the SDGs.

The United Nations Secretary-General's report eloquently articulated the mismatch between the overwhelming human suffering and needs that we are witnessing, and the limited resources and reach of the aid system. However, while the WHS's flagship report correctly identifies the dual nature of the problem, it errs in the solution when it re-engineers the very DNA of humanitarian action, redefining it as an auxiliary to the holistic transformation of human society. This is offering a prescription for the impossible.

Hidden beneath the jingoism of 'ending need' lies the contradiction of shifting humanitarianism's overarching objective while simultaneously expecting that it will continue to exist, let alone honour its defining principles. While there is much artifice in the humanitarian-development divide, there is also much necessity in the distinctions that created it. The challenge is to better reconcile, not to abolish or ignore, the fundamentally different methods, structures, cultures and objectives of the two sectors.

By building a 'coherent' humanitarian intervention through the framework of the SDGs, the 'new paradigm' poisons its own lifeblood – the drive to put people at the centre of humanitarian action. The SDGs place policies and institutions, not people, at the centre. To be effective, and to be humanitarian, the humanitarian sector must maintain enough independence to ensure the primacy of humanity, and hence to deliver aid according

to the needs of people. Yet the long-term needs of a system do not necessarily align with the immediate needs of people. The humanitarian action model is designed to safeguard the independence and neutrality necessary for maintaining impartiality and gaining access. These core principles are already too often ignored in practice. Working towards the SDGs would require them to be side-stepped by design.

A driver of the UN's new paradigm is the perception that aid work in crisis settings inadequately responds to the long-term needs and underlying vulnerabilities of people. True enough. The error is in thinking that this constitutes a gap in the humanitarian response. The solution proposed –shifting the aim of humanitarian action– inverts the causal logic of the actual gap and rests upon flawed problem analysis. The actual gap lies less with humanitarians than with the fact that, despite needs, development action has too often been missing in difficult settings. It seems axiomatic that the response people's needs, especially those enduring years if not decades of crisis, cannot be solely humanitarian in content. And yet, in making the case for the SDGs, the WHS seemed to denigrate the humanitarian imperative, as if saving lives and alleviating suffering embodied no more than to "simply attain basic needs for years on end".

On a different level, the paper sets forth the heavy costs and poor results of treating the aid sector as an aid system rather than a landscape of actors driven by structures and forces demonstrably resistant to coherent action. The persistence of the 'coherence' problem arises from solutions that target symptoms rather than causes. The WHS's paradigmatic shift rests upon a potentially fatal disregard for the entrenched culture, drivers and structures that generate and undergird the problems it seeks to resolve. It specifically avoids structural reform and many of its proposals, such as the Grand Bargain, essentially represent a technical fix to a political problem.

The most severe costs of coherence stem from the politicisation of aid and their impact upon the people in need of assistance: the critical absence of life-saving assistance to those trapped in crises of little geo-political importance; the critical denial of life-saving assistance to those trapped in crises of high geo-political importance; and in some places direct attacks on humanitarian operations. Further striving for coherence and alignment of policies will require that substantial resources be directed towards the aid system rather than to the people who require aid, rendering the sector less effective. Instead, the aid sector must reconcile the need to address immediate necessities and simultaneously to recognise the fullness of human needs and aspirations. To do this, it must reconceptualise the nature of the problem and capitalise upon the advantages of diverse and independent approaches.

Only after reinstating a full spectrum of responders within 'humanitarian crisis' contexts can the full spectrum of people's needs be addressed. To embrace our growing diversity militates against a humanitarian action defined through an overarching SDG framework. It looks not up to the stars but down to the field, to action defined through praxis, with specific, pragmatic and principled adaptations to operations within a given context. The first key will be to honour the specificity of humanitarian action while removing its misguided claims to exclusivity or superiority. A second key will be for humanitarian actors to decide how far they are willing to become coherent with the policies, players and multilateralism that help produce the crises of displacement, inequality and war in the first place.

Introduction

It is difficult to quarrel with the ideal of coherence. It is particularly difficult given a highly resourced humanitarian aid sector that too often resembles either a jammed bumper car arena or an empty Ferris wheel. People in need, not the sector, pay the price for this lack of coherence, especially people in the heart of crisis and emergency.

The long history of trying to operationalise coherence has brought to light its inherent inconsistencies and operational costs. For humanitarian actors, it is necessary to distinguish: whether coherence based on principled complementarity and comparative advantage holds promise; and whether coherence based on structural and strategic political integration holds problems. Further convergence, with political and military objectives contradicts the purpose, principles and methods of humanitarian action.

The new WHS paradigm is a vision of coherence based not on bridges between humanitarianism and other sectors, but on humanitarianism being absorbed by them

Coherence based on the 'new paradigm', announced at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), marks a departure and is a vision of coherence based not on the building of bridges between humanitarianism and other sectors, but on humanitarianism being absorbed by them. It comes at a time when the global context demands even greater independence if humanitarians are to steer through the interests of politicians, generals or corporate agriculture and towards the needs of people. So, while it may be hard to argue against the concept of coherence, it should be even more difficult to champion a strategy of bureaucratic centralisation, political integration and merger.

This paper questions the basis and wisdom of the WHS's transforming of humanitarian action into a support mechanism for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), realigning the ultimate humanitarian goal towards 'ending need'. After setting forth the issue in greater detail, this paper examines these old and new policy fixes through three interlinked flaws:

• Contradiction at the conceptual level.
• Misjudgement of the nature of the problem and disregard for the lessons of history.
• Underestimation of the impact upon a humanitarian sector that is already slow, inflexible, politicised and progressively less able to meet the emergency needs of people in crisis.

The aid sector must work to strengthen complementarity across those responding to people affected by crisis while preserving the critical distinctions between the humanitarian and other forms of action

Protest against the politicisation of aid is not at all new. The paper attempts to raise less discussed points, to avoid a lengthy repetition of research showcasing the cost of coherence to principled humanitarian action. That said, this paper carries no support for the status quo when it comes to the humanitarian-development divide (HDD), and seeks pragmatic ways forward, rather than a return to sectoral purism or humanitarian exceptionalism. Taken together, the response delivered to people, especially those enduring years, if not decades of crisis, cannot be solely humanitarian in content. The international aid sector must address basic, immediate necessities and simultaneously recognise the fullness of human needs and aspirations. It must work to dismantle barriers and strengthen complementarity across those responding to people affected by crisis. Crucially, it must do so while preserving the distinctions between the humanitarian and other sectors that are critical and fundamental to its identity and effectiveness.

From coherence to a WHS redefinition of humanitarian action

To what extent do you justify sacrificing the humanitarian imperative for long-term political strategy? We are not debating this – it is in the 'too difficult' tray.
— Michael Møller, UN Dept. of Political Affairs
(cited in Macrae, 2000)

The simple promise of coherence has long captivated aid policymakers. Their initiatives have fallen short for just as long. Nonetheless, it was again slated as a cornerstone of reform; this time as a central ambition of the inaugural World Humanitarian Summit.

The coherence debate in aid circles is an (ironically) incoherent one – the term refers to an assortment of policies and structural arrangements. Simplifying, the less vertical form of coherence seeks to improve the international response to a given crisis by ensuring greater coordination and complementarity among the various humanitarian actors, and between the humanitarian sector as a whole, with peacebuilding, military and political/diplomatic sectors. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA's) introduction of the cluster system is a prominent example, facilitating (in theory) the exchange of information and a more rational, planned division of labour across responding agencies. Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD), initiated in earnest, in the early 1990s, is another example, aimed at bridging the HDD. The objectives underlying this form of coherence include a greater realisation of comparative advantages and coordination with other actors, as opposed to coordination by them.

> In its more ambitious manifestations, coherence also aims to create a strategically and/or structurally integrated response across humanitarian, development, political and even military actors

In its more ambitious manifestations, coherence also aims to create a strategically and/or structurally integrated response across humanitarian, development, political and even military actors. Conceived in the late 1990s, in the post-Cold War period, amidst the increasingly interventionist policies of the 'international community', the 'integrated agenda' or 'comprehensive framework' marshalled aid work in the service of overarching and long-range political strategies for economic development, stabilisation, counter-insurgency, peace-building and the like. Well-debated efforts include the strategic integration of humanitarian aid into the goal of delivering government services in order to build the legitimacy of the Afghan government, or in countries where the United Nations (UN) Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) role is held by a Resident Coordinator (RC) or Special Representative (SRSG) sitting within the political hierarchy of the UN.[1]

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[1] For an analysis of case studies on UN integration, see Metcalfe, 2011.

While the integrated framework specifically applies to the UN's deployment, these structures entangle independent humanitarian actors given the UN's or HC's functional coordination of the overall humanitarian response, and the dependence of many humanitarian actors upon the UN system and its financing.[2]

At the recent WHS, the UN turbo-charged existing thinking on coherence by placing humanitarian aid at the service of the SDGs

At the recent WHS, the UN turbo-charged existing thinking on coherence by placing humanitarian aid at the service of the SDGs. The WHS's flagship report, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, correctly identifies the dual nature of the problem. First, we have a composite of needs. Humanitarian crisis is defined by a situation where people have high levels of urgent needs –food, shelter, water, healthcare, protection– that must be addressed. The urgency of those needs eclipses, but in no way lessens, a greater spectrum of human aspirations – to secure livelihoods, education for their children or to live in peace. Moreover, the delivery of assistance does not sufficiently reduce underlying vulnerabilities or establish sustainable local institutions. Nor does it, in practice, appear sensitive to them. In particular, decades-old crisis situations such as forced displacement and complex emergencies spotlight the incongruity of an exclusively humanitarian approach to protracted problems.

Second, the heavily fragmented aid system seems better designed to disaggregate needs and even whole contexts, addressing them in singular, project-based, agency-specific fashion. Operations are constrained by institutional siloes and the false bifurcation of HDD funding streams that arise from "tick-one-box" context designations. The WHS thus seeks to create a coherence of intervention in the many places where "humanitarian, development, peace and security and other international institutions work side-by-side [... and] each sector brings different goals, timeframes, disjointed data and analysis [...], creating and implementing activities toward different objectives." (Ban Ki-moon, 2016: ¶124).

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[2] See Cunningham 2016, discussing the consequences of INGO dependence on UNDSS security analysis.

The WHS re-engineers the very DNA of humanitarian action redefining it as an auxiliary to the holistic transformation of human society

To accomplish this coherence, the WHS proposes a three-pronged paradigmatic shift, including a commitment to "transcend the humanitarian-development divide by working towards collective outcomes, based on comparative advantage"· (Ban Ki-moon: ¶110) and ensure that major donors reduce their monolithic, inflexible funding structures in order to facilitate a more 'whole-of-problem' response. For the most part, so far so good. The United Nations Secretary-General's agenda then reaches ominously further, calling on aid providers to "set aside such artificial institutional labels as 'development' or 'humanitarian', working together... with the [SDGs] as the common overall results and accountability framework." (Ban Ki-moon:¶108). The UN does not exaggerate in labelling this a 'new paradigm': It effectively redefines humanitarian action as an auxiliary to the holistic transformation of human society. Education, gender equality, peace – it leaves humanitarians, for example, to be held accountable for their role in ending hunger, not feeding those who are starving.

Conceptual contradictions

The ICRC urges the WHS to give due consideration... to the particular conditions of armed conflict as a distinct humanitarian challenge, which is different to disaster, chronic fragility and instability.
— International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2016)

The challenge is
to better reconcile, not
abolish or ignore, the
fundamentally different
methods, structures,
cultures and objectives
of the humanitarian
and development sectors

From a theoretical perspective, the World Humanitarian Summit effectively re-engineers the very DNA of humanitarian action. It does so by offering a prescription for the impossible. Hidden beneath the jingoism of 'ending need' lies the contradiction of shifting humanitarianism's overarching objective while simultaneously expecting that it will continue to exist, let alone honour its defining principles.[3] While there is much artifice in the humanitarian-development divide, there is also much necessity in the distinctions that created it. The challenge is to better reconcile, not abolish or ignore, the fundamentally different methods, structures, cultures and objectives of the two sectors. Three sets of contradiction emerge from this new paradigm: Contradiction with the stated purpose of the WHS, contradiction with the principles of humanitarian action and contradiction with humanitarian reality.

People first

The SDGs place policies
and institutions, not
people, at the centre. Yet
the long-term needs of a
system do not necessarily
align with the immediate
needs of people. The
humanitarian sector
must maintain enough
independence to ensure
the primacy of humanity

By building a 'coherent' humanitarian intervention through the framework of the SDGs, the WHS poisons its own lifeblood – the drive to position people at the centre of humanitarian action. By definition, the SDGs place policies, institutions and states at the centre, not people (unsurprisingly so, given the UN system's purpose to "support countries in reducing and managing major risks to sustainable development"[4]). Achieving the SDGs would most certainly benefit people, but it would benefit them as trickle-down recipients of hoped-for improvements to public goods such as governance, economic development or health systems. Working towards the SDGs will also often undermine impartiality, because the long-term needs of a system do not necessarily align with the immediate needs of people. In contrast, humanitarian action has but one purpose, found in the principle of humanity. By definition, it designs aid efforts with people –individuals– at the centre of its action.

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[3] *One Humanity* also contains the central aspiration to leave no one behind. The appeal is obvious. The humanitarian principles, however, instruct that we *should* leave people behind. It even tells us who: given limited resources, the principle of impartiality dictates that the most urgent of cases are the ones to receive aid first.
[4] Chandran, 2015: 5.

To be effective, and to be humanitarian, the humanitarian sector must maintain enough independence to ensure the primacy of humanity, and hence to deliver aid according to the needs of people as opposed to institutional donor priorities, national strategic objectives or even the lofty goals of the SDGs. Methodological differences add to the difficulty. Humanitarian action has adapted to strife-torn contexts by developing 'state-avoiding' approaches, which safeguard the independence and neutrality necessary for maintaining impartiality and gaining access. At a minimum, these principles are already too often ignored in practice. Working towards the SDGs would require them to be side-stepped by design.

Principles first

The core humanitarian principles lie at the centre of the aid sector's long battle with integrated frameworks (see e.g. Macrae; Metcalfe; Gordon, 2016; de Castellarnau, 2016). The dangerous, overtly political instrumentalisation of aid over the last two decades in Angola, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or Greece (to name but a few) launched a raft of criticism that continues today (see e.g. de Torrente, 2004; Donini, 2008; Collinson, 2012; de Castellarnau 2016). To (over)simplify, while studies have found some advantages (Metcalfe, citing for example the use of UN logistical capacity by humanitarians), the foremost concern has been the extent to which this integration transforms humanitarian action into a means to the dominant economic/political/military ends of the major (Western) world powers, or blurs the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian organisations, thereby undermining access.

If situated within the framework of 'greater' public good, the UN's humanitarian strategy in a given context becomes structurally accountable to the UN's political bodies (ultimately, to the UN Security Council). Integration thus fosters the view that humanitarian aid, particularly within a UN-led response, has become a vector of Western values and a component in the War on Terror (see e.g. Collinson; Gordon). In turn, this high-level hierarchisation of political and humanitarian objectives places conditionalities on emergency aid where none should exist, and undermines trust in the intentions of humanitarian actors, thus limiting their access to populations in crisis and increasing the insecurity of their operations.

The core humanitarian principles lie at the centre of the aid sector's long battle with integrated frameworks and the risk to them is particularly acute in conflict contexts

Crucially, structural coherence is not the sole problem in this regard. The situation is made worse because "humanitarian organisations have also willingly compromised a principled approach in their own conduct through close alignment with political and military activities and actors." (Egeland, 2011: 4). This dangerous embrace results not from a weak humanitarian sector being victimised by a community of powerful institutional donors, but rather a sector that increasingly seeks and maintains its power by acting as an implementing arm or partner of these donor governments.

In practice, the risk is particularly acute in conflict contexts, where aid can be conscripted to serve military strategies such as counter-insurgency, winning local hearts and minds or building the legitimacy of one belligerent over another. The consequences pervert the humanitarian edict to put people at the centre of aid efforts: The "selection of villages for assistance according to 'where they stand on the insurgency' draws local populations into the wider conflict." (Donini: 21, citation omitted; see also Atmar, 2001: how using aid to Afghanistan to punish the Taliban resulted in 'punishing' Afghans instead.)

There is ample literature examining the politicisation of aid resulting from the engagement of powerful states in foreign lands such as Afghanistan and Somalia. Less discussed in the literature has been the opposite effect, the role of coherence in fostering disengagement by making aid bodies 'primarily responsible' for international policy in certain contexts, while political investment is redirected elsewhere. This coherence of aid and politics leads to a "re-division of international political labour such that aid is no longer a *substitute* for political action. Rather, it is the primary *form* of international policy at the geopolitical periphery." (Macrae, 2000: 8, original emphasis, citations omitted).

That political disengagement from conflict prevention and resolution, structural poverty or forgotten people/crises (the topmost politics of who does and who does *not* receive aid) forms a central, cross-cutting issue condemned by *One Humanity*. Contemporary global politics offers no evidence that the situation has improved, hence the danger in gambling humanitarian responsiveness upon the advent of de-politicised decision-making at the UN or among the world's most powerful (donor) nations. For people of little or no strategic value, the dynamic of political coherence may continue to prove a dynamic of disengagement, which necessitates greater humanitarian independence from, rather than coherence with, the global political system.

There is danger in gambling humanitarian responsiveness upon the advent of de-politicised decision-making at the UN or among the world's most powerful (donor) nations

Conflict (sadly) first

The new paradigm turns humanitarian intervention on its head, as if urgent and life-saving assistance were an exception

It would be wrong to characterise *One Humanity* as ignoring completely the specificity of principled humanitarian action. Indeed, having set out the ambition of 'ending need', the report adds this caution: "While working towards collective outcomes to reduce vulnerability and risk needs to be the rule, we must recognize the existence of contexts that require the delivery of urgent and life-saving assistance and protection in the short term." (Ban Ki-moon:¶140). This rule turns humanitarian intervention on its head, as if urgent and life-saving assistance were an exception rather than the sole purpose of humanitarian response. This misplaced focus has provoked a reaction not only from the habitually vocal MSF,[5] but the genetically diplomatic ICRC as well.

> The UNSG's report "risks downplaying life-saving humanitarian action in two small commitments which treat it as an 'exception' to be 'retained' only as a reserve strategy. This seems a curious conclusion for a Humanitarian Summit and is at odds with the ICRC's pressing protection and assistance operations in many armed conflicts." (ICRC, 2016).

For humanitarians, the rule is conflict

Certainly conflict does not occur in the majority of UN member states, but the announced rule makes little sense given the preponderance of conflict settings in humanitarian operations. *One Humanity*'s new paradigm thus seems divorced from the reality of conflict violence and instability it elsewhere so eloquently portrays: "Over 80 per cent of humanitarian funding requested by the United Nations goes towards meeting life-saving needs in conflict settings." (Ban Ki-moon: ¶25). For humanitarians, the rule is conflict (or, it should be). Even a casual reading of the top humanitarian appeals (by country) underscores not just the weight of conflict, but thereby the paramount importance of humanitarian actors maintaining a high level of independence from national authorities and world powers alike.

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[5] Thttp://www.msf.org/en/article/msf-pull-out-world-humanitarian-summit.

Table 1.
Top 12 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan/Appeal Requirements (figures in US$)

Country	Amount
1. Syria	3.2 bn
2. Yemen	1.8 bn
3. Ethiopia	1.5 bn
4. South Sudan	1.3 bn
5. Sudan	967 m
6. Somalia	885 m
7. Iraq	860 m
8. Dem Rep of Congo	690 m
9. oPt	570 m
10. Chad	566 m
11. CAR	531 m
12. Afghanistan	392 m
Total	**US$13.2bn**[6]

Source: OCHA

One must ask: in how many of these countries would national ownership and/or significant joint programming (humanitarian, development, peacekeeping/peacebuilding) provide the most effective approach to meeting the immediate needs of people?

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[6] The table omits Regional Refugee Response Plan appeals, the top three being Syria, South Sudan, and CAR (US$4.6bn, US$637m and US$345m respectively). Together, just these top three RRPs join with the top 12 appeals to account for US$18.4bn, or 85% of the total US$21.6bn 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan requirements. Based on data provided by OCHA.

Towards a deeper, more historical analysis of the problem

Conscious efforts to bring together humanitarian and development aid streams and programmes have been going on since the early 1990s and have led to the development of frameworks, policies, and operational guidance designed to address incoherence across international modes of engagement… However, these have failed to deliver coherent responses in practice.
— Tasneem Mowjee, Donata Garrasi & Lydia Poole
(Mowjee, 2015: 12)

Keeping people alive makes a powerful long-term contribution to the development, resilience and stability of nations

One driver of the UN's new paradigm is the perception that aid work in crisis settings inadequately responds to the long-term needs and underlying vulnerabilities of people and that this constitutes a gap in the humanitarian response. The solution proposed, shifting the aim of and accountability framework for humanitarian action, inverts the causal logic of the actual gap and rests upon flawed problem analysis.

To begin with, the UNSG's new paradigm promotes the very logic of sectoral exclusivity it seeks to remedy. Hence, the extreme option of a merger, rather than reinforcing the necessity and benefits of maintaining two distinct, complementary communities of action. Disconcertingly, in making the case for the SDGs, *One Humanity* seems to denigrate the humanitarian imperative, as if saving lives and alleviating suffering embodied no more than to "simply attain basic needs for years on end" (Ban Ki-moon: ¶103).[7] This logic fails to recognise the degree to which keeping people alive and ensuring their survival –reducing the tragedy, trauma and impact of crisis– upholds dignity in the short-term and makes a powerful long-term contribution not just to humanity, but to the development, resilience and stability of nations. Humanitarian programmes may not build the national systems of the future, but during the destruction of disaster and war they act as a bulwark against their reversal, what the ICRC astutely views as 'development holds'.

More importantly, research has shown that the gap in addressing the full range of needs of people affected by crisis lies less with humanitarians than with "the fact that development action has too often been missing in difficult places" (Mosel, 2014: 18). This *development* gap results from two deeply entrenched factors. First, there is the poor availability of funding for development work in many crises.

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[7] The ICRC reaches a similar conclusion, asking "the Summit to give greater recognition to the vital life-saving role of humanitarian action by the temporary meeting of needs, as well as humanitarian contributions to sustaining basic services in fragile environments." (ICRC 2016a p.3).

The gap in addressing the full range of needs lies less with humanitarians than with the fact that development action has too often been missing in difficult places

Bifurcated funding streams are far from an oversight: Major donors have engaged with crisis through humanitarian programming to avoid political entanglement, effectively shutting off funding for other activities. In parallel, at both policy and field level, international development work has shifted away from civil society and community empowerment to an emphasis on state-building, thus rendering it problematic in conflict settings or where the political conditionality of development aid blocks engagement with unfriendly governments (see e.g. the Paris Declaration 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action 2008).

Second, over time development agencies have lost their capacity/expertise to work effectively in contexts characterised by insecurity, unpredictability, widespread emergency levels of suffering, weak, illegitimate or abusive state institutions, or community distrust.(Mosel).[8] Therein lies primary responsibility for the "[m]illions (...) trapped in dependency on short-term aid" (Ban Ki-moon:¶107).[9] Hence, first and foremost, there is a need not for an enlarged humanitarian action, but for international development initiatives that escape the trap of their state-building approaches to address the causes of crisis (see e.g. Mowjee) and escape the capital cities to work at the community level.

Another problem is that various aspects of *One Humanity*'s problem analysis ignore the lessons of history. This 'new way of working' greatly resembles a repackaging of old ways that have repeatedly disappointed in spite of persistent investment. The 2011 Transformative Agenda was supposed to jumpstart the 2005 Humanitarian Reform, again aiming for more effective, coherent responses that enhanced accountability to affected populations. The WHS diagnosis of aid system woes provides a telling commentary on its success. As one study concluded, the shortcomings of the Transformative Agenda's "illustrate the limitations of this type of top-down, bureaucratic approach to change." (Krueger, 2016: 9). Moreover, there is a limited upside to the WHS's proposal because "the system is reaching the limits of the potential of voluntary steps towards coherence." (Chandran, 2015:¶34).

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[8] As humanitarian agencies progressively switch focus from delivering aid in emergencies to mentoring and funding local organisations, they too lose the capacity to operate in these contexts. (de Castellarnau: 10).

[9] The bigger issue, and one largely avoided at the WHS, is that millions of people are trapped in crisis situations – fear, hunger, sickness and violence – with no such dependency, because they receive no such humanitarian aid (see e.g. de Castellarnau). The emergency gap at the core of humanitarian responsibility results in part of a sector being asked to become coherent with the stabilisation and political agenda of (Western) donors.

We already know that the aid system cannot be tweaked into a timely, coherent response. The persistence of the 'coherence' problem arises from solutions that target symptoms rather than causes

The WHS's paradigm shift rests upon a potentially fatal disregard for the entrenched culture, drivers and structures that generate and undergird the problems it seeks to resolve

In other words, we already know that the aid system cannot be tweaked into a timely, coherent response. Why, then, has the same call been repeat so consistently over the past two decades? The enduring allure of coherence and integration suggests the need for deeper research, a political economy of the coherence/integration agenda. How does the WHS's new paradigm respond to the interests of global power, national authorities, and institutional turf?[10] Even more disturbing is the near absence of protest from within the 'independent' humanitarian community (aside from MSF and the ICRC) or any of the multi-mandate organisations, either in a principled defence or out of concerns for the bureaucratic costs (see Part 5, below).

At a deeper level, the persistence of the 'coherence' problem arises from solutions that target symptoms rather than causes. In general, as various papers suggest, the aid system struggles with reform and implementing lessons learned (see e.g. Steets, 2016; Donahue, 2006; DuBois, 2015).The WHS proposal for a paradigm shift rests upon a potentially fatal disregard for the entrenched culture, drivers and structures that generate and undergird the problems it seeks to resolve. One study aptly "identified that that there are no incentives and few structural mechanisms for implementing the measures that humanitarian and development actors know would improve their effectiveness." (Mowjee: 44).

In this regard, the WHS's paradigmatic shift calls for a 'transformation' and an institutional surmounting of the 'institutional divides' and 'mandates first' culture, yet proposes to remedy these underlying issues with a regimen of improved management and culture change. It specifically avoids structural reform, promising instead that UN agencies shall "retain their operational independence, advocacy role and budget authority." (Ban Ki-moon:¶138).[11] As high-level UN reports have concluded, "in the absence of... fundamental changes to the UN's governance structure and fairly radical reforms to its funding arrangements, there are limits to the gains that people at headquarters (HQ) and in the field can achieve in terms of coherence." (Chandran: citation omitted). The same could be said for the NGO sector.

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[10] On this latter point, see e.g. Duffield, who already wrote in 1994 that the LRRD debate "is primarily an argument over resources, a defensive move by an institutional interest which fears for the object of its existence." (Duffield, 1994).

[11] It is noteworthy that a high-level UN proposal has been circulated to combine the humanitarian and development coordinating systems at country and global levels (see Lake, 2016).

The new paradigm specifically avoids structural reforms and many of its proposals, such as the Grand Bargain, essentially represent a technical fix to a political problem

Various studies have fingered humanitarian funding arrangements as promoting fragmentation, and there have been consistent calls for funding that incentivises collective or collaborative approaches (see e.g. Bennett). While the WHS's 'Grand Bargain' proposes significant modifications to humanitarian financing, including incentives for closer collaboration on the ground, it essentially comprises a technical fix to a political problem.[12] For one, there is a push for coherence in the field, and yet these same donor governments struggle greatly with coherence across their various governmental departments. (OECD, 2016). More damningly, "states claimed to see value in an 'adequately resourced, relevant, coherent, efficient and effective UN system.' But, simply put, this does not appear to be the case." (Chandran: 14, citing A/RES/70/1. ¶46).

In the big picture, then, proposed changes in the way the various aid entities work together will be limited unless serious changes occur at the political level. The relationship between donor agencies and their external stakeholders –the political establishment or, ultimately, the domestic public– is unfortunately not part of the agenda for change. Disconcertingly, trends indicate greater not less political interest in, and domestic control over, aid flows. In other words, the aid sector should anticipate that integrated structures will drive aid programming even further into the service of the strategic objectives of donor nations. The EU's response to Europe's migrant crisis offers a telling, tragic example.

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[12] A forthcoming instalment in this Emergency Gap Series will examine issues related to humanitarian financing.

The consequences of a flawed approach on operations

If the world is complex, then acting congruently with that complexity can be simpler and more effective than trying to control a machine that does not exist.
— Jean Boulton

Coherence and integration efforts have also imposed serious costs upon the humanitarian aid sector, which in turn render aid less effective

As discussed above and elsewhere, the most severe costs of coherence flow from the politicisation of aid and their impact is upon the people in need of assistance: The critical absence of life-saving assistance to those trapped in crises of little geo-political importance; the critical denial of life-saving assistance to those trapped in crises of high geo-political importance, where humanitarian ambitions have been consistently blocked by deference to political or military aims; the lack of access caused by dependency and the lack of respect for humanitarian principles on the part of aid agencies themselves; and in some places direct attacks on humanitarians and hospitals, IDP camps and other places of sanctuary.[13] Coherence and integration efforts have also imposed serious costs upon the humanitarian aid sector, which in turn render aid less effective.

Even more importantly, the operationalisation of structural reform is itself part of the problem – the policies do not suit actual practice. As recent research has shown, apparent reform agreements may harbour disagreements that prove fatal upon implementation: "In what has been described as 'organised hypocrisy', different actors maintain different interpretations of what a reform proposal entails. This makes it easier to reach political consensus on a reform, but harder to subsequently implement it." (Steets: 1).

A further defect lies in treating the humanitarian sector as a system, subject to mechanical or top-down modification/improvement, rather than as a diverse ecosystem of actors

A further defect lies in treating the humanitarian sector as a system, subject to mechanical or top-down modification/improvement. The sector is in fact an ecosystem[14], an organic landscape of actors directed not by agreements, policies or good intentions but the complex interaction of drivers and incentives within architectural, environmental and cultural structures. The ambition to operationalise a more concerted, responsive intervention through a more centralised, integrated process –a perennial fantasy– amounts to inappropriate technology when applied to a loose constellation of actors.

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[13] OIntegration is a two-sided coin. If the international community wishes to deliver humanitarian aid in furtherance of peacebuilding objectives, then some belligerents will target humanitarian aid in furtherance of their military objectives.

[14] "[H]umanitarian organisations are free to regulate themselves, resulting in a complex and highly dynamic and dispersed form of networks-based governance that lacks any explicit or overarching rules-based 'regime'." (Bennett: 62).

The removal of decision-making away from the field and towards the HQ makes it even more time-consuming, expensive and difficult, and renders the sector less responsive

It taxes rather than capitalises upon the diversity of the sector, relegating this potential strength to the role of Achilles heel.[15]

Less fundamental, though no less significant consequences come in the prosaic form of transaction costs – a bewildering array of bureaucratic and procedural structures/measures that inefficiently 'improve' humanitarian action. In a number of ways, the WHS's new paradigm exhibits the disincentives or tendencies that have imposed substantial, inescapable, structural transaction costs in the past.

- Decision-making becomes even more time-consuming, expensive and difficult: Coordination stifles action, planning replaces delivery and inertia curbs agility. Moreover, the collective diversity of the aid ecosystem renders it costly to arrive at a joint problem analysis that is not watered down to the lowest common denominator (see Steets) or a collective agreement on top priorities, that is actually a collection of all priorities (the unprioritised SDGs make a good case in point).[16]

- Difficulties in taking decisions at field level plus the desire for coherence to be guided by high-level principles and collective outcomes combine to push key decision-making away from the field/periphery and towards the HQ/centre, exacerbating trends towards remote management. That distance, and the technological advances which support it, result in a distance termed by one scholar as 'humanitarian automation', which places ever more data, rather than people, at the centre of decisions. (Duffield, 2016).

- Attempting to harmonise the diversity of actors generates staggering challenges for interoperability – getting the data, systems, people, etc., to be able to 'talk' to one another. As one major study found, the internal costs of integration are far from theoretical: "In almost every case reviewed, bureaucracy relating to administrative and financial systems hindered the easy and effective sharing and use of staff and resources in integrated mechanisms, increasing transaction costs and exacerbating tensions between the actors involved." (Metcalfe: 22).

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[15] The same donor states who champion the free market in terms of its reactivity to the needs of consumers have financed a centralised economy in terms of the needs of aid recipients. Rather than fostering better drivers and incentives –adapting 'market' policies for the ecosystem of aid workers– much donor policy drives greater bureaucracy and the same empty shelves so derided in the former Soviet bloc.

[16] Not to mention the degree to which policymakers now recognise that a crisis presents a "wicked" problem, marked by levels of complexity that militate against a single problem analysis and against a solution via a set of planned interventions (see e.g. Mowjee).

- The aid system has a longstanding gap when it comes to accountability, perhaps especially for acting in a collaborative fashion. The siloes at the root of the identified dysfunction reflect methods, cultures, etc., but also 'sovereign' lines of vertical command. Little horizontal accountability exists between the various UN agencies and NGOs, which impedes coordination and increases the transaction costs of trying to enforce it.[17] In the end, for the new paradigm to work, the first step would involve creating a system where one does not exist.

The prescription requires that substantial resources will be directed towards the aid system rather than to the people who require aid

This list of transaction costs could continue. Even ignoring the conceptual contradictions and historical handicaps to humanitarian action, the prescription requires that substantial resources will be directed towards the aid system rather than to the people who require aid. The costs have long appeared to outweigh the benefits. And that is when the costs are recognised as such. Increasingly, humanitarian actors seem to be losing sight of the distinction between virtual aid outputs –production of a seemingly limitless progression of meetings, agreements, frameworks, information sharing, guidelines, policies, discussions– and the actual aid outcome of assistance being delivered to people in crisis.

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[17] It is telling that all humanitarian organisations contain specialised departments or units akin to the UN's agencies, yet it is only the UN that replicates its HQ siloes in its field deployments. Operational NGOs employ a single chain of command in field missions, which creates a level of coherent operation and prioritisation that escapes UN missions who often must rely on coherence to be manufactured in Geneva or New York.

Conclusion

People in need are being left behind by a humanitarian system that [...] is now relinquishing its ability to operate swiftly and effectively in conflict settings for a subsidiary role to development and stabilisation policies.
— Monica de Castellarnau & Velina Stoianova

There is an inherent dependence of the humanitarian sector upon a very fundamental independence of action, an independence compromised by integrated structures

The long history of attempts –proposals involving culture, procedures and structures– to ensure greater coherence or install an integrated framework has yet to successfully reform crisis response. The inaugural World Humanitarian Summit now launches another attempt. This short paper highlights the inherent dependence of the humanitarian sector upon a very fundamental independence of action, an independence compromised by integrated structures. The blurring of the humanitarian purpose with those of politics, development, peacebuilding, good governance, and many other public services is intrinsically, definitionally toxic to humanitarian action in all but a few settings.

There may be contexts where, on balance, an integrated approach seems to have yielded positive results (see e.g. Metcalfe), but limited success does not alter a dynamic that will only worsen as world powers progressively instrumentalise aid. Aid thus works to evade political engagement in some contexts and to accomplish political objectives, such as the stabilisation of fragile states or containment of migration flows, in others. This sort of integration has caused and now risks further transplacement, whereby government systems and international politics are moved to the centre of aid strategies while people find themselves forgotten at the margins or, worse still, in the crosshairs of belligerents.

This protracted debate is itself toxic; the sector's leaders must avoid thrusting forward with the same old wedge of aspirations

This paper's conclusions will be opposed by many. Such disagreement –the product of fundamentally divergent views on the nature of humanitarianism– is now 25 years old and will not disappear with a fresh set of summits, policies or 'new' ways of working. The lamb will not easily dwell with the wolf. Crucially, research based on the UN experience has shown that the integration issue polarises the sector, undermining "its effective implementation in practice and the objectives it seeks to achieve." (Metcalfe: 45). In other words, this protracted debate is itself toxic. The sector's leaders must avoid thrusting forward with the same old set of aspirations. Instead, strategists need to reconceptualise the nature of the problem to capitalise upon the advantages of diverse, independent actors/sectors. To embrace our growing diversity militates against a humanitarian action defined through an overarching SDG framework. It looks not up to the stars

but down to the field, to action defined through praxis, with specific, pragmatic and principled adaptations to operations within a given context.

At the sectoral level, praxis –approaching the needs of people through the operational lens– might prioritise (1) building development agencies' capacity to work within crisis contexts and (2) heightening humanitarian actors' understanding of and sensitivity to people's long-term needs and underlying vulnerabilities.[18] To move forward humanitarians should also better understand the impact of their programmes beyond the short term –on people, the environment and the conflict– even if they do not seek to remedy structural, systemic, political problems. The aid sector as a whole could hold a dialogue in the field: What do the humanitarian and development actors want from one another? How can each capitalise on or complement the other's work?

Only after reinstating a full spectrum of responders within 'humanitarian crisis' contexts can the full spectrum of people's needs be addressed

Only after reinstating a full spectrum of responders within 'humanitarian crisis' contexts can the full spectrum of people's needs be addressed. The key will be to honour the specificity of humanitarian action while removing its misguided claims to exclusivity or superiority. Given the weight of conflict as a generator of human crisis, that diversity of interveneors means that humanitarians will have to invest further in safeguarding their reputation as principled actors so as to safeguard the centrality of people to their programmes. Note that a multi-sectoral response within the same context reinforces the logic of humanitarians dealing with short-term needs and not being pressed to tackle societal resilience, structural inequality, peacebuilding, ineffective systems or community empowerment – thus reinstating the alignment of an organisation's purpose and methods with its operational responsibilities. The urgency of acute needs should not triumph over the importance of long-term vulnerabilities. At the same time, achieving the important should not compromise responding to the urgent. (HERE-Geneva 2016: 4).

On a different level, the paper sets forth the heavy costs and poor results of treating the aid sector –implementing organisations, donors, governments– as an aid system rather than a landscape of actors driven by structures/forces demonstrably resistant to coherent action. It thus joins many calls for a fundamental recalculation of how aid

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[18] The ICRC's 'environment building' from its 3-tiered protection 'egg' model provides a useful starting point. Research focused on how single agencies, the 'multi-mandate' INGOs, have overcome (or not) the substantial sectoral divides within their own organisations might also yield interesting results that can be applied to the larger system.

seeks to reform itself, one founded on an analysis of the underlying structures and obstacles rather than wishful thinking or bureaucratic reshuffles (see Bennett, 2016; HERE-Geneva). As a starting point, the sector must avoid the solution delusion – that the delivery of resources and expertise can solve deeply organic, 'wickedly' complex crises. The way forward must traffic in relationships and drivers, not platforms and procedures. For example, improving the degree to which aid reaches those most in need requires not costly centralised command and control, but strengthened accountability within the humanitarian sector to the principle of impartiality, so as to nudge the various actors towards those with the greatest needs (the institution of independent needs assessments would also contribute).

The UN Secretary General's paradigm shift incorporates existing disadvantages of the integrated framework and then provokes an entirely different set of questions. This new paradigm is not simply a matter of reorienting the humanitarian and development sectors in a more effective, less fragmented fashion. This WHS vision seems better designed to rally political buy-in than to address the needs of people. Neither the importance of the SDGs nor their political eminence within the UN or among member states should subordinate the purpose and practice of humanitarian action of responding to the life-saving needs of (principally) conflict-affected people.

To begin with, *One Humanity* essentially proposes a de facto dissolution of humanitarian action into a focus upon the institutions, policies and homogenised targets necessary to deliver on the SDGs' rather utopian catalogue of public goods. They may indeed be greater goods, but they must not supplant the urgent and perhaps self-contained good offered by the humanitarian response to people affected by crisis; nor can humanitarianism exist without its basis in humanity and impartiality. That requires a robust independence, already a key weakness even before this paradigmatic coup d'état.

Second, while one cannot predict failure, much of the WHS proposal seems predicated upon an unlikely and ahistorical belief that the behaviour of states will improve and improve dramatically; that they will act more like saints than states. Today's newspapers suggest a different outcome, as the atomised disrespect for IHL obligations and humanitarian standards swells into a normalised disregard for ideals as an end and multilateralism as a means. The bombing of hospitals? These acts now issue from the United Nations Security Council's P5, the structural crown of integrated

The importance of the SDGs should not subordinate the purpose and practice of humanitarian action of responding to the life-saving needs of (principally) conflict-affected people

Humanitarianism cannot exist without its basis in humanity and impartiality. That requires a robust independence, already a key weakness even before this paradigmatic coup d'état

The humanitarian arena is one where the advantages of collaboration with state authorities or local actors may have particularly dangerous consequences

intervention. The oppression of asylum-seekers and migrants? Policy and practice in the European Union, the second largest funder of humanitarian aid.

Finally, the logic of the new paradigm is most problematic, given the overwhelming majority of conflict contexts filling the humanitarian agenda. Progress towards the SDGs can help avert crisis and humanitarian action can help maintain communities where destruction becomes routine and progress towards the SDGs has been overwhelmed by more urgent needs. But humanitarian action already owns a framework, one indispensable to its identity and essential to operating safely and effectively in conflict contexts like Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, CAR and South Sudan. From the humanitarian perspective, the unexceptional nature of such contexts suggests there must be further thinking, discussion and research focused on the interface between international crisis response and the rapidly evolving role of national authorities and local institutions/communities. Clearly, the humanitarian arena is one where the advantages of collaboration with state authorities or local actors may have particularly dangerous consequences.

Perhaps one last question needs to be asked, and that is the ideological one: Coherence and integration with what? Is it with the states and the system of states that *One Humanity* so passionately portrays as the cause and abettor of marginalisation, abject poverty, abuse and violent conflict? Is it with an international development sector that has become heavily intertwined with the securitisation agenda? Humanitarian action must be based upon well-established relationships and engagement with (and appropriate distances from) all actors – governments, corporations, militaries, rebels, communities. *De facto* partnership and auxiliary status, especially when docile, prove another matter.[19] Humanitarian action has always pledged not to take sides in a conflict, but to stand one with the victims. Humanitarian actors, therefore, need to decide how far they are willing to become coherent with the policies, players and multilateralism that help produce the crises of displacement, inequality and war in the first place. The people affected by crisis and the principle of independence require no less.

[19] Exempting for this paper the statutory auxiliary status of within the Red Cross Federation.

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