

Renewing the humanitarian enterprise



by Paul Ronalds

25 May 2017

Over time, as each new major humanitarian challenge has presented itself, humanitarian leaders have found ways to adapt and renew the humanitarian enterprise in response.

The challenges the humanitarian system faces today require a similar renewal. And we need a new generation of leaders to lead that renewal. In this post I will highlight two of those challenges and suggest some directions for reform.

1) Increasing frequency and severity of humanitarian crisis

The first challenge is the sheer scale of humanitarian need compared to the available resources.

In the last ten years, the number of people affected by humanitarian crises has almost doubled and the cost of international humanitarian aid has **more than tripled**. International humanitarian assistance did increase in 2015, for the third consecutive year, reaching a **record high of US\$28 billion**. But humanitarian need increased faster, creating a **record 45% shortfall** on UN coordinated appeals.

The average also hides crises that are chronically underfunded. Prior to last month's **international donor conference** in Geneva, only 14% of the \$2.1b humanitarian funding required for Yemen **had been pledged**. This has now increased to slightly more than half, provided donor pledges are fulfilled. And despite months of intensive military preparations, **only 16% of the required funding** has been pledged to respond to the humanitarian fallout from the battle for Mosul and other humanitarian needs in Iraq. Unfortunately, we can expect this gap between available resources and need to only get worse.

One **briefing paper for the Humanitarian Summit** suggested that by 2030 there could be 325 million extremely poor people living in the 49 countries most exposed to the full range of natural hazards and climate extremes. Another calculates there will be more people living in urban coastal floodplains in Africa and Asia by 2060 than the 30 million counted today.

This is on top of the long-term crises like Syria that continue to absorb the largest volumes of international humanitarian assistance.[1]

How should the humanitarian system respond?

While campaigns like that for [Australian Aid](#) will continue to push rich countries like Australia to be more generous, significant increases in humanitarian assistance are unlikely. Instead, we must find new sources of funding and make existing funding go much further.

One of the key opportunities is to use new technologies to reach much larger numbers of people at a much lower cost, such as telemedicine and EduTech initiatives. Technology may also be able to lower costs of some products and services to a point where beneficiaries are able to contribute some or all of the cost of delivery (e.g., insurance). Organisations like BRAC have been able to raise the majority of their funding this way.

More broadly, humanitarian actors will need to be more prepared to cannibalise their own business model to improve outcomes for beneficiaries faster. If not, we can expect others to impose disruption on us. This disruption needs to extend to new forms of collaborations and partnerships *and* sector consolidation. There are too many organisations competing with one another, making the overall system unsustainable. For example, there are 322 aid & development charities in Australia; 133 are ACFID members. Only 24% had income of more than \$1m per annum.

Finally, the system needs to be far more disciplined in using rigorous evidence to determine which initiatives to invest in and scale up. In my view, almost all humanitarian actors are still investing too little in evaluation and too few donors are using it to make funding decisions.

2) Less stable and more fragmented humanitarian system

The second challenge is an increasingly unstable and fragmented international system. Without a predictable order, widely accepted international rules, and strong institutions, the space for mischief **becomes significantly greater**.

One type of mischief is an increasing disregard for humanitarian law. For NGOs like Save the Children, it means our staff and operations are more likely to be targeted, sometimes intentionally, often recklessly, by state and non-state actors in conflict. Hospitals are **destroyed**, aid convoys are bombed and **ambushed**, and aid workers are **gang raped and murdered**. The number of annual reported kidnappings of aid workers **quadrupled between 2002 and 2014**.

The war on terror is not only making NGO operations more risky, it is increasingly being used as an excuse to place restrictions on civil society. In 2014, **96 countries took action** to limit civil society freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. New pieces of legislation have multiplied around the world – on foreign funding of NGOs, placing restrictions on NGO registration or freedom of association, instituting anti-protest laws and laws that curb advocacy and free speech.

But the system is fragmenting in other ways too. Despite the 2005 Paris Declaration commitment to increase harmonisation, the humanitarian system has become more complex rather than less. Non-DAC donors are growing in number and importance, and there seems to be ever increasing number of non-state actors of all types (local and international NGOs, hybrid and for-profit actors).^[2]

How should the humanitarian system respond?

Edmund Burke is attributed with saying that ‘the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing’. We must not stand by while humanitarian principles of international law are being routinely ignored by state and non-state actors. We must advocate for the humanitarian principles we believe in. We must push the international community to hold perpetrators to account.

International NGOs should also look for ways to make the challenging environment work for them. For example, as political rhetoric becomes more nationalist, there will be many who will want to find ways to resist it. Through donating, volunteering or campaigning, international NGOs can be one vehicle for such resistance.

Critical to all of this is authentic leadership. Many of the best known humanitarian organisations were founded by inspirational leaders: people like Henri Dunant (ICRC), Eglantyne Jebb (Save the Children) and Bob Pierce (World Vision). All of them were built by countless leaders who, in the words of Hugo Slim, were experts at identifying the “possible in every situation and every relationship... gauging the right moment, finding the right person, spotting the right plan and taking others with them”.^[3]

Now, more than ever, we need the next generation of leaders who are able to grapple with the seemingly inextricable challenges that face us, and renew the humanitarian enterprise.

Paul Ronalds is the CEO of Save the Children Australia. This post is a condensed version of his speech given at the 1st Asia Pacific Humanitarian Leadership Conference on 28 April 2017.

Notes:

[1] In 2014, 91% of official humanitarian assistance from OECD Development Assistance Committee donors went to long- and medium-term recipients, reinforcing the rationale for more multi-annual humanitarian planning and financing (*Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2016*, p.7)

[2] In 2015, it is estimated that there were 4,000 known humanitarian organisations (ALNAP, 2015, GHA, 2015).

[3] On Realism

Author/s:

Paul Ronalds

Paul Ronalds is the CEO of Save the Children Australia. He recently led a delegation of federal Australian parliamentarians to Bangladesh as part of the Australian Regional Leadership Initiative, which is funded through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/renewing-humanitarian-enterprise-20170525/>