Putting People at the Centre of the World Humanitarian Summit

A consultation with persons affected by conflict and natural disasters in Colombia led by Plan International Germany and Fundación Plan in Colombia

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The World Humanitarian Summit and the Colombian context

The first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), summoned by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, will be held in May 2016. In preparation of the WHS, numerous regional and thematic consultations were conducted during the years 2014 and 2015,1 taking as their starting point the following subjects: 1) humanitarian effectiveness; 2) reducing vulnerability and managing risk; 3) transformation through innovation; and 4) serving the needs of persons in conflict. Communication and engagement with communities affected by crises increasingly emerged as an important topic under the various themes, reflecting a longer-term development in both humanitarian response and development cooperation, where efforts have been made to strengthen community participation, communication, and “accountability to affected persons” with the aim of putting people more firmly at the centre of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of assistance programmes.2 With the intention of realising this vision of involving crisis-affected persons in the processes that aim to improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection also in the WHS preparations, an initiative was carried out to listen to the members of communities affected by the conflict or natural disasters in Colombia.

Plan International Germany, with the support of Fundación Plan in Colombia and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, conducted consultations with a number of actors, mainly the beneficiaries of humanitarian response, aimed at developing recommendations and points of reflection on how to improve the relationships between communities and other humanitarian actors and participation of the affected persons in the various processes relating to humanitarian action. Colombia was chosen for the implementation of these consultations because of the particular conditions of the Colombian context, which make it an interesting space for reflecting on the topics to be addressed by the WHS in 2016. Colombia is currently the only country in Latin America with an armed conflict that continues to affect the civil population. As a consequence, the population has been suffering a range of negative effects, such as deterioration in the security situation, high incidence of displacement, and the deterioration of living conditions. Although the progress in the ongoing peace process between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) raises hopes for an improvement, in the longer term, of the situation for the civilian population, humanitarian needs are expected to remain in the foreseeable future. In addition, Colombia is vulnerable to natural disasters; according to a report by the National Planning Agency (Departamento Nacional de Planeación), between 2006 and 2014, 26% of the total population estimated by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística) – have faced an emergency situation. This means that out of around 48 million inhabitants, over 12 million have been affected. Finally, Colombia has long been called a “forgotten crisis” and treated as such by humanitarian organisations and donors; therefore, it appeared appropriate to use the opportunity to raise this crisis scenario in the WHS debate.

During the consultations, it was pointed out that humanitarian response and development cooperation could not be seen in isolation, especially in a protracted crisis scenario like Colombia; although each one has clearly defined functions, they must work hand in hand. This consultation initiative focuses on the humanitarian perspective, which is guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. This document advocates that humanitarian response is more effective when it is able to help the beneficiaries in attaining their own objectives of development, moving from a strictly assistance-based mentality to an approach that prioritises sustainability by increasing the capacities of the beneficiary communities. This approach demands a more thorough contextualisation of the assistance and an enhanced and direct relationship with beneficiaries.

Scope of the document

This document aims to give a voice to affected persons regarding the topics of the WHS and to present the ideas put forward in the various consultations conducted in Colombia.

1 https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_timeline, accessed 1 April 2016
2 For instance, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International or the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org), and from the Paris Declaration on the effectiveness of assistance to the Mexico Forum in 2014.
3 One of the most prominent of such works is: Mary B. Anderson, Dayna Brown, and Isabella Jean, Time to Listen: Hearing People at the Receiving End of International Aid, 2012; available from: http://dcdiabolobbrero.org/publication/time-to-listen-hearing-people-on-the-receiving-end-of-international-aid/, accessed 1 April 2016
4 Please refer to the Annex for details (p. 14)
LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITIES: AFFECTED PERSONS’ VIEWS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

What does effectiveness mean to the communities?

"The assistance has allowed us to face other needs by ourselves. Having sorted out the food problem allowed us to use the money to fill the holes in the roof and, therefore, live with more dignity." Community of Pueblo Nuevo, Isla Grande, Tumaco

Community members explain that an effective form of help is that which allows them to face other needs by themselves and facilitates ways to solve immediate problems. To this end, humanitarian actors should enter into a dialogue about what is most urgent, rather than making such decisions on a unilateral basis. At the same time, listening is far more than simply hearing; it means that those who are assessing needs and designing interventions have to be able to decipher the codes used in communicating with them, knowing that sometimes pain, fear, and despair block the ability to communicate. Beyond looking at having an impact in addressing immediate needs, the vision of effectiveness should, consequently, include listening to different languages — including non-verbal — and encourage the flexibility necessary to adapt to a changing situation.

The general perception of people taking part in the focus group discussions is that the assistance received has been very effective. It has accompanied them at their worst times, and, by meeting their most basic needs, it has provided them with the opportunity to think about how to tackle other problems. They highlight food assistance for boys and girls, particularly for those in early childhood, as an important part of a dignified life; some of them even say that this type of support is as important as, or even more important than, the food assistance they received.

Several focus groups say that, to be more effective, it is necessary to know first the specific context of each group or community. In this way, the measures taken to facilitate the process, for example communication, can acknowledge the needs, characteristics, and capacities of the community, which are not the same for all communities. They tell us that, in their opinion, interventions are more effective whenever a previous diagnosis is made.

Participants also highlight the ways in which relief organisations relate with communities. They state that usually there is a lot of respect for the views of beneficiaries, but in some cases there are issues that are not fully understood or respected by organisations, and this adds weight to the importance of analysing in detail the characteristics of each group. In this regard, there are complaints on the unreliability of communication processes, which sometimes leads to difficulties in solving problems in a timely manner, for example when there are distributions of types of food that they do not eat, or even of spoiled food. However, it is important to highlight that communities acknowledge the good work done in this regard, but it is still a sensitive and important issue to be improved.

Similarly, they acknowledge that assistance received in the area of home improvements has been very important, since a decent shelter is an important part of a dignified life; some of them even say that this type of support is as important as, or even more important than, the food assistance they received.

"If the children are well fed, they do not doze off, they pay more attention, and do not feel dizzy. They do better at school and come back with prettier drawings." Mother in Tumaco

They also note that the fact of ignoring the context sometimes delays the delivery of much-needed assistance, such as construction of access roads and support to the mobility of those affected. Participants say that this is one of the major issues regarding long-term effectiveness of assistance. Though assistance certainly reaches the communities, the poor condition of access roads and natural events such as rain and its consequences, constantly prevent the use of such roads. They express that those who are going to work with them must be aware of the geographical context and the real possibilities of mobility. Therefore, relief organisations must know as accurately as possible the natural or other parameters, such as armed conflict, which may influence their possibility of mobility.

Moreover, the creation and maintenance of solidarity in their communities is acknowledged as an essential element for the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian response. Community networks stimulate social cohesion, facilitate the striving for the common good, and represent a great cultural asset. Despite some difficulties, these networks allow a flow of knowledge and a way to deal with their experiences in a more familiar way.

Participants also note that, to be more effective, any type of assistance would have to be complemented by an accompaniment of the beneficiaries, so as to provide them with the knowledge, stability, and security necessary to continue the process of improving their situation. They point out that the fact of feeling personally assisted and supported strengthens their chances of achieving a better quality of life. They suggest that if very specific courses are taught, it is also necessary to help them implement the knowledge acquired and turn it into a productive activity. There have been situations where training processes were not supported by the supplies required for income generation, this created significant frustration for participants.

"The Teacher [of the organisation providing support] promised to deliver chickens and pigs to start the process, but he failed to fulfill his commitment." Community of Novaña

In this same vein, difficulties have repeatedly been encountered in making some forms of assistance actually useful, e.g. difficulties in processing of bank checks, further underlining the urgency of contextualizing assistance and generating assistance processes, so that solutions offered can have the desired impact rather than ending up being a source of further frustration and suffering.

The most common complaint regarding obstacles to effectiveness is the undermining of humanitarian actors’ credibility. Most notably, community members emphasise that the failure to comply with promises is the greatest enemy to effectiveness. This failure can lead to frustrations, confusion, and a deterioration of communications with affected persons, as well as of the coordination between actors.

Coordination among actors is highly demanded by beneficiaries. They see it as a prerequisite for preventing and avoiding repetitions, uncoordinated actions, and especially the unexpected cessation of activities. Participants observe that it often happens that one organisation expects another organisation to conduct certain measures and vice versa, with the result that none of them actually implements these measures. While each actor, government, private or third parties, have specific roles, beneficiaries are asking for an improvement in the quality of their actions by setting up clear roles and responsibilities and mechanisms that ensure best use of resources and effectiveness of interventions. To achieve this, it is seen as indispensable to have an active engagement of community members in designing and managing interventions, creating monitoring processes for ongoing actions, and identifying future ones.

As a conclusion, effectiveness has much to do with improvement of networks, increased participation, and shared evaluation processes.

How can humanitarian response be more effective in addressing vulnerability?

Vulnerability is understood here as the reduction of a person’s or a group of persons’ capacities to anticipate, face, and resist the impact of natural hazard or hazards caused by human activity, and to overcome such impact. It is a relative and dynamic concept. Vulnerability is often associated with poverty, but persons who live in conditions of isolation, insecurity and helplessness regarding to risks, shocks, or stress are also vulnerable.1

Participants note that training processes were among the most important contributions made by external assistance to the mitigation of the populations’ vulnerability. They say they usually do not have time or money to attend formal education processes, and, therefore, they are left behind as their abilities and knowledge to attend formal education processes, and, therefore, point out that identifying differences in culture, age, gender, and type of impact is fundamental to also understand differences in the response. If these differences are understood and taken into account, comprehensive and integrated interventions can be designed that are more effective in reducing different vulnerabilities specific to each demographic group. In several of the focus groups they enquire specifically why there is no more specific focus on elderly persons and their particular needs in the humanitarian assistance and protection provided. They point out that, if provided with adequate opportunities of participation, each group can also better contribute to the improvement of their own situation and that of the community.

Another factor contributing to a high level of defenclessness is the deterioration of public facilities such as schools, community rooms, or health centres. Very rarely appropriate solutions are found for this kind of situation. As a consequence, insecurity, the lack of services and space for constructive community engagement, and the misuse of public spaces render communities more vulnerable, in particular girls, boys, and adolescents. When they see that external assistance arrives with inappropriate supplies or materials, and what is provided to the communities wears down quickly, this causes problems and a feeling that they have been mistreated, and this affects their dignity. Therefore, they point out that anyone working with them must listen to what they consider is most necessary and appropriate, not what is believed to be most necessary with an outside perspective.

Moreover, they see a field of action of the humanitarian response in the increased support and training for identifying land that provides suitable and safe living conditions. In cases of displacement, whether from conflict or natural disaster, the urgent need to find a place to settle down often results in dangerous decisions, thus increasing vulnerability of the persons (whether due to natural risks, insecurity in the area, illegal lands, etc.), which, in some cases at least, could be avoided if better information and knowledge were available.

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How can innovation contribute to a more effective humanitarian response?

For the purpose of this report, innovation is understood to be a process of adaptation, change, and improvement that can help persons, communities, organisations, or systems to find solutions to operational and strategic problems with greater speed, and escalate such problems if necessary. Innovation refers not only to technology or a specific idea, but also to way of thinking that can be used to solve problems. Successful innovations are those that bring on improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and impact.

As mentioned above, much emphasis is put on the need for more communication that reflected true participation in the processes, and which helped recognise distinctive features. Accordingly, it is suggested to implement training processes and provide counsel for the communities on the development of needs and capacity assessment. These assessments, in turn, should then provide the communities’ perspectives on adapting and putting assistance and protection into context to improve the way communities benefit from them. This way, the contributions of the community can be a direct and valuable source of improvement and sustainability of living conditions.

In this regard, an idea repeatedly brought up is the formation of networks through which the communities themselves were enabled to monitor the effectiveness of the response in a specific community, but also across several communities in an area. The collaboration between several communities is seen as an added value, as it could facilitate learning lessons from each other and produce input that goes beyond a single community. Relying on persons of the community not only in the identification of needs, but also during the distribution of assistance, implementation of activities and, especially, monitoring of such interventions should help to strengthen collaboration within and between communities, as well as with the relief organisations.

Moreover, although community leaders are highly appreciated and valued in most of the communities - they have a special role and high degree of organisation in the indigenous communities on occasions it is suggested that participation mechanisms should better ensure that the voice of the community members be heard in addition to those of their representatives.
In turn, according to the communities that have suffered the consequences of natural disasters, the tensions and insecurities they face are different from the armed conflict and are the result of reoccupying highly vulnerable lands. They recognise that counsel, assistance, and support in the identification and adaptation of safe lands for relocation are key factors in providing stability and safety.

Another important finding is the acknowledgment, by both Afro and indigenous communities, of the presence of cultural and ethnic conflicts (which could be described as “tensions” to distinguish them from the armed conflict). In this regard, they suggest the importance of the existence of some kind of "cultural mediator”, who would work in the programme area on a permanent basis and whose duty would be to support and improve the relationship between donor organisations and beneficiaries. Cultural issues are often relegated in humanitarian response because, for example, the urgency of ensuring survival and the complexity of security situations tend to take precedence; this can lead to a lack of understanding, on behalf of the communities, of priorities set and activities planned by the organisations, and, in turn, a lack of understanding, on behalf of the organisations, of the repercussions of their interventions. Participants see this cultural topic as crucial, since their worldviews and traditions are a fundamental part of their identity; therefore, examining the cultural scope serves to adapt humanitarian response and improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

"We need help to overcome the fear caused by losing our close relatives. You cannot live with fear. No one helps us with that. We cannot lead a normal life after what we have been through.”
Young mother of Tumaco

In addition, one of the views expressed most emphatically is how important it was to include psychosocial support in the humanitarian interventions. Many participants who are victims of violence or of natural disasters believe that their main necessity is of a psychological nature. They feel that the adequate promotion of tools or processes is lacking to help them cope with the impact of the loss of loved ones, livelihoods, homes, support networks, etc. In addition, they do not sense any difference between the support offered to victims of the conflict, for example, and to victims of other situations, which shows a disregard for their particular condition of vulnerability, but also of the different psychosocial needs related to different experiences and personal crises. This analysis was conducted mainly by women.

In relation to the above, they also stress the lack of support in the search of missing persons, be it due to kidnappings, armed confrontations, or natural disasters. They complained that despite the figures that exist for this phenomenon in Colombia, authorities have not made strategic alliances with other entities for a comprehensive management of the situation. In the midst of a conflict, it is all the more necessary to strengthen the community-based organisations, prevent communication failures, and improve the humanitarian organisations’ mechanisms for participation.

It also became evident that the victims’ roundtables (“mesas de victimas”) have to be made more visible, as they are not well-known, not even among community-based organisations bringing together victims of forced displacement. Likewise, it is important for relief organisations to have available databases with up-to-date demographic information on communities in affected areas, so that emergencies can be addressed in a contextualised and effective manner. In addition, municipal contingency plans are suggested to have a mapping of the definition of institutional coordination to facilitate coordinated assistance processes in moments of crisis. Where there is no political will to coordinate and optimise resources, we lose the opportunity to ensure human dignity and the reinstatement of rights.

In conflict situations, special care should be given to revision of the victims’ lists. Some testimonials talk about the creation of “mafias” around the resources assigned to victims’ reparations, i.e. oftentimes they are communities reaching those who really need them. This is why participants see it as important to create oversight systems with transparent access to accurate and first-hand information. The proposal goes beyond the simple control of the distribution of assistance to victims, and involves strengthening the community fabric in such a way that communities are put in the position to perform this oversight function; this way, participation would also be promoted. Furthermore, it is essential that the information on the restitution of rights and services to which the affected persons can access should be adapted to all types of conditions of language, reading and writing skills, knowledge of the context, etc. Currently, difficulties are often observed even in the interaction with officials in charge of communication with victims due to limitations of this sort.

The following recommendations can be captured regarding work in conflict settings:

- Prioritise activities that improve the security and protection of the civil population; this a primordial responsibility of the State.
- Better differentiate between needs in situations of conflict and natural disaster, give more priority to psychosocial support and attention to the search for missing persons, as well as to support for their relatives.
- Focus more on the role of youth and the creation of new perspectives and life plans in order to remove them from special risks and put to use their potential.
- Identify “cultural mediators” to improve communication and understanding between community members and humanitarian actors, and support them in mitigating tensions between different affected groups.
- Update data bases with demographic information on the potentially affected population in anticipation of emergencies, in order to be able to respond in a more targeted way.

Persons who have suffered forced displacement⁶ say their greatest concern is the youth. Their reasons for this concern are that there is little chance to study or of getting a job to keep them occupied and start building a life plan that would help them break the cycle of poverty. These youth have been undernourished since their early childhood, which accounts for health problems that have never been detected or treated. This is caused by the long-standing precarious conditions in the communities of population displaced by any conflict, whether an armed conflict or a natural disaster.

Participants repeatedly state that, in the situations of conflict that they witness, youth have particular vulnerabilities and are faced with particular risks, which are often inadequately acknowledged and addressed. Therefore, special attention should be given to the development of interventions that focus on their population group; this should happen in a way that not only addresses their needs enable their participation, but also fosters their capacity as agents of change. Likewise, participation of the entire community should be a part of the peace oversight through the strengthening of the community fabric and of community-based organisations. In order to deal with conflicts, it is important to have a fabric of networks and innovative measures for conflict-resolution, participation, and communication between the various sections of the communities.

⁶ According to UNODA, “Between January 2013 and August 2015, on average, almost 10,000 people were forcibly displaced every month in Colombia” (Humanitarian Needs Overview 2016, p. 7; 2 out of 4 recently displaced internally displaced persons are under 18.)
In addition to the findings solicited in relation to the WHS issues presented to the communities, it would seem opportune to highlight two aspects that have proved to be of high importance for the participants: community engagement and the role of youth. The following is a Colombian perspective, but can also be applied to other contexts in the Americas region, since the set of problems, the actors, and the levels of government can be considered comparable, notwithstanding the obvious differences that exist between countries.

**Community engagement**

Accountability to the affected communities has become a central theme to improve the pertinence and effectiveness of humanitarian response; the need to contextualise the form of interacting with the communities forces the organisations to create feedback mechanisms. Communication, listening and participation should precede the actions performed. Participants reiterate that it is important for the actors involved to understand that the community’s participation and accountability to such communities should always play an important part in the search for a greater humanitarian effectiveness. The views and contributions of the community members should always be taken into consideration in the continuous context of multiple vulnerabilities in which the affected populations live.

**Youth as a driving force**

Community members identify special vulnerabilities in the young population in their communities, especially where they are exposed to the impact of conflict. This analysis is due, among other reasons, to the undernourishment experienced as children, the lack of adequate training and of opportunities in the job market, forced displacements, or the lack of a permanent and stable affectivity throughout their lives. It is felt that, while children are often receiving attention as vulnerable group, youth are often overlooked and under-served. As such, youth should benefit from a more targeted needs and vulnerability analysis, followed by adequate and specific measures to address those needs. In addition to listening to young people and taking their views into account in shaping future programming, their potential should be valued and incorporated in humanitarian programming as an asset rather than only as a group with special risks. Humanitarian response should learn to better tap into their enthusiasm and their potential to mobilise and transform their own communities with a view of creating a better future. During the consultations, a number of initiatives were mentioned and observed where youth are organizing themselves, often with the support of humanitarian or development organisations, and affect change in their own communities. Good examples include communication initiatives, be they radio stations, flyer, or other written materials, in which youth debate their situation, their problems, but also their dreams, vision of the future, and practical examples of change and improvements. Including the youth gathered in these initiatives in communication with humanitarian organisations could bring new elements to the dialogue and create new options of action and attitudes.

When looking at the consultations conducted in 2014 on the perception of risk and sources of crisis with children, adolescents, and youth, they reflect the information obtained through the present consultations in Colombia, including the concerns of the young regarding livelihood opportunities, that is often considered as an “adults’ issue”; this topic is a concern because, on the one hand, they recognise a difficult situation at the family level, but on the other hand, because in many cases it means that the very young end up in the street begging, working, or taking over tasks of the adults; in almost all those cases they have to abandon school, being fully aware of the negative impact this will have on their present and future.

**Conclusion**

This document aspires to reproduce, in the most direct way possible, the perspectives of the persons consulted in the communities as the added value of the consultation initiative. It is important to underline that the findings also reflect and confirm many of the suggestions developed in the WHS preparation process. For example, the final report of the Global Consultation in 2015 also addresses the importance of strengthening the accountability to affected communities and their engagement in the assistance, recommending that transparency at all levels and ensuring leadership and resources for the active participation of the communities in humanitarian programming. This points to larger issues behind many of the issues raised above, including for example the need to put humanitarian actors in the position not only to listen but also to react and adapt according to the feedback received, which, in turn, is linked as much to a change of institutional culture as to the limits of flexibility in a lot of funding from institutional donors - issues that have to be addressed if accountability to affected populations is to be brought to life. At the same time, instruments already exist to take forward a number of those recommendations, like the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, and the WHS presents the opportunity for humanitarian actors to make specific commitments on their use and implementation. Likewise, the subject of a more active role for youth has come out very clearly in the WHS process, not least in the broad, global survey conducted by the WHS secretariat that brought out “Guarantee protection and education for children, and engage youth as partners in emergency preparedness and response” as the most supported proposal across all topics; it recognises the youth as much as human resources as their particular vulnerabilities, and recommendations call for the formation of a global alliance for the empowerment of youth and their active engagement in humanitarian situations. In this sense, the hope is that the present report can present some elements to inspire specific and operational changes to improve the work with the persons that humanitarian organisations seek to support in crises.

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1 According to enquiries in the region of the Americas the ‘rendición de cuentas a las comunidades’ from the English term ‘accountability to affected populations’, can result in misunderstandings in its Spanish translation as it is associated with financial matters, although its meaning is much broader.


3 Ibid cit. 8

4 Global Consultation, Geneva 14-16 October 2015, Final Report; p. 89

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS

More than 230 persons participated in the various consultations with communities, with representation from the municipalities of Bajo Baudó, Literal de San Juan, Novita, and Quibdó in Chocó; from Buenos Aires and Suárez in Cauca; from Buga and Jamundí in Valle del Cauca; and from Tumaco in Nariño. As a representative sample, 144 of them were separately interviewed to obtain the following, more detailed information on their situation. In addition informal group discussions were held with several groups of school pupils in Bajo Baudó and Literal de San Juan.

**Gender Distribution**

- Women: 75%
- Men: 20%
- Not specified: 5%

**Age distribution**

- Not specified: 5%
- 65+ years: 3%
- 55 - 65 years: 11%
- 45 - 55 years: 17%
- 35 - 45 years: 15%
- 25 - 35 years: 33%
- 18 - 25 years: 16%

**Ethnic group**

- Not specified: 5%
- Mestizo: 4%
- Katio: 1%
- Indigenous: 19%
- African descent: 71%

**Displaced**

- Yes: 59%
- No: 41%

**Reason for displacement**

- Armed conflict: 87%
- Natural disaster: 11%
- Not specified: 2%