



VOICE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES UNDER THREAT?

THE BRUSSELS LAUNCH OF THE STATE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM REPORT 2022

VOICE-ALNAP EVENT IN BRUSSELS

17 NOVEMBER 2022



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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the main ideas discussed during the event and does not necessarily reflect the speakers' or the VOICE network's opinions.

The humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are under increasing threat as attacks on aid workers, politicisation of aid and access restrictions have made it harder for humanitarian organisations to uphold them. While compromises are inherent to principled humanitarian action, pressures to respond to needs often create dilemmas, as humanitarians must weigh the delivery of life-saving aid with respect to the principles. In addition, humanitarian principles are being questioned, both by actors outside and inside the humanitarian sector.

As part of the worldwide series of launches of the ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System Report 2022, the event aimed at exploring how humanitarian principles are applied when negotiating access, how humanitarian agencies balance advocacy and presence, and maintain independence from political interests. It was the occasion to reflect on the humanitarian system's ability to navigate threats to principled action and the donors' role in delivering principled aid.



Keynote speakers:

- Heidy Rombouts, Director General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Sophia Swithern, co-author of the ALNAP SOHS Report 2022

Panel speakers:

- Dr Knut Dörmann, Head of Delegation to the EU, NATO, and the Kingdom of Belgium, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
- Andrea Koulaimah, Director of Directorate D, DG ECHO
- Dr Mary Okumu, Senior Director and Head of the Technical Unit, ForAfrika
- Andreas Ring, Global Programme Director, Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

Moderator: Maria Groenewald, VOICE Director

I. Learning from the State of the Humanitarian System report

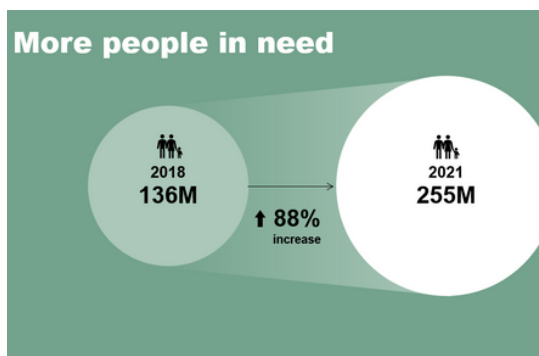
Covering the 2018 - 2021 period, the 2022 edition of the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report investigates how well the humanitarian system has performed against the challenges of the past four years and how much it is fit for purpose. The report is a unique learning tool providing evidence and supporting the sector in its reflections to face an ever-evolving and challenging context. Among others, using the findings of the report helps to better frame and understand which trends and evolutions in the humanitarian system have fed into the current debates around humanitarian principles.

The SOHS report demonstrates that while the system's size has significantly expanded, it has failed to keep pace with the rising demand for humanitarian aid. The estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection nearly doubled over the 4-year period and though humanitarian funding has doubled over the last decade, the gap between funding and needs is growing. This evolution has fundamental impacts on a sector that puts needs-based assistance at the core of its identity and legitimization.

In addition, three trends were identified as having noteworthy impacts on the principles:

- A concentration in the geographical allocation of funding. For example, in 2021, 40 % of humanitarian funding went to only five countries.
- A concentration in which implementing organisations are receiving most of the humanitarian funding. Over the 4-year period, 47 % of funding went directly to only three UN agencies.
- A concentration in the number of donors. In 2021, 57 % of funding was provided by only five donors.

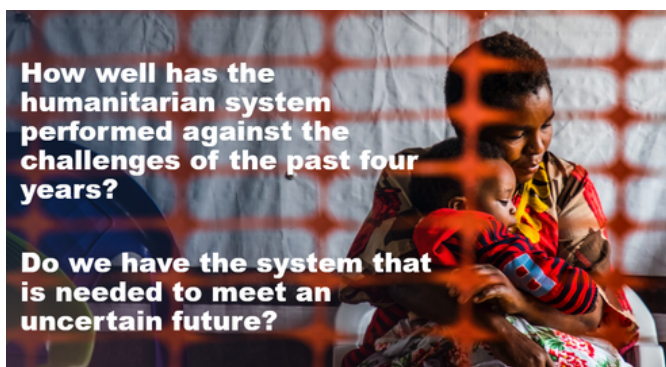
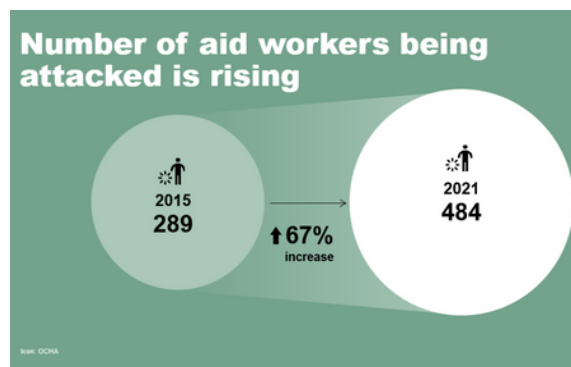
The growing concentration of funding, be it in relation to its geographical allocation, origin or destination poses challenges for the system to uphold its needs-based response, its performance and independence.



I. Learning from the State of the Humanitarian System report

The system's ability to reach and target those most in need is closely linked with its principles. However, the SOHS states that only a third of surveyed aid recipients said that aid went to those who needed it most. Restricted humanitarian access appears to be one of the main factors behind this finding, as figures suggest a correlation between difficult access and low results in affected people's satisfaction with the aid received. Bureaucratic and political impediments undermine humanitarian access with counter-terrorism measures and sanctions playing a major role. According to the [2021 VOICE survey report](#), 42% of respondents said that these measures affected decisions relating to their programming, by preventing them from carrying out certain humanitarian activities, or by impeding access to areas where needs are acute.

Lastly, a striking finding of the SOHS report directly affecting the sector's ability to uphold its principles is the shrinking humanitarian space, at a time when needs are skyrocketing. 45 % of aid practitioners said that respect for humanitarian space had declined and attacks on aid workers rose by 67% between 2015 and 2020.



II. How do humanitarians handle the trade-offs between delivering aid at all, and delivering it impartially and independently?

While the SOHS report depicts a challenging context for humanitarian principles, from regulatory and bureaucratic impediments to the rejection of humanitarian norms by some political actors, the panel's speakers reflected on how humanitarians handle the trade-offs between delivering aid at all and delivering it impartially and independently.

DRC, as well as ICRC, put forward the importance of providing its staff with operational tools and offering training to be well equipped in facing difficult choices and ensure a "Do No Harm approach". ForAfrika, while fully endorsing and upholding the "Do No Harm" principle adopts a very different entry point. In fact, through its long-term partnerships with affected communities the NGO equips its personnel with the necessary tools and co-creates in tandem with the communities. ForAfrika would not co-create solutions in partnership with communities where it thinks it would cause any harm to others but rather provides them with the space and possibility to define their own needs and solutions.

If there was an overall agreement that compromises are inherent to humanitarian aid and the delivery of aid must be weighted with the principles, speakers highlighted that refusing to deliver under certain circumstances must remain an option. These difficult decisions to refrain from engaging take different forms across the spectrum, from, e. g. DG ECHO highlighting that the principles are at the core of their funding decisions, to DRC refusing to deliver in some circumstances to avoid political instrumentalisation and the ICRC staying out of integrated approaches to protect its non-association with any political agenda.

“In the face of growing constraints, restrictions and attacks on aid, humanitarians found it ever harder to practice their ideals of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. And although they continued to pin their identity to these principles, aid workers often lacked the support, skills and will to make difficult judgement calls in complex operating environments.” (SOHS 2022)



II. How do humanitarians handle the trade-offs between delivering aid at all, and delivering it impartially and independently?

On another note, ensuring an enabling environment for the respect of humanitarian principles is fundamental to ease the difficult trade-offs between delivering aid at all and delivering it impartially and independently. In that regard, the ICRC explained the importance of understanding the applicable legal frameworks, in particular international humanitarian law, which spells out the protections for impartial humanitarian action, and the need to influence other normative frameworks such as sanctions regimes to ensure that they don't have unintended negative impacts on humanitarian action, as a building block of a safe environment for the delivery of aid.

For DG ECHO, its role in supporting an enabling environment for the principles is threefold. As a donor, it supports its partners' advocacy, negotiation, and learning capacities. As part of the EU institutions, it holds a central role in raising awareness of other EU decision-makers in building a principled narrative. As a global actor, the respect for principles and International Humanitarian Law is at the heart of its advocacy messages in different fora. DRC highlighted that NGOs' advocacy for the respect of humanitarian principles needs to remain high on the agenda, both toward like-minded donors and others.



III. How do humanitarians manage the difficult balance between pursuing access and speaking out against violations of humanitarian and human rights law?

The SOHS 2022 mentions the chilling effect of the fear of expulsion on the “sector’s collective willingness to speak out about abuses of civilians and blocks on aid”. In particular, some civil society voices say that “neutrality is being used as a cover for silence” and that “unrealistically purist ideals of neutrality have served to perpetuate the exclusion of local actors”.

Overall, the panel speakers nuanced these criticisms. First, frontline agencies such as DRC, ForAfrika, and the ICRC, highlighted that speaking out publicly is not the only modality to react to violations of humanitarian and human rights law. They recalled the risks at stake: the protection of people in need and humanitarian aid workers, local and international ones, during a time when attacks on aid workers are sadly increasing every year.

“Fear of expulsion had a chilling effect on the sector’s collective willingness to speak out about abuses of civilians and blocks on aid: the humanitarian voice became more and more muted, drawing criticism– including from Venezuelan and Burmese civil society – that neutrality was being used as a cover for silence.(ALNAP SOHS 2022)



Public denunciation is considered by the ICRC as the last resort action under very specific circumstances and solely if it is in the interest of the victims of the armed conflict at hand and does not alter the organisation’s ability to reach victims worldwide. Instead, the organisation uses confidential dialogue as its preferred mode of action to obtain success while maintaining access.

Similarly, ForAfrika refrains from speaking out publicly and uses instead local systems and networks. This strategy ensures that violations are condemned by organisations with different mandates, allowing humanitarian aid workers to continue their life-saving work. In addition, DRC highlighted the importance of nurturing collective advocacy, rather than advocacy made by only one organisation, to reduce risks of expulsion in case of public denunciation.

Overall, panel speakers agreed that the complementarity of mandates is fundamental. In that regard, DG ECHO highlighted that localisation is an opportunity to further strengthen this complementarity. By building strong partnerships with local actors and networks, organisations that do not bear the same level of risks can speak out publicly when humanitarians cannot do so for reasons of access, protection, and security.

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“Others, however, argued that unrealistically purist ideals of neutrality have served to perpetuate the exclusion of local actors as some warned that those same ideals were being appropriated by assertive states to delegitimise Western aid efforts. (ALNAP SOHS 2022)”

In addition, speakers recalled that the principles were created first and foremost as a tool to secure access for international humanitarian organisations and to protect their staff. In that regard, not all civil society organisations operating in the same context as international humanitarians need to abide by them.

The principle of neutrality shouldn't be used to “perpetuate the exclusion of local actors”, as the latter are free to choose to stand on a particular side, as solidarity organisations. DG ECHO highlighted that this debate speaks directly to the definition of what humanitarian aid is. The DG established a parallel between the different rules and red lines applying to its foreign support, falling into the humanitarian aid domain with its specific *modus operandi*, and its support within the EU, falling into the civil protection domain.

To conclude, the debate highlighted the importance of humanitarian principles in engaging with different actors, maintaining access to hard-to-reach locations, and ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers while delivering the much needed life-saving humanitarian services.

At the same time, the discussions highlighted the need for humanitarian actors to assess on a case-by-case basis what they can or should not do. Following the “do no harm” approach, humanitarians ensure that their actions are not feeding into conflict dynamics, further marginalising groups, or putting their staff at risk.

To do so, organisations have to compromise and understand what falls outside their reach. As humanity is at the very core of their identities, international humanitarian organisations consider instrumental the importance to rely on actors with different mandates to speak out in difficult contexts in order to maintain access to communities in need.

This event was co-organised by VOICE, the network of 87 European humanitarian NGOs, and ALNAP, a global network dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.



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