

Fit for the Future: Envisioning New Approaches to Humanitarian Response

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The traditional humanitarian system faces a paradox. As the world contends with the highest levels of forced displacement and acute need in a generation, humanitarians are reaching more people than ever before yet falling further and further short of global need. A fragmented global aid architecture, with its roots in the mid-twentieth century, is struggling to adapt to the demands of the twenty-first. Humanitarian response today reaches too few people, allocates resources inefficiently, and largely fails to listen to vulnerable populations. And despite commitments to make humanitarian response “as local as possible, and as international as necessary,” the system at large continues to default to an international-first approach.

For more than a decade, reform efforts have attempted to put crisis-affected people at the center of humanitarian response, and make the system more cohesive and responsive. These reforms have produced ever-heavier coordination systems and technocratic guidance, but have targeted the symptoms of the system’s shortcomings rather than the causes. Traditional humanitarian response remains plagued by deep power imbalances, needless rivalries between organizations, and perverse institutional incentives.

These structural factors disenfranchise vulnerable populations and fragment aid operations to suit aid providers’ mandates. **Humanitarian response aspires to be demand-driven: oriented around and responsive to the prerogatives of the vulnerable people it serves. Yet its power dynamics and organizing structures make it fundamentally supply-driven: oriented heavily toward the prerogatives of the institutions that finance and operate the traditional humanitarian system.** Meaningfully tackling these issues of power and structure has been a red line in past reform efforts. As a result, the reforms of the last 15 years have had noble aspirations but delivered only modest progress.

A new approach is badly needed—one that builds on the aspirations of earlier reform efforts while explicitly tackling the red-line issues that have long undermined them. A new multi-year research initiative at the Center for Global Development (CGD) aims to do just that: **develop concrete, pragmatic, and actionable reform options to overhaul the outdated power structures and institutional incentives** that have long skewed the humanitarian system’s behavior.

In late September, CGD convened the initiative’s first high-level consultation workshop with senior experts from the UN, the NGO sector, academia, and the donor community. We focused on honing the three mutually reinforcing pillars around which CGD will organize this research:

- **Field practice innovations** to put affected populations in the driver’s seat
- **Modernizing the humanitarian business model** to incentivize coherent and responsive aid operations
- **Rethinking humanitarian governance** to address institutional fragmentation and enhance downward accountability

The workshop participants provided feedback and guidance that CGD is using to inform and refine the project’s research. In an extremely rich discussion, participants shared a range of insights on the future of humanitarian response. This note distills a selection of useful insights that emerged from the conversation and explains how they are shaping CGD’s forthcoming work.

PROJECT FRAMING AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN REFORM

There was broad agreement on the need for further and more ambitious reform of global humanitarian response. Participants observed that the latest major round of reforms—under the 2016 [“Grand Bargain”](#)—contains important commitments but is yielding uneven progress. CGD’s new initiative need not duplicate progress being made in the Grand Bargain workstreams. But on some commitments (localization, [“participation revolution,”](#) and impartial needs assessment were among the areas cited), participants felt that Grand Bargain reforms are running up against the same underlying obstacles of power distribution and structural misalignment that impeded previous rounds of reform (one expert questioned, for example, whether a “participation revolution” is even possible under current humanitarian financing practices). CGD’s model of addressing the field, financing, and governance dimensions of reform could assist in navigating structural impediments to the Grand Bargain’s commitments.

But we need to think beyond the Grand Bargain as well. The present humanitarian system remains heavily dominated by large international institutions and a core set of mostly Western donors. It tends to deploy in a uniform and self-contained manner, and struggles to partner effectively with host governments, local aid leaders, and affected populations. Participants urged a shift away from the default, international-centric approach through which humanitarian response is traditionally planned, financed, and carried out. But they cautioned that we must apply a different mentality than past efforts at reform. **The starting point should be “what kind of humanitarian outcomes does the world need” rather than “how do we adjust the system that we have?”**

Participants noted as well that this international-centric mentality often infuses the very language that we use to describe humanitarian response, and so tacitly limits how we can conceive of fixing it. The “system” is composed of mainstream donors and aid agencies, and is often spoken of as the actor that intervenes in, and acts upon, a country in crisis. Aid is frequently described in terms of “delivery” (the UN lists [“deliver humanitarian aid”](#) as one of its core functions), implying an aid-agency-centric view of response that ignores the capacities and complex social support networks that exist in crisis-affected communities. And of course, the long-reviled but still widely used term “beneficiaries,” which portrays vulnerable populations as passive recipients, rather than active partners and leaders in addressing their own challenges. **It may be that part of changing humanitarian response must start with changing the vocabulary we use to describe it.**

Finally, discussion on the framing of the research emphasized the importance of articulating a theory of change: why is it that past rounds of humanitarian reform have fallen short—and what changes in approach would yield meaningful outcomes? This question is baked into the DNA of the research initiative, and CGD will flesh it out further in future products. The core vision— affirmed by the workshop dialog—is that working within the basic logic and structures of the traditional humanitarian system, as past reforms have done, will not shift the power dynamics and incentive structures that impede true change.

Instead, **the interconnected power dynamics and incentive structures that span field practices, financing models, and governing structures make it impossible to reform any of those individual elements in isolation.** New approaches to field response—such as non-sectoral cash programs, or truly impartial and holistic needs analysis—cannot be delivered solely by rhetorical commitments and additional normative guidance. And likewise, changes like a promised “participation revolution” will remain out of reach if crisis-affected populations have only a token role in humanitarian financing and governance decisions. Effective humanitarian reform must entail tangible changes to practices and power structures across all three of the dimensions that shape humanitarian outcomes.

The workshop then delved into each dimension in further detail.

FIELD PRACTICE INNOVATION

The research initiative’s first pillar focuses on field-level innovation. Discussion of this pillar coalesced around several changes with the potential to meaningfully shift power and practice toward a more demand-driven approach to humanitarian response. The UN Secretary-General’s commitment at the World Humanitarian Summit to make humanitarian action “[as local as possible and as international as necessary](#)” has been widely echoed across the humanitarian sector. But in practice, there has been limited tangible change. And humanitarian action on the ground remains badly fragmented and turf-driven; participants noted ongoing struggles between UNHCR, OCHA, and IOM in places like Bangladesh and Colombia.

Discussions centered around several areas for further research:

- **Population-centered response management:** Shifting from a supply-driven to a demand-driven humanitarian response model will require inverting how response is traditionally planned and executed. Workshop participants noted that it is not sufficient to simply consult with affected populations during the assessment phase or build accountability mechanisms at a project level. Truly population-centered response requires involving affected populations in humanitarian decision-making at both the project and the strategic levels, and building that ownership into every phase of the response cycle.

It might also mean taking a new approach to how we organize field response. A participant noted the potential for “area-based approaches” to response planning, in contrast to the sector/cluster-based approach that predominates today. An area-based approach would look holistically at needs and capacities in a discrete community, across all response sectors and population status categories. Numerous participants also cited scaled-up cash programming as a potentially key piece of this, if it can be truly delinked from sector and agency turf divisions.

- **Impartial capacity and needs analysis:** The Grand Bargain commitment to impartial needs assessment was among the most controversial during the negotiation process, and has struggled to gain traction in the two years since its launch. The problem is as much political as it is technical. Workshop participants observed that impartial analysis is difficult in practice because it requires humanitarian agencies to accept findings that may not align with their respective mandates and priorities. It also requires sharing information openly across agencies, in ways that may compromise their competitive advantage in obtaining donor funding.

Participants noted that the framing of “needs” analysis is itself problematic, as it presumes the international system as the principal agent in meeting those needs. Reframing the process instead as one of capacity and gap assessment would more accurately reflect the contributions and leadership of affected populations in meeting their own needs, and better enable international partners to reinforce locally driven coping strategies. Finally, capacity and needs analysis should be designed to be accessible and useful to affected population, not only to traditional international actors.

- **Rebalancing power toward local responders:** Response that is “as local as possible” must shift who holds the power to define priorities, elaborate strategies, and oversee resources. Presently this power is the near-exclusive domain of international agencies; numerous ideas were proposed for changing this.

An INGO leader observed that her organization is beginning to reconceive its mission: less as a frontline implementer in its own right, and more as a platform for enabling and supporting locally led response. Numerous participants argued for a more tailored and modular approach to deploying international humanitarian structures. An adaptable deployment model could be better integrated with national response systems (which national disaster management authorities in Indonesia and elsewhere are increasingly demanding), and configure itself to local realities (particularly local languages) rather than forcing local partners to adapt to default international approaches. Others cautioned, however, that this is likely to be easier in natural hazard crises than in conflict settings, where national systems are not necessarily benign partners. In contested environments, the question of who legitimately speaks for the affected population can be highly politicized and controversial, and power shifts will require nuanced local analysis.

MODERNIZING THE HUMANITARIAN BUSINESS MODEL

Resource control means operational influence. Shifting power centers in the field—and driving toward coherent response rather than turf competition—will be difficult as long as donors predominantly route humanitarian funding through the same small group of intermediary multilateral agencies. Workshop participants noted that traditional funding models are out of sync with both the stated aspirations of past reform agendas, and with operational realities on the ground. Rarely does donor funding go directly to the organizations leading frontline response operations. Instead it passes first through UN and INGO intermediaries, whose value-add is real, but often opaque. Predominant humanitarian financing practices reflect the political economies of different donors, in ways that are poorly understood and rarely studied.

Workshop participants cited several areas where research into the humanitarian business model could yield insights toward greater reform:

- **The political economies of donor models:** The traditional humanitarian response model is reliant on institutional donor funding, which shapes the basic institutional incentives for aid agency behavior. Yet CGD's ongoing literature review is finding that the factors shaping humanitarian donor allocations are poorly studied. Workshop participants, particularly from the implementing community, expressed a major interest in better understanding the political economies of donor behavior. Donor participants likewise affirmed that aid agencies rarely seem to appreciate the bureaucratic constraints, risk calculations, and political realities that determine their freedom to maneuver. A well-researched typology of donor models, the varying political economies that shape them, and linkages to the systemic incentives that they in turn create, would be helpful to both sides.
- **Delinking the UN's normative and operational functions:** Several participants identified the blurring of UN agencies' mandated normative roles with their voluntary program operations as an impediment to change (CGD also cited this in a [paper](#) earlier this year). Articulating a funding model that would de-link these, and consider each element on its own merits, would better align funding flows with the division of labor. This need not automatically mean less funding for UN-led programs, but it would mean that program funding would be allocated between UN, INGO, and national agencies based on suitable capacity rather than mandates. It could also mean greater transparency in the costing of the UN agencies' important normative leadership functions relative to their roles as an intermediary donor and project implementer.

NGO participants suggested that more consistency in donor expectations and practices would also be helpful—such as holding UN agencies and NGO grantees to comparable standards of budget transparency and reporting. And where UN agencies act as donors in their own right, their approach could be better harmonized with the practices of the donors that in turn fund them; NGOs expressed frustration that financing passed through UN agencies is often dramatically more burdensome than direct donor funding. Importantly, participants emphasized that these shifts should be made thoughtfully and judiciously, to ensure that delinking the UN's normative and programmatic roles does not inadvertently result in a steep drop-off in funding for those vital normative functions.

- **Outcome-centered response planning:** The workshop discussion raised numerous concerns with the construction of humanitarian response plans and funding appeals. Participants felt that UN response plans are too heavily focused on justifying resources for aid agencies' projects, instead of aligning local and international resources against a comprehensive strategic plan (the same was argued, on a macro global scale, of OCHA's Financial Tracking Service).

Participants urged that response plans should be centered on addressing broad strategic outcomes, without prejudging which aid groups should receive funding for them. This would acknowledge that those outcomes could be met by a range of community, national, and international partners, rather than a narrowly prescribed set of sectoral projects. Furthermore, these outcomes should be explicitly prioritized based on severity of need and the guidance of the affected populations—even if this prioritization differs from traditional resource allocations. This would also require accounting for funding differently—country appeals and the FTS would need to shift toward calculating appeal coverage based on funding that aligns with the strategic outcomes of a response plan, rather than the current practice of only counting funds that go towards projects specified

in the appeal. Finally, response plans should serve audiences beyond humanitarian insiders. Plan development should heavily involve affected populations, and be oriented in part towards enabling those populations to lead their own response and hold aid groups accountable.

RETHINKING HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

The humanitarian business model does not operate in a vacuum—it reflects the structure and governance of humanitarian institutions. Discussions at the workshop noted the heavy interdependency of humanitarian governance and financial reforms. Participants observed that the governance of humanitarian agencies—whether through NGO boards or multilateral governing bodies—badly underrepresents the array of partners and stakeholders that those agencies serve. This in turn suppresses the ability of vulnerable populations to influence the institutions that nominally exist to serve them. Governance models also remain heavily siloed, with little connectivity between the governing bodies of major institutions; this siloing translates quite directly into fragmented financing and fragmented field operations. Finally, participants observed that governance gaps exist at multiple levels—both in the inconsistencies in agency-level governance processes, and in the de facto absence of a meaningful system-level governance framework.

Fruitful areas for further research and reform could include:

- **Comparative governance models:** Major global humanitarian institutions each fall under different governance processes, with varying levels of accountability. These governance models shape how agencies' strategic priorities are determined, and how they are held accountable for performance. Major reforms to the humanitarian business model must be reinforced through agency governance processes; reforms that are not will stand less chance of delivering change. Mapping out how these various agency governance processes operate, and compare with each other, could provide useful insights into how to hold agencies more accountable for reform.
- **Beyond tokenism—broadening humanitarian governance:** The governance of aid agencies is an almost entirely upward-facing process. Agencies, whether NGOs or multilaterals, are vertically accountable to their governing boards and donors, but have no formal downward accountability to the populations they exist to serve. Involvement of affected populations in governance tends to be tokenistic at best—handpicked representatives may be invited to speak at governance events, but the populations they come from are not accorded substantive representation in the process. This stands in contrast to the development sector, where initiatives like the Paris and Busan commitments, the New Deal for Fragile States, and the World Bank Deputies Process (which shapes policy between donors, Bank leadership, and client states) all create formal entry points for aid recipients.

Workshop participants noted that the humanitarian sector must do more to give affected populations leverage at this level—but also that the mechanisms will need to be different than those in the development sector. Humanitarian principles of impartiality and independence, and the grim reality that some governments are not benign representatives of their people in conflict settings, mean that options must be explored for giving voice more directly both to affected governments and to affected communities themselves.

- **Creating connective tissue—system governance:** The global humanitarian architecture is often referred to casually as a “system,” but in fact there is little formal connectivity between its constituent parts. The major UN agencies are part of the UN family but are all governed independently of each other and so have evolved to operate as independent fiefdoms. The Red Cross movement and the World Bank group are also governed independently outside the UN’s umbrella—as is each individual humanitarian NGO.

This degree of independence has some value; but it also ensures a fragmentation of effort that translates directly to these many organizations’ field operations. This makes it difficult to ensure accountability for systemic commitments to reform, as this accountability must be enforced through a proliferation of disconnected fora. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee of the UN was established in 1991 to provide a venue for enabling cross-agency alignment but has proved to be a relatively toothless normative body with no formal link to the governing processes of its constituent agencies. It reflects a traditionalist, international-centric approach to humanitarian leadership, with no representation of affected populations, donors, or member states. New and more inclusive options for system-wide governance and accountability would be a useful outcome of this research.

WHAT NEXT?

This workshop—along with literature reviews, field research, and other outreach—will feed into a series of papers that CGD will begin producing in mid-2019. These papers will lay out analysis and preliminary findings under each of the three research pillars, and lay a groundwork for specific reform recommendations. We will then hold another round of outreach and consultations to review those findings and inform the development of specific reform recommendations, with the aim of publishing a final blueprint for reform in mid-2020.



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