



Indramaya Shrestha searches for belongings in the ruins of her home, Nepal, April 2015. Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam.

# FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

The World Humanitarian Summit and the challenge to deliver



**Tens of millions of people receive vital humanitarian aid every year, but millions more suffer without adequate help and protection, and their number is relentlessly rising.**

**Far too often this is because their own governments cannot, or wilfully will not ensure their citizens' access to aid and protection.**

**But international aid has not kept pace with the rising tide of climate-related disasters and seemingly intractable conflicts. And the promise to help affected people reduce their vulnerability to future disasters, and to lead their own humanitarian response, has not yet been kept.**

**Part of the solution is in the hands of humanitarians. Twenty-five years of reforms have still not built truly accountable humanitarian agencies – UN, NGO or government – that are both swift to respond to new crises and that invest enough in building more resilient, sustainable futures.**

**But most of the solution is not in humanitarians' hands. They do not cause the conflicts, climate change and inequality that drive crises. Until the world's governments – which will gather for the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016 – address the injustice behind humanitarian crises, the demand for aid will keep on rising, and tens of millions more men, women and children will keep on struggling to survive.**

**One Summit cannot change everything. But the key tests of its integrity and success are that it:**

- **Demands that states are held to account for their international obligations on assistance and protection**
- **Sets out genuinely new ways to support local humanitarian action, reverse the growing gap between the amount of aid needed and given, and reduce the risk of future disasters**

# FOREWORD



Our world is becoming a more dangerous place. Crises are intensifying. For many years the humanitarian community has responded to one crisis after another, sometimes successfully, sometimes only partially so. But too often there have been failures. These failures rest on the injustices and inequalities that help to drive these crises in the first place. And always the people who are most poor and vulnerable are left suffering the consequences.

We have the wherewithal to build a better global humanitarian system. And we have the duty to tackle the world's failure to uphold the rights to assistance and protection that international law already sets out.

Civil society fought very hard for these rights to be enshrined in today's humanitarian system. These have given us a good foundation now to put 'solidarity with people' at the heart of an improved system.

A successful humanitarian response begins before a crisis hits. We need to tackle the structural causes of crisis, not simply to mop up its tragic human consequences afterward. We must act together to change the harmful policies and practices that spark a crisis and deepen people's vulnerability to it in the first place. If that makes Oxfam's work 'political' then it is proudly so – we have stayed true to our vision since 1942.

The focus of tomorrow's renewed humanitarian response system must shift fundamentally toward Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. This is where political and economic power is moving, and where people's opportunities and needs are greatest.

Far too often, whether rotten or wrecked, states fail and fall into conflict. And today – in some ways both rotten and wrecked – the world faces the existential challenge of climate change caused by human actions. In the face of these huge challenges, our leaders often face real and invented pressures *not* to do their humanitarian duty.

Oxfam will continue to work in solidarity with allies, partners and local communities to bolster our leaders to take their humanitarian responsibilities seriously and resist the pressures of inertia. This paper outlines four key tests for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. At the heart of each one exists 'people' and making good their agency, knowledge, resilience and rights.

**Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International**

# SUMMARY



***'We don't want food. We want to be protected from what is happening.'***

Resident of Homs, Syria<sup>1</sup>

A woman and her child take shelter as a jet bombs the streets around her home in, Aleppo, Syria in 2012. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam.

Tens of millions of people receive vital humanitarian aid every year. Oxfam alone helped more than 8 million people in 2014, including 3.6 million with better access to clean water;<sup>2</sup> and in June 2015 the UN was appealing for funds to reach 78.9 million people across 37 countries.<sup>3</sup> However, millions suffer without adequate help or protection, and the number of people exposed to crises seems to relentlessly increase.

This is not primarily because the so-called 'humanitarian system' is failing, but because of the injustice at the heart of humanitarian crises:

- The poorest and least powerful are always the most vulnerable;
- Those who cause conflicts and climate change are the last to pay for their consequences;
- Too many states – and other armed groups – ride roughshod over their citizens' rights to assistance and protection; and
- Too many other governments, including those sitting on the UN Security Council, squabble over political rivalries instead of uniting to uphold the international law that already exists.

What is wrong is not that humanitarian action has stood still. It has not. The World Humanitarian Summit's host, Turkey, exemplifies the contribution of nations that have been traditionally excluded from the Western 'club' of humanitarian leaders. If the \$1.6bn it spent on hosting Syrian refugees in 2013 is included, Turkey gives more humanitarian aid than any other country except the US and UK.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the UN's 'Transformative Agenda', international humanitarian aid has not been transformed. The series of reforms that have resulted from the painful lessons of past crises since the Cold War must be successfully completed. The promise of swifter, more appropriate and more accountable aid must be kept – not only for disaster response, but also to invest more humanitarian and development aid in reducing the risk of future disasters, and in the long-term recovery from the world's tragically long list of protracted crises.

This requires a real transformation in both humanitarian and development aid. The world's donors must get more funds onto the ground, where aid actually happens, and minimize the money lost in the UN and international NGOs that serve as the 'middle men' of the international humanitarian world. Local governments, national and local NGOs and civil society must be empowered to lead wherever they can.

This would *not* render UN agencies and international NGOs obsolete – far from it. The rising tide of disasters makes them more vital than ever before. But there must be a clearer distinction of how they add value; for example, by rapidly scaling up in massive disasters; by strengthening the capacity of local organizations and their networks; and by bearing witness to the horrors of conflicts that the world too often ignores.

However, the fundamental way to reduce the terrible toll of suffering in humanitarian crises is not any change to international aid. It is to uphold the international humanitarian and refugee law to which governments have already agreed. It is to act on humanitarian principles, such as impartiality, every day. It is to tackle the inequalities and injustices that drive humanitarian crises.

*'The climate has changed. It's raining much more. We have landslides. The corn plants dry up. We can't harvest them.'*

Elena Diaz, Olupa, Guatemala<sup>5</sup>



Syrian refugees being rescued by an Italian ship in the Mediterranean.  
Photo: UNHCR/A. D'Amato

***'We ran away from death. And then we saw death again [in the Mediterranean].'***

Hanan from Damascus, Syria speaking in the UK, April 2015<sup>6</sup>

## BEYOND HUMANITARIAN SOLUTIONS

A generation ago, one woman said that bluntly. As UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata struggled to cope with the human misery caused by the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, she said that *'there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems'*.

That truth has been almost completely forgotten in the preparations for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Millions of words have been written about how to make further administrative changes to international aid. Hundreds of papers have agonized over how to provide aid in fragile or failed states.

But these simple truths have been largely forgotten:

- That to the men, women and children struggling in humanitarian crises, **a failed state is one that fails to fulfil its responsibility to ensure its citizens' access to aid and protection**; and
- To the men, women and children who have just survived this year's typhoon, flood or other disaster, **a failed world is one that allows climate change to overwhelm the world's most vulnerable people**.

Humanitarians must not only complete the reforms they have promised for years. They must challenge the world to tackle the drivers of humanitarian crises, and rekindle outrage at the atrocities and obstacles that stop vulnerable people reaching the aid they urgently need. And perhaps most of all, they must help give a voice to the millions of people struggling in humanitarian crises so often ignored by those in power. For if humanitarians do not seek to do this, who will?



Prolonged drought in Turkana, Kenya, killed livestock and made pastoralist communities dependent on food aid. Here Ikai and her mother Ester Longlomoe walk home with food rations given to them by friends, March 2011. Photo: Andy Hall

*More people are displaced by conflict and violence than at any time since the Second World War.<sup>7</sup>*

*But the soaring crisis of global displacement is not just caused by war. In 2013, 22m people were displaced by disasters caused by natural hazards.<sup>8</sup> In 2012, 98% of human displacement was triggered by climate- and weather-related hazards (83% over the five years up to then).<sup>9</sup>*

***'The drought affected us in so many ways. There was thirst. We spent most of our time just searching for water. The borehole dried up. The livestock died.'***

Esther Idoko, Lokore, Turkana, Kenya

## CAN THE SUMMIT DELIVER?

For the UN, governments and NGOs to spend so much time preparing for the Summit only to deliver well-meaning words and no practical, concrete recommendations and agreements would be shameful.

One Summit cannot change everything. Humanitarian crises will continue growing unless governments also succeed – to use a crucial example – at this December’s global conference on climate change in Paris, and more generally tackle the injustices that drive humanitarian crises. But the World Humanitarian Summit can and must achieve something, and the fundamental tests of its integrity and success are as follows.

### **Key test 1: Demand that states are held to account for their international obligations on assistance and protection**

Too many governments – and other armed groups – fall woefully short of their fundamental responsibilities under international law to protect their citizens from atrocities and to allow them unhindered access to aid. Some purposefully attack, trap or starve civilians as weapons of war. The Summit must reaffirm existing international law in the strongest possible terms, to help influence the practical steps that must be taken in real crises in the years to come. The Summit must:

- Reaffirm the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality and independence, which reflect the universal human heritage of helping other human beings in distress;
- Reaffirm the vital international legal obligation of states to ensure affected civilians’ access to assistance and protection – and condemn the fact that it has not been fulfilled in a significant proportion of humanitarian crises, and that the world has not united behind effective action to help change this;
- Reaffirm the international legal obligation to grant refuge to those fleeing violence, conflict and persecution, and the need to substantially increase international support to help countries neighbouring the world’s worst humanitarian crises to fulfil their responsibilities;
- Set out a new means to monitor and expose the failures of states to uphold international law in these respects, which the new UN Secretary-General in 2017 could help lead.

Wealthy countries in particular should go beyond their basic legal obligations to help more refugees reach protection outside their regions of origin. It cannot be right that less developed countries and regions host 86 percent of the world’s refugees.<sup>12</sup> What this means may be different for each crisis, but Oxfam’s call for wealthy countries to offer resettlement or humanitarian admission to at least five percent of refugees from Syria in the past<sup>13</sup> – and a higher figure will almost certainly be needed in future – shows what a more humane approach to global displacement might look like.

### **Key test 2: Set out new ways to support local action**

During 2007–13, less than 2 percent of annual humanitarian aid went directly to local organizations,<sup>14</sup> such as the members of the Humanitarian Response Consortium in the Philippines that responded to the county’s recent typhoons.<sup>15</sup>

*The ‘average’ displaced person in the world has been displaced since the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>*

*...most wealthy countries still refuse to welcome more than a fraction of refugees. In 2014, 26% of refugees were hosted by countries in Asia, 26% in Africa, 21% in the Middle East, 22% in Europe, 3% in North America.<sup>11</sup>*

In 2014, while national governments received only 3 percent of all international humanitarian aid reported through the UN, the share given directly to national and local NGOs was even less, falling from 0.4 percent in 2012 to a derisory 0.2 percent.<sup>16</sup>

*'We're responsible. We'll take the lead. We'll clean up the destruction.'*

Apurba Mehrab Srabon,  
Mymensigh, Bangladesh

### **Box 1: Local civil society after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines**

*'I was attending a UN meeting and heard that the area we were working in was considered hard-to-reach. But it's on the main road. And we travel there every day! Perhaps it's hard-to-reach by international rather than national standards. While there are security issues for international organizations...National NGOs are better able to move around.'*

Local humanitarian worker, Samar Province

*The aid that was distributed directly by the [local government] targeted only some of those most in need of assistance. Those areas that had been lobbying against the mining companies [which the government supported] were missed out. We targeted these areas and others that needed assistance.*

Local humanitarian worker, Leyte Province

Source: A. Featherstone and C. Antequisa (2014) 'Missed Again: making space for partnership in the Typhoon Haiyan response', Christian Aid, Cafod, Oxfam, Tearfund and Actionaid, <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/Missed-Again-Typhoon-Haiyan-September-2014.pdf>, p9

There is no way to know how many aid dollars are lost in the UN and international NGO 'middle men' of the humanitarian world. Their role *is* vital – to support local actors, address global challenges, and work directly where local actors cannot do so alone; but a higher proportion of international aid should get to the front line. In many places, local groups face grave challenges, but the lesson of almost every recent crisis is that greater support for local leadership, wherever possible, would make aid more effective, responsive and accountable.<sup>17</sup> That is why it is increasingly recognized that humanitarian action should follow the idea of 'subsidiarity', in which local, national, regional and international organisations all have vital roles to play, and wherever possible, they support the efforts of affected people themselves to cope and recover from crises.<sup>18</sup>

The Summit must therefore encourage governments and other humanitarian donors to:

- Dedicate, by 2020, at least 10 percent of their global humanitarian funding to strengthen the capacity of local and national NGOs to lead humanitarian action – and set out practical strategies to help build that capacity. That funding will of course vary considerably from country to country depending on its circumstances;
- Make every aid dollar count – by maximizing the amount that gets to the local and sometimes international agencies directly providing aid on the ground. The UN and international NGO 'middle men' between donors and 'doers' have a vital role to play, but every possible effort should be made to reduce the costs that are deducted from aid on its way to the people in need.

The Summit should encourage the UN, and in particular UNOCHA, UNDP and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction to:

- Work with countries, including their governments, local NGOs and civil society, to develop national strategies for disaster response, preparedness and risk reduction *that uphold all citizens' rights to assistance and protection* – setting out cost projections and the national budget allocations required.

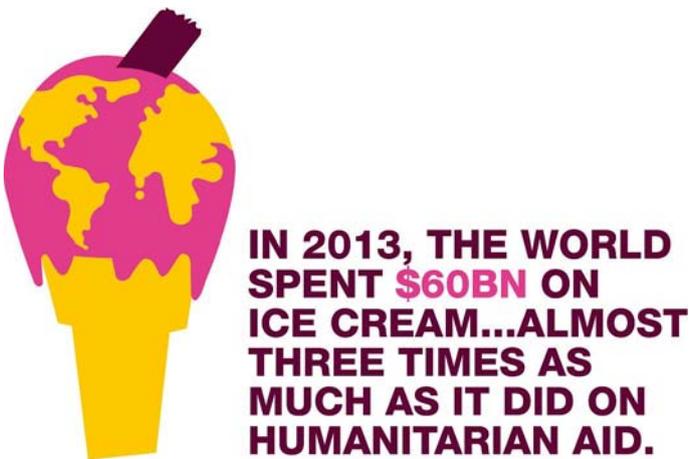
And the Summit should encourage all donors to:

- Help ensure those plans that uphold citizens' rights are fully funded by using their ODA to fill any gaps.

### **Key test 3: Reverse the growing gap between aid needed and given**

International humanitarian aid has substantially grown – but it has failed to keep pace with the demand from climate-related disasters, and from new conflicts such as in Syria. Since 2000, donor governments have, on average, met less than two-thirds of the needs set out in UN humanitarian appeals.<sup>19</sup> Such shortfalls have devastating consequences: in late 2014, the World Food Programme suspended food aid to 1.7m Syrian refugees when it ran out of money, and was only able to reinstate its assistance after a fundraising effort on social media.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 1<sup>21</sup>**



Yet even in these times of austerity, the cost to donor governments of filling this gap would be relatively small. The UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing will report in November 2015 and help to frame the Summit's discussions. Neither should be afraid of making truly bold recommendations to increase predictable humanitarian funding. Governments pay vital mandatory dues to everybody from the UN to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, but leave humanitarian appeals to rely on uncertain funding, which is starkly unequal between different crises.

The Summit should:

- Encourage the UN to bring forward proposals for more predictable funding – perhaps some form of assessed contributions – a percentage of which could be dedicated to developing local capacity to complement voluntary contributions.



Maria and Santos outside their home, newly built to protect against floods, Beni, Bolivia.  
Photo: Peter Tecks/Oxfam.

***'It will be safe in the new house because the floods will not reach it. Last time it flooded the water rose an extra metre.'***

Maria, Beni, Bolivia

#### **Key test 4: determine new ways to reduce the risk of future disasters**

Since 2000, disasters have caused damage costing an average of \$100bn each year.<sup>23</sup> National governments, funded through progressive taxation, must lead the way in reducing this vast economic and human cost; and international donors must do far more to support them. Yet the promise to help countries build their resilience to future disasters has not been delivered. In the three decades to 2010, only 0.4 percent of total official development assistance was spent on reducing the risk of disasters.<sup>24</sup>

The Summit should encourage all national governments to:

- Lead effective strategies to build their people's resilience to future disasters, ensuring that all government policies reduce future risks or at least avoid creating new risks, and that risk analysis is integral to decisions on public and private investment.

It should encourage international donors to:

- Collectively contribute, by 2020, at least \$5bn of total global annual aid – because reducing risk is not solely a humanitarian challenge – to help countries vulnerable to disasters build their resilience and reduce the risk of future disasters. That funding may of course vary considerably from country to country, and many countries may call on donors to fund substantially more to help them become less vulnerable to disasters;
- Ensure that development, not just humanitarian, aid tackles the inequalities that make people more vulnerable to the shocks and stresses that they face, and increase development work in protracted crises and those societies facing the greatest risks.

These goals would focus a reasonable proportion of aid on some of the most vulnerable people in the world. It is vital to ensure of course that donor countries do *not* cut other vital aid priorities, and they have no legitimate reason to do so. The great majority of wealthy countries, even in these difficult times, should contribute more in total official development assistance; and every government must recognize that climate finance for mitigation and adaptation must be fully additional to development aid.

*By the 2030s, much more of the world – large parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – will be exposed to droughts, floods and other hazards. 325m people in extreme poverty will live in the most exposed areas.<sup>22</sup>*

*In the 20 years to 2010, the world spent \$14bn on reducing the risk of disasters – less than 1% of the \$2.3tn of disaster losses.<sup>25</sup>*

*Long before this year's earthquakes in Nepal, the Nepal Red Cross estimated that for every \$1 spent on DRR almost \$4 would be saved in future disaster response.<sup>26</sup>*

# 1 THE CHALLENGE TO DELIVER



***‘There is only one activity in this community: surviving.’***

Louise sits with children outside her temporary shelter in Buporo Camp, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, December 2014. Photo: © Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam

Louise, Buporo camp, Eastern DRC, December 2014

Tens of millions of people receive vital humanitarian aid every year. Oxfam alone helped more than 8 million in 2014. However, millions more suffer without adequate help or protection, and the number of people exposed to crises seems to increase relentlessly. 2014 saw almost 11 million *more* people affected by disasters from natural hazards than in the previous year,<sup>27</sup> while wars, conflict and persecution forced more people to flee their homes than ever on record, with 59.5 million displaced at the end of 2014 – more than 8 million *more* than in 2013, and 22 million *more* than a decade ago.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is not the fault of humanitarians that the fundamental threats creating an ever-rising toll of human suffering have not been addressed.

## THE DRIVERS OF SUFFERING

It is, first and foremost, the job of states to reduce the human-made threats that drive every humanitarian crisis, such as those in Syria, Yemen and South Sudan.

Some governments are better than others in tackling both the causes and consequences of crises. Humanitarian aid remains staggeringly unequal – both in terms of how much people receive, and how much different governments choose to give.

# THE INEQUALITY OF COMPASSION

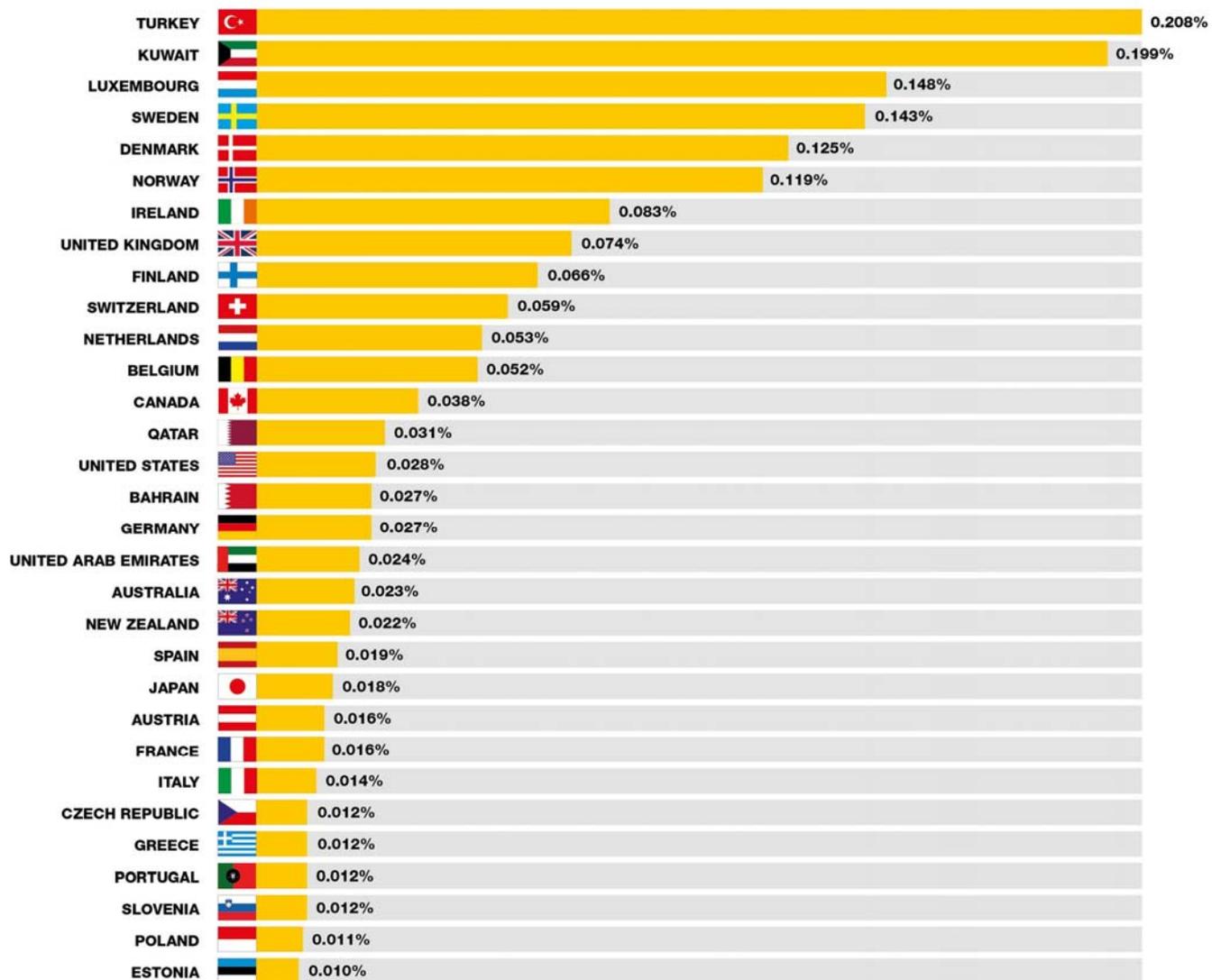
Figure 2

## HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AS A PERCENTAGE OF GNI 2013

This graph is based on 2013 figures for GNI and humanitarian assistance. It includes the top 20 contributors, according to their humanitarian aid as a percentage of GNI, as well as other OECD countries contributing at least 0.010%. No other country, including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), gave more than 0.010%.

Figures for EU member states include their contribution to EU institutions' humanitarian aid, and therefore the graph does not present the European Commission's relevant department (ECHO) separately, despite it being one of the largest humanitarian donors in the world.

Turkey's number one position is based on including the \$1.6bn it spent on hosting Syrian refugees. Without that figure, Kuwait would rank top. A number of Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, have significantly increased their funding since 2013.



Source: Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, Fig. 3.4, p. 30, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/report/gha-report-2014>; OECD; World Bank; and data gathered by Development Initiatives.<sup>29</sup>

**Overall, the states that will gather at the World Humanitarian Summit are failing, as:**

- Too many governments – and other armed groups – fall woefully short of their fundamental responsibilities under international law to protect their citizens from atrocities and allow them unhindered access to aid. Some states purposefully attack, trap or starve civilians as weapons of war.
- Too many states repress the free civil society and media that could help hold them to account and bring their attention to unaddressed crises within their borders – and deny their people an effective voice in demanding their rights to humanitarian assistance and protection.
- Too many governments fuel conflicts with irresponsible arms supplies, or fail to unite to use the influence they have to uphold international humanitarian law and new international norms, such as the Arms Trade Treaty.
- Too many OECD and other relatively wealthy states are donating insufficient humanitarian aid, and fail to uphold the principle of impartiality by addressing needs proportionately wherever they are.
- Too many governments do not offer safe refuge to those fleeing violence and persecution. EU member states are shamed by the thousands who drown in the Mediterranean, as austerity and xenophobia make Europe turn its back on some of the world's most vulnerable people. But as the tens of thousands who have fled Myanmar and Bangladesh since 2014 have found, the struggle to find safe refuge is a challenge facing the whole world.
- Humanitarian action is overwhelmed by the rising tide of climate-related disasters, which increased threefold between the 1980s and the end of the last decade,<sup>33</sup> and the growing number of people vulnerable to them in an increasingly unequal world.
- Governments have only begun to respond to those trends as they struggle to tackle climate change, and to invest enough – not least in disaster risk reduction (DRR) programmes – to help people become resilient to future crises. Far too little development, as well as humanitarian, aid is focused on reducing the risk of future disasters.

**Twenty-five years of humanitarian reforms have improved but not transformed humanitarian action. Governments, UN agencies and international NGOs still need to:**

- Build more effective and balanced partnerships between local and international actors;
- Make humanitarian action genuinely accountable to local people;
- Focus on the differing needs of women and men, and of all people particularly vulnerable because of age, disability, or social or ethnic group;
- End the disproportionate focus on the crises in the media spotlight, in which protracted conflicts continue to struggle for funds more than major disasters from sudden natural events;
- Support truly impartial and independent assistance by ensuring a clear separation from their other goals, including to counter terrorism.

*In 2013, the world spent 80 times as much on military expenditure as humanitarian aid.<sup>30</sup>*

*On an average day in 2014, 42,500 people a day fled from violence, persecution and conflict – four times the figure just four years ago.<sup>31</sup>*

*93% of people in extreme poverty live in countries that are politically fragile, environmentally vulnerable, or both.<sup>32</sup>*

*Japan devotes dramatically more of its humanitarian aid to DRR and preparedness than any other OECD government. In 2012, it gave more than five times the proportion of countries such as Switzerland, Canada and the UK.<sup>34</sup>*

*In the first four months of 2015, 2,629 people drowned in the Mediterranean trying to seek refuge in Europe.<sup>35</sup>*

The human cost of all these failings is not only the massive flows of refugees across the Mediterranean, Bay of Bengal and elsewhere. Tens of millions of people suffer where they are, including the ‘internally stuck people’ prevented from fleeing crises by the actions of warring parties or by a lack of resources. Nonetheless, the soaring number of people displaced is perhaps the most dramatic sign of the world’s failure to overcome humanitarian suffering.

*‘Being a refugee is not a crime. It’s not a caste. In life you can be a citizen. In life you can still have your rights.’*

Rebecca Majok, a South Sudanese refugee in Uganda<sup>36</sup>

## Box 2: Forced to flee

A record 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2014. This global number is accelerating fast as, in region after region at least 15 conflicts have erupted or reignited in the last five years: eight in Africa, three in the Middle East, one in Europe, and three in Asia. UNHCR now calculates that ‘one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. Were this the population of a country, it would be the world’s 24<sup>th</sup> biggest.’ At the same time, the number of refugees able to return to their home countries was the lowest in 2014, at 126,800, than for 31 years.<sup>37</sup>

Refugees have rights under the 1951 Refugee Convention, including:<sup>38</sup>

- The right not to be forcibly returned to a country in which s/he has reason to fear persecution (Article 33)
- The right to work (Article 17)
- The right to housing (Article 21)
- The right to education (Article 22)
- The right to relief and assistance (Article 23)
- The right to freedom of movement (Article 26)

But the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the beginning, not the end, of a humane response to displacement. As UNHCR has said, ‘while the 1951 Convention remains the key legal document defining who is a refugee, their rights and the legal obligations of governments, the world has changed dramatically’ since the Convention was agreed.

UN High Commissioner António Guterres has specifically highlighted how climate change, food and energy insecurity, water scarcity, population growth and urbanization are driving more men, women and children to flee their homes, and exacerbating the conflicts that are traditionally seen as causes of flight. The increasing number of disasters, as well as the gradual effects of climate change, drives more people from their homes, mainly within their own countries, but some across borders. For all these reasons, UNHCR already recognizes that ‘the distinctions between refugees and migrants and voluntary and involuntary movements are increasingly blurred’.

As UNHCR again says, ‘none of the existing international and regional refugee law instruments specifically addresses the plight of such people,’ or those driven by poverty, inequality and deprivation to flee their countries ‘because they lack any meaningful option to remain’. And support for all these groups is often even more limited than for traditional refugees, internally displaced and the ‘internally stuck people’ trapped in conflicts.

Source: all quotes from UNHCR ‘Next steps: new dynamics of displacement’, <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/refugees/nextsteps.html> (accessed June 2015)

## MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Could humanitarian aid be better? Absolutely.

But it is the failure of the world's governments that is driving the sharply rising 'demand' for humanitarian aid. It is a catalogue of political and environmental injustice.

The gap between needs and response will go on rising. The human cost of this will keep growing as the world faces more disasters and brutal conflicts easier to start than to resolve – without radical change not only in humanitarian action, but tackling the injustice, inequality and failure of states that aid alone cannot solve.

*UN appeals are never more than an approximate measure of human need. But in 2015, they identify twice the number of people in need than at the height of the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2005. These numbers are likely to rise.<sup>39</sup>*

# 2 RIGHTS IN CRISES



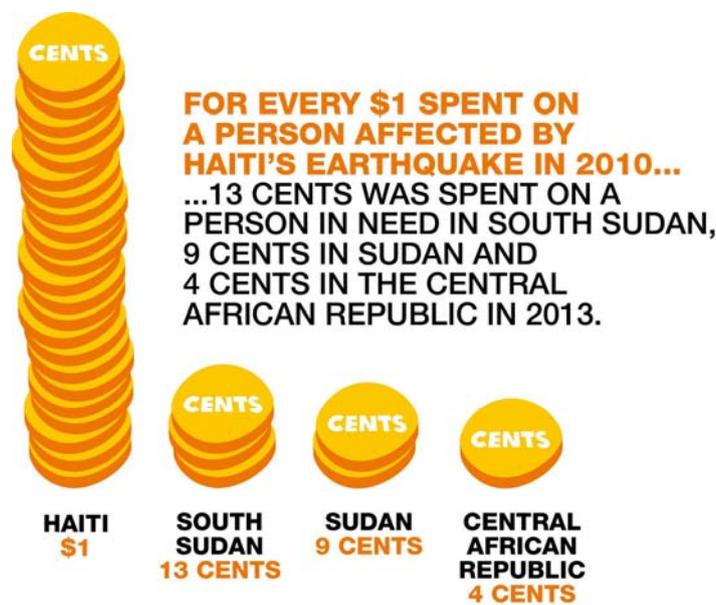
Malakal IDP camp, South Sudan, August 2014: Photo: Simon Rawles/Oxfam.

***‘To those people fighting, there is a difference between the Dinka and the Nuer. To normal people like me, there is not. I hope one day everyone feels the same.’***

Nyabil Riel,  
Mingkaman, South Sudan<sup>40</sup>

The World Humanitarian Summit will only succeed by addressing the injustices at the heart of humanitarian crises. The first is the shocking inequality of aid, which values the life of a person in one crisis higher than another. In 2014, a record \$24.5bn was given in international humanitarian aid.<sup>41</sup> Yet virtually no disaster gets the funds to meet all the needs that there are; and the amount given between one and another is extraordinarily unequal. Sometimes the costs are unequal, but the extreme difference between one crisis and another is also because many donors are more interested in some places, some people, than others.

**Figure 3: The inequality of aid**



***‘We want peace, we want our children to eat, walk and play as they should.’***

Antoinette Bolobo,  
Bangui, Central African Republic

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Haiti earthquake 2010,<sup>42</sup> South Sudan 2013,<sup>43</sup> Sudan,<sup>44</sup> Central African Republic.<sup>45</sup>

Of even greater importance is the stark inequality in states' behaviour to ensure their citizens' access to the assistance and protection to which they have a right. The Summit's real test is to help men, women and children enjoy those rights, and influence governments to uphold them.

Precisely because those rights are violated in almost every humanitarian crisis, it is important to remember what they are.

### Box 3: Rights in crises

- *In all disasters* – caused by extreme weather, political crisis or anything else – citizens have a right to humanitarian assistance.<sup>46</sup> States have the responsibility to prepare for, and seek to prevent, disasters that inevitably threaten the fundamental right to life.
- *In armed conflicts* specifically, states and non-state actors alike also have obligations under international humanitarian law.<sup>47</sup> They bear the primary responsibility for meeting the needs of people living in areas under their control, and if those needs are not fulfilled, to consent to impartial humanitarian activities offered by humanitarian organizations, including NGOs.

**International humanitarian law sets out fundamental obligations in relation to both humanitarian access and the protection of civilians. In terms of access, states and non-state actors must:**

- Allow and facilitate the unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need;
- Prevent the destruction of infrastructure or services vital to survival, such as water supplies and medical facilities;
- Refrain from using starvation as a weapon of war; and
- Protect humanitarian workers and respect their freedom of movement.

To protect civilians, they must:

- Distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants, in order to spare civilians and civilian property from attacks; and
- Refrain from using weapons (e.g. cluster munitions) or methods of warfare (e.g. preventing civilians fleeing violence) that are likely to cause unnecessary losses or excessive civilian suffering.

*State sovereignty should not be used as an excuse to constrain humanitarian access.*

Inter Agency Standing Committee of UN and NGO humanitarian leaders, May 2015



Asma'a in the rubble that used to be her home, Gaza, December 2014. Photo: Anas Al Baba/Oxfam.

***'I feel that I am losing my dignity here every day.'***

Asma'a, Gaza, December 2014

# 3 UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF HUMANITARIAN REFORM



Bernadette Samura, a voluntary health worker, going house-to-house with Ebola health advice in Pamaronkoh, Sierra Leone. Photo: Michelle Curran/Oxfam.

In 2015, humanitarian action takes place in a world that has changed enormously since that first ‘transformative crisis’ of the post-Cold War world – in the Kurdish region of Iraq in 1991. Since then, many NGOs, UN agencies and governments have tried to change humanitarian action.

Local people themselves are almost always the first to respond to disasters; but they are still sometimes let down by slow, inadequate or unresponsive aid, by their own governments, international actors or both. In 2014, the response to Ebola in West Africa was lethally slow. This followed close after the world’s tragically late response to the 2011 famine in the Horn of Africa,<sup>50</sup> exposed in Oxfam and Save the Children’s scathing critique, *Dangerous Delay*, of their own and the world’s failure to act swiftly upon the first warnings of disaster.

Successive crises have shown governments, the UN and international NGOs lacking the agility to change plans rapidly in response to unforeseen events; and that is a failing of both humanitarian and development aid. Yet humanitarian action has also been improved by twenty-five years of reforms, many of them led by NGOs, including the:

- **Code of Conduct** for the Red Crescent and Red Cross Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief;
- **Sphere Humanitarian Charter** and Minimum Standards;
- **Humanitarian Accountability Partnership**;
- **People in Aid Code of Practice**; and most recently the

***‘The cavalry [international community] wasn’t coming. We were the cavalry.’***

David Mandu Keili-Coomber, chief from Mandu chiefdom, Sierra Leone, on the early international response to Ebola in 2014<sup>48</sup>

***‘Humanitarian assistance is punching above its weight... expanded into long-term recovery in too many crises. [The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator] must re-engage the development sector.’***

Christina Bennett, Overseas Development Institute, June 2015<sup>49</sup>

- **Core Humanitarian Standard**,<sup>51</sup> launched in December 2014 to bring together the common elements of different standards, and by so doing making it simpler for humanitarian actors to be held to account by the people and communities they serve.

Such codified lessons form only part of a much wider process of learning from past crises on how, for example, to make aid more appropriate by often providing cash and vouchers rather than in-kind aid.

*'Deep in our heart, we believe that the Core Humanitarian Standard will be able to make a qualitative change in establishing a long-lasting but easy to operate system of accountability in humanitarian initiatives.'*

Nayeem Wahra,  
Foundation for Disaster  
Forum, Bangladesh

# 10 CRISES THAT HAVE CHANGED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Figure 4



## THE UN: TRANSFORMED?

Since 2011, the UN's 'Transformative Agenda' has built on the reforms of the past, including the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) in the last decade, driven by the world's response to the terrible conflict in Darfur. That HRR set up Humanitarian Country Teams to coordinate the work of international agencies in each crisis, established 'clusters' to organize aid around each 'sector' (such as water, sanitation and hygiene), and created new funds to pool donors' resources.

However, these have been incremental not transformational changes, and what has not changed is as much as what has. While the new systems have improved coordination between international agencies, they have often failed, for example, to engage with the local actors who best understand their national and local contexts. In some crises, of course, the national government is more part of the problem than the solution. But even in disasters driven primarily by natural hazards, not war or atrocities, the UN and international NGOs have often been slow to work with local states and civil society.

International actors remain important, not least for helping to bear witness to the horrors of conflicts that the world so often ignores. National and local resources are, almost by definition, often most lacking in the very places most vulnerable to crises, especially in countries blighted by conflict. No local group, for example, could have organized the World Food Programme's air drops in South Sudan that have helped to prevent famine during that country's brutal conflict since 2013.

International NGOs such as Oxfam can sometimes 'scale up' in response to sudden disasters in a way that no local organization can, not least because in many cases they cannot effectively access international funds, while many donors have increasingly concentrated their funding through large donations to the UN and other international actors. This challenge of funding local organizations more directly should also be addressed at the Summit.

After the Philippines' devastating Typhoon *Haiyan* in 2013, the UN's coordination of international aid showed what its new classification of 'L3' highest priorities could achieve. At the same time, when Oxfam and others evaluated the crisis response a year later, it became clear that even more could have been achieved if international aid had worked more closely with the Philippines' relatively developed state and civil society structures.<sup>53</sup>

## STATES: WHERE THE BUCK STOPS

States are not only responsible for ensuring their citizens' access to assistance and protection; they are also the masters of the UN; the UN's shortcomings are ultimately shortcomings of the states that control it.

UN reforms can only do so much to change governments' behaviour. Ten years since the upgraded UN Central Emergency Response Fund was established to provide 'adequate, flexible and predictable' funds, governments continue to leave UN appeals heavily and unequally underfunded. While the total amount of international funding has substantially increased – from OECD and some

*'As a cluster coordinator in Pakistan in 2012 and 2013, I saw how clusters serve a very positive coordinating function. But there is a real risk that their members spend too much time meeting each other and other clusters, and too little time working with the community and local actors, especially if local people aren't included in cluster meetings, which is too often the case.'*

Chris Laughlin, Oxfam  
Australia

*After Haiti's earthquake in 2010, all but two of the clusters met in English, and those two – on WASH and Education – were in French, a language that 95% of Haiti's people do not speak.<sup>52</sup>*

*In 2014, UN appeals' unmet requirements – at \$7.5bn – were higher than ever before.<sup>54</sup>*

non-OECD governments alike<sup>55</sup> – it has failed to keep pace with rising needs. However, the amount of money that could help millions is still relatively small. Norway is one of the most generous countries in the world, but as Jan Egeland said earlier this year, what the people of Norway spent on Christmas in 2014 could have totally met the UN's \$7.2bn appeal for Syria and its neighbours.<sup>56</sup>

Around the world, donor governments have, on average, met less than two-thirds of the needs set out in UN humanitarian appeals since 2000.<sup>57</sup> Such shortfalls have devastating consequences: in late 2014, the World Food Programme suspended food aid to 1.7m Syrian refugees when it ran out of money, and was only able to reinstate its assistance after WFP launched a social media campaign to raise funds.<sup>58</sup>

Even the governments that give most have increasingly concentrated their donations on a relatively small number of large contracts to UN and other agencies, with overheads to deduct before the money reaches the men and women struggling on the ground. As the 2015 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report shows, the 'transaction chains' from a donor to the individual human being in need 'are so complex [that] it is possible to trace funding only to the first-level recipient. Systematic traceability is essential to understand and improve effectiveness and underpin accountability to both donors and recipients.'<sup>61</sup> The report's authors show how full reporting to the International Aid Transparency Initiative,<sup>62</sup> that Oxfam supports,<sup>63</sup> could help do this.

Importantly, barely 6 percent of humanitarian aid from OECD countries in 2012 was focused on reducing the risk of future disasters,<sup>64</sup> despite evidence that such investment can save both money and lives. Working with local civil society for instance: the Philippines government evacuated nearly a million people before Typhoon *Hagupit* struck in December 2014, drastically reducing the potential death toll.<sup>65</sup>

Regrettably, governments use a remarkably large proportion of humanitarian funding not to pay for emergency measures at all – but instead to plug the gap left by relatively little development aid spent to support long-term recovery from protracted conflicts. As an Overseas Development Institute report said in 2015, too many donor governments 'use humanitarian relief as a means of avoiding more substantial engagement in difficult contexts'. As a result, more than 60 percent of countries with annual humanitarian appeals in 2014 had had such appeals for more than eight years.<sup>66</sup>

In a similar way, OECD and other bilateral donors also generally fail to fund DRR or preparedness through development funds, despite their long-term sustainable purpose, instead funding these as largely humanitarian activities.<sup>67</sup>

*In 2013, the total shortfall in humanitarian funding – measured by UN appeals – could have been filled by OECD governments spending less than one hour of their combined GDP, less than one day's combined profits for the Fortune 500 companies, and less than the retail value of two weeks of US food waste.<sup>59</sup>*

*Improved early warning systems of natural disasters in developing countries could yield benefits 4 to 36 times greater than the cost.*

World Development Report  
2014/60

## PAYING ATTENTION TO GENDER



***'When I see my children eat, I am still worried. What will they eat in the future? What will I find for them? Will I be able to feed them tomorrow?'***

Adoaga Ousmane,  
Louga, Chad

Adoaga Ousmane searches for grain during the 2012 food crisis in the Guéra region of Chad, 2012. Photo: Abbie Trayler-Smith.

Disasters affect women, men, girls and boys in radically different ways. Women and girls are often more vulnerable, because of their limited access to resources; and even in disasters, the responsibility for caring for others falls heavily on their shoulders. However, their voices in planning the response are often not heard. In 2011, only 60 percent of OECD donors even had policies on gender.<sup>68</sup> Yet if humanitarian interventions ignore women's rights, they are very unlikely to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people, and may leave women more powerless than before.

At the same time, humanitarian crises can sometimes challenge discriminatory behaviour, enabling women and men to reflect on existing gender roles and to value traditional roles differently. For example, in some conflict situations women can assume prominent roles in peace building and mediation, and men may take on greater care responsibilities. More generally, humanitarian crises may create greater opportunities for some women at least. When Oxfam, for example, worked with women's rights organizations in Central America to improve the way in which the humanitarian agencies engaged with women affected by disasters, one woman in El Salvador said, 'I have learned how to speak up, how to talk in public, and express my opinions.'<sup>69</sup> Box 5 shows another example, from Oxfam's research among Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

### Box 5: The potential for women's empowerment among Syrian refugees in Lebanon

At least some Syrian women who have fled their country's conflict feel that taking on different roles as refugees has created a sense of empowerment.

That was one of the perhaps surprising conclusions when Oxfam listened to refugee women in Lebanon. Some are going to market, making decisions, and undertaking paid work. As one woman in Aarsal told Oxfam, 'now I am free.' One man in Bar Elias observed 'she can give her opinion and it matters...she can go out. Back in Syria, she could not do anything.'

Other refugee women face far greater restrictions, and the potential for advancing women's rights in such difficult circumstances should not be exaggerated.

Listening to Syrian women in Lebanon has proved that aid agencies must target women as well as men, not least in helping them earn their own incomes, and to explore how the continuing crisis is changing gender identities – potentially for the better.

Source: R. El-Masri et al (2013) Shifting Sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon, Resource Center for Gender Equality and Oxfam, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/shifting-sands>, p16

Such opportunities will be greater in some contexts than others, but in every humanitarian crisis, promoting women's leadership and participation in humanitarian programmes and policymaking spaces is critical. Women and girls are not simply victims of crises, but have ambitions, expertise, and skills.

## NGOS: EFFECTIVE ENOUGH?

Humanitarian NGOs – local and international – are not perfect, and sometimes fail to match their actions to their words. When crises strike countries that international NGOs are largely unfamiliar with, such as Syria in 2011, or where most programming is devoted to long-term development, such as Liberia or Sierra Leone in 2014, many fail to respond swiftly to the ever-expanding demands.

True accountability is however perhaps the greatest challenge for NGOs, as well as for governments and the UN. At the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, ICVA, and the World Humanitarian Summit's Secretariat organized focus groups across the Middle East to listen to refugees and others receiving aid. The results included uncomfortable reading for national and international agencies alike. Asked if they were treated with respect and dignity, respondents gave an average ranking of 3.5 out of 10; asked if aid agencies were neutral and impartial, the score was 4.<sup>70</sup>

NGOs share the tendency of governments and UN agencies at being better able to agree statements than implement them. The support given by many international NGOs to partnership with local civil society is one such example. In 2014, more than 2,400 organizations around the world, both development and humanitarian partners, were asked to rate Oxfam's performance as a partner in various areas. Their 'overall satisfaction' was a humbling 'minus 1'. In four out of six areas, the average scores were in fact positive, but every one of

*'Despite all the reforms, codes, guidelines, protocols, standards and indicators, humanitarian agencies still repeat their bad practices, such as failing to recognise local actors, and still fail to press for truly radical solutions.'*

Carlos Mejia,  
Humanitarian Manager,  
Oxfam America

Oxfam's affiliates received negative scores for their capacity-building support to partners.<sup>71</sup>

As Oxfam International Executive Director Winnie Byanyima said, 'the results give us a tremendous insight into what we need to do to improve, based on what our partners say they really need from us.' Oxfam has taken immediate steps to improve on the areas where the survey indicated we are weaker, and in particular to:

- support our partners better to help them raise funds from other sources;
- develop joint strategies with them more often, and to promote their work publicly;
- strengthen our support for women's leadership development programmes and put more funding into gender equality projects.<sup>72</sup>

Oxfam will also engage with Keystone to invite partners to participate again in this independent survey in 2018, so that we can judge exactly how we're progressing overall, because the need to build on the kind of good practice described in Box 4 is as important as ever.

#### **Box 4: Supporting humanitarian partners in Central America**

Over the past 10 years, Oxfam has substantially developed emergency response and DRR programmes in Central America, including strengthening the capacity of partners, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It has worked with Concertación Regional de Gestión de Riesgos (the Regional Coalition for Risk Management), an umbrella association of civil society networks in four countries, to help vulnerable communities prepare for and respond to disasters. In 2012, the Gates Foundation awarded this organization \$1.6m directly.

## 4 IN HUMANITARIANS' HANDS



Oxfam's warehouse in Saada, Yemen after an airstrike in April 2015. Photo: Oxfam

The humanitarian community must complete the reforms it has promised to undertake for years – on early action, accountability, partnership and building resilience. It must challenge the world to tackle the drivers of humanitarian crises, and rekindle outrage at the atrocities and obstacles to access to aid. For if humanitarians do not seek to do this, who will?

*'It takes politics to stop the killing.'*

David Milliband,  
International Rescue  
Committee, January  
2015<sup>73</sup>

Humanitarians must not cling to the narrow, top-down humanitarianism of the past. Tackling the symptoms but not the causes of suffering is not good enough. The rising number of disasters caused by political and environmental injustice makes that clear.

The call from local organizations and affected people to lead humanitarian action can no longer be ignored; but that does not mean that regional or international actors are not as vital as ever.

Humanitarian action should follow the idea of 'subsidiarity', in which local, national, regional and international organizations all have vital roles to play, and wherever possible, they support the efforts of affected people themselves to cope and recover from crises.<sup>74</sup>

This will require vital international support as citizens struggle to hold both their own governments and the international community to account. And every humanitarian actor – local, national, regional and international – needs to implement vital principles and standards, with the Core Humanitarian Standard at their heart, more consistently than ever before.

Instead of using grand words such as 'impartiality' without question, they must make a real commitment to end the disproportionate responses to some crises – usually with high media profile – than others. As long as such inequality exists, international humanitarian aid will never be impartial.

**To improve the effectiveness and justice of humanitarian aid, governments and agencies must transform their investments in:**

- Real partnerships with local state and civil society actors, to help them lead humanitarian action. This includes supporting local civil society, not just to provide vital services, but to influence their governments, especially those that fail to ensure their citizens' access to aid and protection.
- Helping local people become resilient to future disasters, and tackling the inequality and injustices that make people more vulnerable. This includes substantially increasing support for DRR programmes, and ensuring that they are better linked with countries' climate change adaptation strategies.
- Gender programming and other ways to respond to the different aspirations and needs of men and women, girls and boys. This not only includes focusing on women's specific needs in, for example, health and sanitation, as well as the scourge of sexual violence and abuse (to which men and boys can also be vulnerable). It also demands giving the women affected by each crisis a real voice in decisions on humanitarian aid – as one small step to reduce the gender inequality that makes them more vulnerable in the first place. From planning to evaluation, women's full partnership and leadership in humanitarian programmes is vital, and every step should be made to support it, including investing in the capacity of women's rights and other local organizations with expertise on gender.
- Mechanisms to make aid genuinely accountable to affected people. Affected people must have a real voice in planning programmes to prepare and respond to disasters, and reduce the risk of them – and an effective way to seek redress when things go wrong.

*In a study of 141 countries, more women than men were killed during disasters, particularly in poor communities and at an earlier age.<sup>75</sup>*



Young Vumilia, Namuziba, DRC, December 2014. Photo: Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam.

***'We fear rape and worry that other villages will soon be destroyed.'***

Young Vumilia, Namuziba, eastern DRC, December 2014

## UNITED ON PRINCIPLES, DIVERSE IN APPROACH

People seeking assistance, protection and justice need a diverse, not monolithic, humanitarian community. In a country devastated by conflict, Syrians seek aid through every means possible: cross-border, cross-line, and from a vast variety of agencies, networks and individuals working in areas controlled by the government or various opposition forces. No agency has been able to work through all routes. Millions of Syrians are still denied the assistance and protection they need – 4.8 million in ‘hard to reach’ areas in January 2015<sup>77</sup> – but humanitarian actors have reached as many as they have by working in different areas under different political control.

There is no one ‘right’ humanitarian approach, but every humanitarian agency must unite around some things: principles, standards, and respect for local people. Humanitarian principles are needed more than ever before. Far too many lives are lost because people cannot reach – and are often deliberately prevented from reaching – independent, impartial aid.

Such grave violations of international law are committed by states and non-state actors alike in armed conflicts. International and national NGOs alike also face the challenge of acting impartially more consistently than they sometimes have – it is not impartial to respond to high-profile crises more than to others. Truly independent NGOs must at least seek to influence anyone in power who is causing humanitarian suffering, even their donors. That is why Oxfam has chosen, when necessary, to decline funds from governments when accepting them might compromise its perceived independence.

Local NGOs can struggle to be truly impartial and independent too, particularly in divided societies where organizations may represent one community rather than another. The drive to put local actors in the lead is absolutely right. However, this must be leadership of principled impartial action, serving everyone in need, not any one group.

The same challenge faces those private corporations increasingly involved in humanitarian relief. They are adding significant resources to the world’s overstretched humanitarian capacity. They bring skills and competencies, new practices and perspectives to bear. But like every kind of organization, private corporations must meet adequate standards and uphold key principles to make the most of their impact for people in need.

*‘There is no aid. No aid has arrived since the crisis started. There is hardly any water. Food prices have doubled and there has been no electricity for five months.’*

Rami, Syria <sup>76</sup>

*Before the US and its allies invaded Iraq in March 2003, every chief executive of Oxfam affiliates agreed not to accept funds for our Iraq programmes from governments poised to invade.*

### Box 6: Private-sector humanitarian action

TNT, UPS, Agility and Maersk helped save thousands of lives by getting relief supplies quickly and effectively to people after the earthquake in Haiti and the flooding in Pakistan in 2010. They then built on that experience to support the World Food Programme in the Horn of Africa drought in 2011.

Google has developed an app to help find people displaced after crises; it was used in Pakistan’s floods, and in the earthquakes in New Zealand in 2010 and Japan in 2011. All of this of course is in addition to the extensive role of local private companies in different disasters.

Such examples show that private sector contributions can be innovative, timely and crucial. When corporations engage in humanitarian relief, however, they should do so with guidance from, and in partnership with, experienced humanitarian actors, to help follow the best practices and principles that have been developed, including the Red Cross/Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps international corporations are always likely to get involved in some crises more than others, but it is important that they, like everyone else, coordinate with other actors and strive to follow fundamental principles, such as:

- accountability to beneficiaries (as well as funders);
- impartiality of aid based on assessed need; and
- trying to make their work sustainable by reducing people's vulnerability to future disasters, as well as providing immediate relief.

Finally, companies must have good business practices *outside* emergencies as well as within them, in particular to pay fair taxes to help make countries become more resilient to disasters. As Oxfam's recent report, *Africa: Rising for the few*, showed, Africa was cheated out of \$11bn in 2010 alone through just one of the tricks used by multinational companies to reduce tax bills. This was equivalent to more than six times the amount needed to plug the funding gaps to deliver universal primary healthcare in Africa's four Ebola-affected countries.<sup>79</sup>



***'My daughter is malnourished. I have no money to buy food. I try to leave whatever food I have to my children, but that's not enough.'***

Mint Assid Mana, Natriguel, Mauritania

Mint Assid Mana and her youngest child. The community in which she lives, Natriguel, Mauritania was at risk of drought and food shortages in 2012. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam Intermón.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS



In March 2015, Cyclone Pam ravaged Vanuatu, destroying and damaging homes and leaving thousands without clean water or food. Grace Kalengor, an English teacher, dries out the school books that survived the cyclone. Photo: Amy Christian/Oxfam Australia.

Almost 80 million people were affected by humanitarian crises at the beginning of 2015. Millions more around the world give billions of dollars – \$3.9bn in 2013 – to reduce their suffering.<sup>80</sup> Both groups want far more from the World Humanitarian Summit than words that will be forgotten as soon as it is over.

NGOs (including Oxfam), governments and the UN have been quicker to make grand statements than to change what they actually do. They have committed to principles, partnership and swift action. They have argued whether immediate action to save lives or long-term change to reduce future crises is more crucial. While this has happened, tens of millions of people have been struggling in crises, demanding their rights to aid and protection, and the sustainable peace, justice and development that can reduce the risk of disasters in the future.

**Oxfam believes that that is not too much to ask for, and that the World Humanitarian Summit must answer their call.**

This will require addressing the challenges described throughout this paper. Some will prove contentious issues; particularly the need for honesty that some of the governments that will gather in Istanbul are the causes of humanitarian crises.

It is not too late for the Summit to deliver. However, so far, the process towards it has not suggested that fundamental change will emerge. It has yet to join up with other international initiatives that are deeply relevant to humanitarian crises.

*'The whole humanitarian community still needs to look deeper about why poor people are always most vulnerable.'*

Carsten Voelz, Oxfam Humanitarian Director

In 2015, the world has already agreed a new Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (in Sendai, Japan in March), and now is planning to agree new directions in Financing for Development (in Addis Ababa in July), new Sustainable Development Goals (in New York in September), and the vital, long-awaited deal to tackle climate change, in Paris in December. None of these are clearly linked to the preparations for the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. Yet it is impossible to reduce humanitarian crises without succeeding in all.<sup>82</sup>

Other Oxfam briefing papers offer recommendations for all those processes – all available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research>. By the time governments meet in Istanbul in 2016, they should have, for example, reached that historic deal on climate change.

But as governments, humanitarian agencies and others prepare for the World Humanitarian Summit, they should consider the following priorities for the Summit.

*'It is terrifying that on the one hand there is more impunity for those starting conflicts, and on the other there is seeming utter inability of the international community to work together to stop wars and build and preserve peace.'*

António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>81</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**At the World Humanitarian Summit, governments should:**

- **Reaffirm the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality and independence** which reflect the universal human heritage of helping other human beings in distress.
- **Reaffirm the vital international legal obligation of states – and other armed groups – to ensure affected civilians' access to assistance and protection**, and condemn the fact that it has not been fulfilled in a significant proportion of humanitarian crises – and that the world, including the UN Security Council, has not united to help change this.
- **Reaffirm the international legal obligation to grant refuge to those fleeing violence, conflict and persecution**, and the need to substantially increase international support to help countries neighbouring the world's worst humanitarian crises fulfil their responsibilities. While the 1951 Refugee Convention remains the foundation of international refugee law, it constitutes minimum standards, rather than preparing for a humane global response to the millions of people fleeing their homes, including from new trends not envisaged in 1951, such as climate change.
- **Wealthy countries should help more refugees reach protection outside their regions of origin.** What this means may be different for each crisis, but Oxfam's call for wealthy countries to offer resettlement or humanitarian admission to at least 5 percent of refugees from Syria in 2015 shows what a more humane, more consistent approach might look like.
- **Welcome the humanitarian role of NGOs helping citizens to express their views** and advocate for their rights to both assistance and protection.
- **Commit to lead humanitarian action in their countries, including through clear and transparent regulation of independent NGOs;** clear and transparent legislation to protect the space for civil society and its freedom of association, assembly and expression; and legally binding regulations for engagement with regional and international humanitarian organizations.

**The Summit should encourage those governments that can fund international aid to also commit to:**

- **Dedicate, by 2020, at least 10 percent of their humanitarian funding to strengthen the capacity of local and national NGOs** to lead humanitarian action – and set out practical strategies to help build that capacity. That funding will of course vary considerably from country to country depending on its circumstances.
- **Make every aid dollar count – maximizing the amount that gets to local and sometimes international agencies directly providing aid** on the ground. Every possible effort should be made to reduce the costs that are deducted from aid on its way to reaching people in need.
- **Contribute, by 2020, at least \$5bn of total global annual aid – because reducing risk is not solely a humanitarian challenge – to help countries vulnerable to disasters build their resilience** and reduce the risk of future disasters. That funding may of course vary considerably from country to country, and many countries may call on donors to fund substantially more to help them become less vulnerable to disasters.
- **Ensure that development and humanitarian aid tackles the inequalities that make people vulnerable to the shocks and stresses that they face**, and increase development work in protracted crises and those societies facing the greatest risks.

These goals would focus a reasonable proportion of aid on some of the most vulnerable people in the world. It is vital to ensure of course that donor countries do *not* cut other vital aid priorities, and they have no legitimate reason to do so. The great majority of wealthy countries, even in these difficult times, should contribute more in total of official development assistance; and every government must recognize that climate finance for mitigation and adaptation must be fully additional to development aid.

The Summit should also encourage the UN, and in particular UNOCHA, UNDP and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction to:

- Work with countries, including their governments, local NGOs and civil society, to develop national strategies for disaster response, preparedness and risk reduction *that uphold all citizens' rights to assistance and protection* – setting out cost projections and national budget allocations required.

And the Summit should encourage all donors to:

- Help ensure those plans that uphold citizens' rights are fully funded by using their ODA to fill any gaps.

**The Summit should encourage all governments, the UN and NGOs to:**

- Accept that the goal of 'adequate, flexible and predictable' funds for all humanitarian crises has not yet been achieved – **with the UN committing to bring forward proposals for more predictable funding (perhaps some form of assessed contributions)**, a percentage of which could be dedicated to develop local capacity to complement voluntary contributions.
- **Reform all international pooled funding mechanisms so that, by 2017, local and national actors can access them directly**, and encourage all donors to allow local NGOs to apply for funding directly.

- **Ensure that gender equality, and the different needs of women, girls and other particularly vulnerable groups are central to humanitarian responses**, preparedness and DRR, including publishing real-time independent reports of affected people's feedback on humanitarian responses, with data disaggregated by gender and age, allowing public ranking of humanitarian agencies. From planning to evaluation, women's full partnership and leadership in humanitarian programmes is vital, and every step should be made to support it, including investing in the capacity of women's rights and other local organizations with expertise on gender.
- Commit to ensuring a pluralistic humanitarian world in which independent actors coordinate to support the full range of humanitarian work, free to take independent actions to help ensure that every person in need can reach humanitarian assistance and protection.

**To help ensure that the Summit has some lasting impact, the UN Secretary-General, Emergency Relief Coordinator and the heads of UN humanitarian agencies should also:**

- Encourage the next UN Secretary-General (to be elected in 2016) and their successors to present annual reports to the General Assembly on tangible progress on fulfilling the World Humanitarian Summit's conclusions. This would include reporting on governments that fail to adhere to their responsibilities under international law to protect their citizens from atrocities, and allow them unhindered access to aid, as well as reporting on how other governments are fuelling or reducing conflicts through, for example, irresponsible arms sales. These reports should be publicly endorsed not only by future UN Emergency Relief Coordinators, but also by the heads of every UN humanitarian agency.

**The World Humanitarian Summit should also:**

- Set out a clear and transparent way in which everything agreed at the Summit is monitored and publicly reported on in the future.

But the World Humanitarian Summit is not just for others.

**Oxfam encourages every humanitarian actor to:**

- Adopt the Core Humanitarian Standard as a universal, transparent way to show what we strive to achieve – and as one step in helping the men, women and children affected by humanitarian crises hold us all to account.

**Oxfam itself commits to:**<sup>83</sup>

- Support more effective crisis responses, both through Oxfam's own capacity and increasingly through the capacity of other organizations, partners and communities.
- Increase our work to reduce the risk of disasters and build the resilience of communities, drawing from experience and learning from existing programmes involving civil society groups.
- Strengthen the institutional capacity of states to respond to crises, working in a set of selected countries to drive transformative change at the global level.

- Influence others and campaign for the rights of communities at risk or affected by conflicts and disasters at the grassroots, national, regional and global levels to be respected.
- Support poor women and their organizations in emergency preparedness, risk reduction and response, through intensive capacity building and partnerships, and by assisting women and men to safely voice their concerns and hold duty bearers accountable.

## NOTES

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Oxfam Community Support Workers teach children in West Point, Monrovia how important it is to wash their hands to help prevent contracting Ebola, West Point, Monrovia, Liberia, 2014. Photo: Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam

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