Introduction

In December 2011, OCHA hosted a humanitarian policy and research conference on the theme of 'Risk, Adaptation and Innovation in Humanitarian Action'. The conference aimed to identify priority policy research areas for the humanitarian community, and to strengthen partnerships with and among policy and research organisations. Over 50 attendees came from a global network of research institutes, universities, international NGOs and UN organisations. The four sessions of the conference covered:

1. Humanitarian action in a changing world
2. Adaptation and innovation in humanitarian action
3. Humanitarian action in protracted and violent conflict
4. Effective humanitarian action

This report contains a summary of presentations in each session and the ensuing discussions.

It also presents priority policy and research themes identified by the conference, including:

- Evidence-driven humanitarian decision-making
- Accountability and transparency
- Risk and agility
- Partnership.

Additional resources, including audio recordings of the presentations, can be found on the OCHA website: http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/policy/events. For further questions about the event or follow-up, please contact ochapolicy@un.org.
Session 1: Humanitarian action in a changing world

The combined impacts of global trends – such as population growth, climate change, environmental degradation, resource scarcity, urbanisation, irregular migration, and changes in the global economy – continue to exacerbate vulnerability, increase humanitarian needs and contribute to an increasingly complex and challenging operating environment. This session explored the humanitarian implications of these changes.

Session 1 presentations

Humanitarianism in a changing world
Hugh MacLeman, Humanitarian Futures Programme

Hugh started his presentation with a short film made by the Humanitarian Futures Programme. The film can be seen here: [http://vimeo.com/30745255](http://vimeo.com/30745255).

The film highlighted: 1) the changing nature of humanitarian crises, noting that crises are increasingly sequential and simultaneous and that the number of people affected is increasing; 2) the changes in the humanitarian architecture, including the emergence of new national and regional capacities, increasing demands for government accountability, and the role of new technologies; and 3) the changing priorities and emerging opportunities for humanitarian action, noting the greater range of actors and fragmentation in the humanitarian sector, geopolitical considerations and the need for longer term planning and modelling.

In the remainder of his presentation, Hugh highlighted the following five capacities that Humanitarian Futures Programme has identified as priorities for the humanitarian sector: 1) anticipation; 2) adaptation; 3) collaboration; 4) innovation; 5) strategic leadership. Many of these themes were returned to throughout the conference.

Climate, food and water: key trends and humanitarian implications
Rob Bailey, Chatham House

Rob noted that the major driver of increasing disaster risk was increasing exposure of people and assets, rather than changes in hazards. However, for very vulnerable people even relatively minor events could lead to disasters. The small, creeping changes in climate could also have significant, negative effects.

He presented evidence supporting the analysis that high and volatile food prices are here to stay and suggested the humanitarian system would need to consider the implications, especially those relating to supply-side shocks and the purchasing power of humanitarian organisations. He also highlighted evidence for the links between high food prices and political instability.

Rob noted that water scarcity would increase by approximately 30% by 2030, mentioning in particular the challenges associated with changing patterns of
water consumption in developing countries. While the vast majority of water in
developing countries is used for agriculture, urbanisation and industrialisation
are the cause of rapidly rising demand, which would be difficult to meet at the
same time as maintaining or increasing food production.

All these trends would have significant implications for the humanitarian sector,
including relating to food insecurity, social/political tensions, and conflict.
Humanitarian and development actors, as well as donors, need to take a more
integrated approach to vulnerability reduction and the transition from relief to
recovery. It is also vital to increase the effectiveness of early warning, including
through addressing political or institutional barriers to early action.

Urbanisation and the challenges of humanitarian response in urban areas
Gregg Greenough, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative

Gregg started his presentation with some projections of urbanisation – 60% of
the world population will be urban in 2030, 30% of that change will happen in
India and China alone. The primary driver of urbanisation is migration because
of pull factors, such as amenities and increased economic opportunities. Reduced
death rates in cities are also a factor in urban growth, but birth rates are not.

Gregg noted the importance of disaggregated data (sex, age, socioeconomics) and
understanding the spatial distributions of population to inform urban
humanitarian response, as well as highlighting some of the challenges around
accurate urban population data.

Gregg also highlighted the importance of vulnerability/resilience in determining
humanitarian needs and noted some of the uncertainty around its definition. We
are only just beginning to understand vulnerability factors at the local level. He
also mentioned some future concerns for humanitarian response in urban
settings, including social upheaval as a result of land tenure disputes, income
disparities, water scarcity, electrical shortages, and food scarcity.

In terms of the shifting paradigm for response in urban settings, he noted the
need to move away from camp-based approaches, develop a more multi-
disciplinary understanding of relief to development, the need for real time and
shared information and analysis, and the need to link spatial and population
data.

What will the humanitarian sector look like in the future?
Jemilah Mahmood, Humanitarian Futures Programme

Jemilah’s presentation focussed on how to bring additional actors into the
humanitarian system. She acknowledged that governments naturally wanted to
maintain sovereignty over humanitarian operations, although they sometimes
did not have the capacity or expertise to deal with major emergencies.
This issue could be overcome by tapping into regional institutions and networks, but required real engagement with national organisations and actually adapting the approach of international actors to fit with the level of national and regional capacity. She gave a number of examples of regional organisations and mentioned the importance of sharing knowledge and best practices between them.

Jemilah also noted the importance of two-way communication with affected people and made some comments about the concept of accountability and how exactly we can measure accountability. She also mentioned the importance of new donors in the humanitarian system, including the BRICs and other emerging economies. The changing donor landscape means that the humanitarian system needs to rethink how it communicates and engages with new donors.

**Session 1 discussion highlights:**

- Evidence-based decision-making is critical to maintaining impartiality. However, the humanitarian system should be agile enough to take quick, good decisions on limited information. This includes the ability to make fast analyses of the humanitarian implications of unfolding events, undertake rapid assessments and adapt to rapidly changing contexts.

- The humanitarian sector is increasingly demand-driven. New technologies are allowing affected people to express their needs directly. They can also support local communities in generating their own information that can help them understand their own risks and vulnerabilities. Greater transparency and better information flows will help humanitarians remain focused on meeting needs.

- The problem is often not a lack of data or early warning information, but rather that the available information is not fully utilised. Accountability mechanisms need to be strengthened to promote action on the basis of early warning information.

- The politics of data and early warning are extremely important. The vulnerability of marginalised groups can be ignored by governments since there is no political incentive to intervene. Likewise, governments may consider some information too sensitive to collect or share. Forums to share information and collectively interpret it might help overcome politicisation of data.

- Local and regional solutions need to be promoted and understanding of the linkages between national, regional and international systems improved. Regional NGO networks require better access to funding and expertise. Forming new partnerships will require institutions that can play a brokering role, including perhaps OCHA.

- There needs to be better integration between humanitarian and development funding in order to support sustainable solutions to humanitarian needs.
Session 2: Adaptation and innovation in humanitarian action

The trends and challenges discussed during Session 1 will require continuous adaptation of the humanitarian system. Humanitarian caseloads may increase, resulting in increasing pressure on the capacity of the system. Approaches will also need to be adapted to ensure they are effective in changing geographical and political contexts. The international system will be required to effectively support emerging national and regional capacities and increase engagement with new strategic and operational partners. This session explored some perspectives on adaptation, innovative approaches employed by humanitarian organisations, and how to foster innovation.

Session 2 presentations

System-wide adaptation to emerging challenges

Peter Walker, Feinstein International Center

Peter opened the session by describing what he considered to be the six most interesting trends for the humanitarian system. These related to: 1) modelling and how we understand humanitarian emergencies; 2) stabilisation and the nexus of aid and security; 3) new actors in the humanitarian sector; 4) professionalization; 5) the evidence for humanitarian action; and 6) ways to give voice to people affected by crises.

In particular, Peter noted that the widely accepted paradigm of a linear model from emergency relief to recovery and development was not true to life. In fact, most money was spent on keeping people alive, but without real hope or plans for real improvements in their livelihoods.

He also discussed how the humanitarian 'establishment' reacted to the influx of new actors. He asked whether it was acceptable to ask new actors to join the existing system, or whether they in fact should be core to creating a new type of system.

He noted the importance of facts and evidence for decision-making, saying that the humanitarian system needed to radically improve how it defines and measures impact. He also mentioned the positive effects of new approaches, such as cash transfers, that could give choice to aid recipients, as well as the potential of new technologies to use information directly from affected people to design responses.

Adaptation to humanitarian challenges in the SE Asian region

Larry Maramis, ASEAN

In his presentation Larry explained the approach that ASEAN was taking to disaster risk reduction and management, including adapting to emerging issues, such as climate change and urbanisation. In particular, he focused on regional coordination mechanisms and how they could be linked to national and international initiatives. He noted the high disaster risk in the region, resulting
from the hazards it faced, but also exacerbated by the effects of economic growth on vulnerability and exposure.

Larry provided an overview of the ASEAN agreement on Disaster Management (AADMER), which is the first such legally binding regional instrument in the area of disaster risk reduction and management. It provided a means to cooperate and mobilise resources and technical assistance.

The AADMER is supported by a number of tools including standard operating procedures, an emergency risk assessment team and the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Center. Larry outlined the strategic components and building blocks of the AADMER work programme, of which the former include: risk assessment, monitoring and early warning; prevention and mitigation; preparedness and response; and recovery.

**NGO perspectives on emerging challenges**
Joel Charny, InterAction

Joel started his presentation by saying that although the NGO sector recognised all the challenges that had been discussed, they were still struggling with how to approach and address them. He discussed the security and counter-terrorism framework and how it had affected NGOs, as well as the concept of remote management.

He noted the wide recognition in the sector of challenges associated with urbanisation and said that it was driving a lot of creativity and innovation – including around cash and voucher systems, livelihood approaches etc. Joel went on to discuss a number of aspects of the issue of accountability, noting some attempts by NGOs to prove effectiveness, but also the dilemma of whether to divert funding away from service delivery to invest in such initiatives.

On the issue of accountability to affected people, Joel mentioned the importance of working side by side with local people, supporting community-led processes in all phases of emergency management, especially prevention. He felt this was the only way to really deliver meaningful accountability to those affected. Joel mentioned that there were a number of organisations with the dual mandates, but even they were facing challenges in integrating relief and recovery programmes. He felt that development actors needed to make more accountable for making better linkages between prevention, response and recovery.
**The role of the humanitarian sector in building resilience**  
Sue Lautze, FAO

Sue began her presentation with some definitions of resilience and noted that humanitarians needed to provide a level of engagement of high enough quality and long enough duration to contribute to resiliency. She said this required fresh consideration of three areas: principles, relevance, and reliability.

Sue noted the importance of humanitarian principles, especially independence from the political agendas of humanitarian donors. On relevance, she highlighted a growing resistance to the practice of Western humanitarian action, which needed to be addressed by constructively including those actors, stakeholders and powerbrokers that hold differing views on how to realize the spirit of humanitarianism. On reliability, Sue noted that humanitarian assistance needed to provide a reliable safety net that was not subject to uncertainties of shifting humanitarian focus.

In conclusion, she said that under-investment in development continues to place untenable demands on humanitarian action, including ever-increasing expectations that short-term emergency and protection assistance can accomplish long-term development outcomes, including resiliency. However, resiliency is, ultimately, a development challenge and therefore the debate could not be confined to humanitarians alone.

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**Cash transfers as a tool in adapting to emerging challenges**  
Nicolas Barrouillet, The Cash Learning Partnership

Nicolas started his presentation by giving an overview of the work of the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP), in particular its recent research on scale, preparedness, market analysis, urban areas and new technologies.

On the question of whether cash transfer programming should be considered as an innovation, Nicolas explained that he thought not. It had been around for many decades, but only recently was becoming accepted as a mainstream tool for humanitarian assistance. He also discussed the issue of risk, saying that cash transfers were not necessarily more risky, but just had different risks to more traditional types of assistance.

Nicolas mentioned that there was increasing pressure from many donors to scale up cash programming. Doing so would require further improvements in informed decision making, including market analysis, regardless of in-kind or cash delivery mechanisms. Coordination around cash transfer programming also needs to be improved if cash transfer programming is to reach its full potential. The humanitarian community needs to find constructive approach to harness this multi-sectoral tool, which in some ways is at odds with the current sector based cluster system.
Innovations in vulnerability and food security analysis
George Mu‘Ammar, WFP

George began by stating the purpose of undertaking vulnerability and food security analysis was to correctly target food assistance programmes. He explained the various types of assessment and how they fitted into the programme cycle, as well as some of the differences between baseline and emergency assessments, and livelihood analyses.

George went on to briefly profile some of the innovations in the sector. These included using spatial analysis and geostatistical tools to model the results of assessments to provide vulnerability information at a scale more useful for programming than administrative districts, which is how it is often available.

The ‘Africa RiskView’ tool, for example, can model the direct impact of observed weather (such as drought) on vulnerable populations. The Shock Impact Modelling System can model the impact of shocks on household incomes and on food consumption to estimate the number of people affected, where they are located and in which livelihood groups.

Fostering innovation in humanitarian organizations
Ari Wallach, Synthesis Corp

Ari started by discussing the concept of innovation in large organisations, saying it was much more about process, systems and culture, than technology. He summarised some of the work that Synthesis Corp would present as a proposal to UNHCR to help it foster innovation in the organisation.

He said that innovation was about developing a process and platform to allow for the constant and transparent incubation, testing and scaling of new ideas, projects, products and processes that keep the organization on the cutting edge of global humanitarian activity and response.

In relation to innovation in humanitarian organisations, Ari discussed the importance of ideas that were field-driven, including those that came from outside the organisation. He said that ideas need to be actionable – in other words that they should be able to be piloted, tested and potentially mainstreamed in a short period of time.

He also mentioned the importance of organisational ownership of ideas, as well providing an overview of the main components of an innovation system – innovation direction, innovation engine and innovation sustainability.
Session 2 discussion

The following are some of the points made by participants during the discussion in Session 2:

- There is a potential conflict between the professionalization agenda and the need to be inclusive of new actors, which may not fit the established (and perhaps out-dated) specifications. We need to ensure we do not increase barriers to entry by making sure there is not a restrictive ‘licensing system’.

- The funding system and humanitarian operating model act as constraints on professionalization. The system requires a huge standby capacity. That can be maintained through an excess of highly professional full time staff or through outsourcing. The former would ensure professionalism but at huge cost, the latter makes professionalization challenging.

- The humanitarian system is risk averse. What can be done to make the system more agile and more courageous to take on new ideas and approaches, including developing new partnerships?

- Humanitarians are already involved in the development of capacity of national and local actors, as well as resilience-building activities etc. There is very little choice to continue on this path. We cannot return to the original operating model of humanitarianism.

- Through more diverse and ambitious visions of humanitarian work, perhaps the sector itself is creating unrealistic expectations of what it can achieve in terms of longer term solutions. However, there are fundamental problems in getting the development community to take on some of the responsibilities around prevention and recovery.

- Humanitarian and development approaches need to be much more integrated, but both sectors feel overburdened and are unwilling to take on additional responsibilities. Rather those responsibilities need to be shared, supported by donor policies and priorities.

- There needs to be a clearer picture of who the ‘new’ humanitarian actors are and how we can engage them. OCHA can support the sector to understand how it is perceived by those outside it.

- Learning from failure is important. The humanitarian sector has a tendency to ignore failure. In most sectors some level of failure is expected and accepted. Humanitarians could take more of a portfolio approach to failure and have a higher risk tolerance to foster innovation.

- In many cases governments do not want to share data as they are worried about its political repercussions. We have to give governments confidence to encourage them to share data.
Session 3: Humanitarian action in protracted and violent conflict

The increase in intra-state conflict, state collapse and fragmentation since the end of the cold war has forced humanitarian actors to function in dangerous and politically charged environments. This has included providing humanitarian assistance to the victims of conflict, as well as trying to deliver aid in response to natural disasters in the midst of extreme insecurity. In recent years, the changes in perceptions and legal frameworks due to the 'war on terror' and the increase in deliberate targeting of United Nations and 'western' humanitarian actors has made it more challenging for actors to uphold, or be seen to uphold, the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. The session explored how humanitarian actors can best function in these difficult contexts and how the humanitarian community can adapt to these new paradigms.

Session 3 presentations

**Politicization of humanitarian aid**
Samir Elhawary, Overseas Development Institute

Samir began his presentation by stating that he wanted to challenge the dominant narrative on humanitarian space. He noted that although there were many different definitions, most concerns about humanitarian space were predominantly about agency access, prioritised over protection. Samir rejected the idea that humanitarian space was shrinking, suggesting instead that there was no humanitarian space separate from politics, as all access was based on political compromise, and that there had never been a “golden age”. In fact, humanitarian space was increasing as there were more humanitarian organisations, aid workers, and money.

Far from being powerless, the humanitarian system was an important source of power, and in some cases a competing source of sovereignty. The “humanitarian cartel” was dominated by a handful of largely Western-based organizations and reforms, such as the cluster system, had also increased barriers to entry. However, despite the image of power, the system was actually weak and fragmented, which was partly explained by competitive market imperatives for funds, public profile, market share and niche expansion. It was these market dynamics that drove the concern with shrinking agency space and reinforced the tendency of putting agency access ahead of the welfare of affected populations.

In order to ‘stay and deliver’, organisations often transferred risks to national actors and continued programming with little ability to effectively monitor and evaluate results. He cited Sri Lanka as an example – where silence on the protection of civilians was justified on the need to maintain an extremely limited presence – and 30-40,000 civilians were killed, while aid agencies distributed food, water and plastic sheets.
Negotiating access in complex environments
Michael Neuman, MSF CRASH

Michael, introducing material from MSF’s new book “Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed”, argued that whether an actor was granted access had much less to do with how well it upheld humanitarian principles, than what the context was and the interests of the powers that they were negotiating with. For example, after the killings of 5 colleagues in Afghanistan, MSF had pulled out of the country stating that “independent humanitarian action had become impossible”.

At the time, MSF felt that the killings were a “mistake” as the organization had made extensive efforts to protect their neutrality. However, in fact, the perpetrators had understood who MSF were, but were interested in showing that the new Government could not provide security, so MSF workers were simply worth more dead than alive. While it had also been important that MSF had no long-term plans for society, what made MSF’s return in 2009 possible was primarily a change in the context – the Taliban were stronger and were looking for legitimacy by allowing medical services to be provided.

In Sri Lanka, however, MSF was never in a position to escape either being a tool of propaganda for the LTE or an agent of the Government’s pacification policy. Despite three years of efforts, in 2009, MSF found itself as an auxiliary to the regime working in the displacement camps. Nevertheless, he noted that the decision to stay was still debated within the organization.

He noted that it was important to recognize in negotiations that humanitarian actors were bringing something to the table – there were compromises to be made. The point was not total freedom but being able to choose its alliances according to its own objectives, with the goals of saving as many lives as possible, while making sure that its assistance did not primarily support the tormenters.

Adaptations to extreme insecurity
Abby Stoddard, Center on International Cooperation

Abby noted that four countries – Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Pakistan, accounted for 72% of major attacks on humanitarians. All were civil conflicts with international involvement, had some connection to the ‘war on terror’ or stabilization agendas, and all had a backdrop of anti-Western sentiments. In several, humanitarians are seen as legitimate targets as they were perceived as agents of foreign powers.

She noted that there were three main approaches. In the case of the UN there had been an unambiguous shift to greater protection and deterrence, but little outreach to or negotiations with threat sources – the “bunkerization” approach. INGOs had mostly adopted a low profile approach with remote management of localized programs and extreme localization, including low visibility of the organization, programs run by local staff, and no or very little on-site contact.
Finally, ICRC and MSF had strongly emphasized active acceptance and humanitarian negotiation, which was deliberately visible, unarmed and expatriate heavy.

The report had shown that those agencies that had invested the most in humanitarian outreach and negotiation had achieved the best access overall. She also noted several innovations that the report had identified, such as dedicated outreach teams, public perception surveying, community-based partnering and recruitment, and security partnerships and MOUs with local hosts. Despite this success, she suggested that there were real questions whether that model could be replicated by other organizations, as ICRC and MSF had large resource basis and un-earmarked funding that give them an advantage.

Constraints that were imposed by donors and host governments also complicated the ability of humanitarian actors to work in these environments. These included “no contact” polices with parties designated as terrorist, required “vetting” of local partners, movement restrictions and mandatory escorts, and partiality in funding flows away from opposition-held areas.

Assessing and managing risk in complex environments
Mathew Leslie, UNCT Somalia

Matt explained that in Somalia the UNCT had a set up a risk management unit that supported the 24 UN entities, both humanitarian and development, that worked in Somalia. The unit was independent, and was based in the Resident Coordinators office. The unit’s work was not primarily about physical risk, but other risks such as diversion, corruption, fraud and politicization. The goal was to use a greater understanding of risks to make better decisions and to encourage joint action where appropriate. The impetus for the unit was partially driven by donors, who had also recognized that they had become more risk averse, and that there was a need to look at the control and program side.

He explained that the risk management approach in Somalia was already evolving, as after some initial hesitation, there had been an increase in demands on the unit, such as for individual agency support and working on the Somalia assistance strategy to identify strategic issues. Among other initiatives, the team had developed a database, which, for the first time, collected all information on contracts in Somalia to allow a clear picture of exactly who agencies were working and for how much. The team was also adding a monitoring group to help answer basic questions on how and where funds were being spent. This was also in response to the demands of donors, who in instances of allegations of corruption did not want either the agency to investigate itself or the use of third party monitors who were not properly accountable.

Finally, he concluded by noting that, for due diligence, the accountability to the beneficiaries was often forgotten. They are the ones who suffer when aid was diverted or not targeted properly, and there was a need to keep them at the center of all efforts.
Session 3 discussion

The following are some of the points made by participants during the discussion in Session 3:

- There is a danger that when an organization is attacked that this is seen as a failure of acceptance, when in fact that is not always the case and it is important to learn the right lessons from any particular incident.

- Acceptance requires active efforts on the part of organizations, including fostering relations with the real decision makers at the community level and working closely with them on security issues.

- The real challenge is not acceptance in classical situations in armed conflict, but to get acceptance to work in situations that are not legally considered armed conflict such as Syria, Mexico or the Brazilian Favelas, where the biggest challenge is consent of the State.

- Some speakers argued that fragmentation was not necessarily a bad thing, because it provides for a diversity of responses and avoids “putting all eggs in one basket”. It was suggested that there was a need for “coordinated fragmentation” that allowed for both a diversity of approaches while avoiding duplicating mistakes.

- If an objective is protection of the civilian population, this is not that far removed from a peacemaking objective and will change the partners you work with and challenge certain notions of neutrality and impartiality.

- On Sri Lanka, several speakers argued that even a pull-out or a more assertively critical strategy by humanitarian actors would not have had an impact, while others maintained that it would have sent an important signal.

- The only actors present in the critical phase (beginning of a crisis) are the local actors. For example, in Libya, the Red Crescent was the only one working in the country at the start of the crisis.

- It is also important to engage with actors in Government at the working level to identify people who can help.

- In cases of access restriction or expulsion, humanitarian actors should make an effort to work with those groups that are able to function on the ground. If the space is not about us, would we allow someone else to deliver services?

- It might be useful to engage southern NGOs on their experiences, on what has worked for them, without contaminating it with an existing agenda or demanding that they join the existing system.
**Session 4: Effective humanitarian action**

The session identified challenges to the concept of effective humanitarian action. It discussed the definition of effectiveness in humanitarian action, the challenges in measuring effectiveness, the meaning of the concept for beneficiaries, and finally it analyzed current trends in information management, which have an impact on humanitarian effectiveness.

**Session 4 presentations**

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**What is effectiveness in humanitarian action?**  
Paul Knox Clark, ALNAP

Paul discussed three key questions: 1) what do we mean by effectiveness in humanitarian action, 2) how effective is the system currently, and 3) what are the factors for holding the humanitarian system back from being more effective?

He started by indicating that focusing solely on the degree to which objectives of specific humanitarian action have been achieved, might not offer a valuable assessment of the effectiveness of the overall humanitarian response. Rather, effectiveness should be defined and understood in broader terms by applying the OECD DAC criteria of relevance, connectedness, coverage, efficiency and impact. Applying a broader definition however will require a thoughtful choice of indicators and methods for collecting data and moving beyond a purely technological, quantitative judgment of effectiveness.

In regard of the effectiveness of the current humanitarian system, overall progress has been achieved in areas such as coordination mechanisms and assessment tools. However, leadership and the system’s engagement with and accountability to beneficiaries remain weak.

Paul highlighted five key challenges that might prevent the system becoming more effective: 1) weak leadership; 2) partnership; 3) division of roles/responsibilities; 4) the overall model of the humanitarian system; 5) unrealistic expectations of how effective the system can be.

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**Understanding and measuring effectiveness**  
John Telford

John noted that despite undoubted advances in humanitarian effectiveness, attempts at measurement remain weak, often unsuccessful and, at times, vigorously contested by interested parties. There is a need for improved methods, tools and expertise. This is, however, secondary. Core failings relate predominantly to a ‘corporatisation’ of the sector and a related lack of political-will to measure effectiveness transparently.

John set out five main recommendations: 1) rationalise roles and accountabilities, noting that the increasing number of actors and activities were a barrier to measuring effectiveness; 2) prioritise measurement of mortality and
morbidity, as well as effectiveness of emergency interventions; 3) improve measurement of cost-effectiveness, which is impeded by insufficient political will rather than technical barriers; 4) regulate the system; 5) democratise delivery and measurement, by systematically involving affected-people in decision-making through an entirely revamped architecture of humanitarian assistance operations.

**Beneficiary perceptions of humanitarian effectiveness**
Dennis Dijkzeul, IFHV at Ruhr Universität Bochum, Germany

Dennis discussed local perceptions of international humanitarian assistance of the International Rescue Committee and Malteser International in eastern DRC, and raised the question of how can it be that the local population is sometimes extremely negative about humanitarian organizations?

He started by differentiating the "local population", arguing that there are directly affected populations (e.g., patients or health committees), local NGO's, local Government officials, traditional chiefs, and religious leaders, as well as ethnic groups, and that each of these actors has different perceptions of humanitarian organizations. Whereas some local population groups may be very positive about humanitarian medical assistance, local leaders may actually feel that they operate in competition with international humanitarian organizations.

Perceptions in the case study of eastern DRC depended on events that are inevitable, for example, the arrival of the organizations (arriving at the same time as foreign military), consequences of assistance (looting of health clinics by militia after assistance was provided), and even local vampire myths, in which humanitarian NGOs transport those vampires in their four-wheel drives.

Dennis described three different narratives that each explain on the basis of interpretations of the same facts, a very different set of perceptions. Dennis highlighted that although the language of the traditional humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – was not used, the objectives behind the principles, e.g., not taking sides, will also be carefully considered and checked by local populations.

**Challenges in Information Management**
Mark Foran, NYU School of Medicine

Mark looked at the challenges of information management and opportunities posed by emerging technologies, focusing on the potential role of affected communities and Volunteer and Technical Communities (V&TCs) as key actors. He noted that affected communities now had the tools to push information to humanitarian actors, which is a change from the dynamics to date.

V&TCs include a wide range of different types of groups, including non-profit organizations such as Open Street Map; for-profit organizations like GeoEye,
which provides satellite imagery and is partnering with humanitarian actors, such as the Satellite Sentinel Project, to try to predict and intervene in humanitarian settings, as well as volunteer communities like Crisis Mappers. He noted the potential applications of a range of emerging technologies and approaches, such as SMS, crowdsourcing, social networks, upsourcing, portals, short codes, etc.

On the question of key challenges, he noted that V&TCs, which are generally quite informal and small-scale, often have trouble interfacing with established humanitarian actors. The V&TCs also had problems of consistency, as they are often dependent on volunteers and may have variable funding, as well as with professionalization and awareness of humanitarian principles, that would need to be addressed in order for V&TCs to become increasingly reliable partners. He also highlighted several issues that related to making data collected via emerging technologies useful for decision making, particularly challenges relating to verification of the data, the importance of open-data standards, and, overall, how to develop trust between established actors and V&TCs. He emphasized the importance of considering unintended risks associated with new technologies, particularly in conflict settings where data streams could also be used by perpetrators or parties to the conflict.
Session 4 discussion

The following are some of the points made by participants during the discussion in Session 4:

• We need to take coverage into account when defining effectiveness. How do we define who is in need, especially in “mega-disasters” and where there is a high level of pre-crisis vulnerability. How do we decide who should and should not receive assistance?

• Not all situations can be measured and many have no clear indicators. We should build in mechanisms for common thought processes and algorithms. Judgment is essential in measuring effectiveness, but there needs to be some consistency in and procedure for making that judgement.

• It is not possible to fulfil all criteria for effectiveness. We should acknowledge the need to prioritize which of the criteria of effectiveness we want and need to fulfill within a given context.

• Judgments and decisions should be based on the best data available. Are we trying hard enough to obtain the best quality data? Do humanitarian agencies and organizations have the ability to systematically collect data and verify data? Furthermore, does the culture of the humanitarian community act as a barrier to evidence-based decision-making.

• There needs to be a change in attitude when it comes to measuring effectiveness. The humanitarian system functions on achievements, as they attract funding. In consequence, situation reports often undersell failures and oversell achievements. We need to change this environment and allow for reporting on failure.

• We need to understand the diversity of local population groups and their perceptions better, and to collect data on them in order to further improve humanitarian action.

• New technologies should be more effectively incorporated into humanitarian assistance. At the same time, it was argued that new technologies will not substitute for judgment and analysis. While new technologies are promising, they should be used alongside reliable, tested systems for information gathering, communication and decision-making.
Conference summary: research and policy priorities

OCHA staff identified the following priority policy and research themes from the conference as a whole.

Evidence-driven humanitarian decision-making
Humanitarian programming needs to be driven by timely and relevant information and analysis. This is integral to ensuring that interventions are impartial and needs-based. Without integration into decision making processes, information collection has limited value. More work is needed to understand how information can be used to ensure strategic decision making, particularly with respect to driving preventative action.

Accountability and transparency
The current patchwork of accountability mechanisms speaks to the lack of a shared humanitarian identity. Unresolved tensions between the idea of accountability to donors and accountability to communities remain a concern. The problem of prevention (or of risk-reduction/resilience building) is particularly fraught as this is not perceived as a core humanitarian responsibility, but is increasingly being implemented by humanitarian actors. Work on better integration with development actors is critical. Development actors also need to be more accountable for reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience of people affected by humanitarian crises. The link between transparency and accountability is essential, and the humanitarian community is behind the curve in terms of transparency.

Risk and agility
The humanitarian system needs to be more effective at managing risk. It also needs to become significantly more agile to cope with future crises. There was a general consensus that the system remained risk averse and lacked a culture that would help stimulate innovation. Humanitarians also tend to ignore failure rather than investing in learning from failure, which requires stronger leadership and a culture that embraces necessary risks.

Partnership
The most discussed issue – and the source of the most frequent calls for OCHA action were around partnership. Specifically, participants called for OCHA to build deeper and more strategic relationships with new actors in humanitarian space. OCHA was cautioned, however, against trying to simply co-opt partners into the existing system; rather, it would benefit from engaging with humility, listening to partner experiences, and building a truly inclusive system. There was a strong push for OCHA to facilitate regional consultations while adopting a “listening” mind-set. Specifically in relation to policy and research, OCHA was encouraged engage a different and more diverse group, including regional organizations and academics from countries dealing with crisis.
Conference follow-up

Based on the comments made during the conference and in the evaluations, OCHA is looking at the following concrete steps to follow-up from the conference with the goal of holding a 2nd Annual Research and Policy conference again in December of 2012.

1. OCHA will organize a series of regional workshops in 2012/13, launching with Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Each workshop will bring together 15-20 participants encompassing Regional Organizations, regional/national NGO’s, Member States, and local academics. Efforts will be made to also include voices from conflict/disaster affected communities, and non-traditional academics (e.g. urban planners/anthropologists) who might bring a fresh perspective.

2. For each of the priority areas identified in the conference OCHA will create Policy Working Groups (PWG) blending key policy makers, researchers and practitioners with the goal of identifying key problem statements for the thematic area and supporting research to develop innovative solutions. In 2012, the PWG’s will focus on the strategic use of information and transparency.

3. A new OCHA publication, to be launched in late 2012/early 2013, will link to both the regional conferences and the PWG. The publication, which will be a flagship for OCHA and the humanitarian community, will provide an in-depth exploration of major thematic issues, tentatively on a biennial basis.

OCHA will also continue to try to develop the important ideas that came out of the conference in its own research and advocacy. OCHA welcomes any further suggestions or initiatives on how it can contribute to the development of innovation in humanitarian delivery. Please write to us at Ochapolicy@un.org.