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Commentary \ **The World Humanitarian Summit— Reform the system, but do not merge humanitarian and development aid**

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Esther Meininghaus, researcher at BICC, comments on the World Humanitarian Summit, 23-24 May 2016 in Istanbul. She underlines that “we need to act, and we need to act fast” but also addresses mayor shifts in aid funding and the crisis of the UN. Last but not least she argues that the separation of humanitarian and development aid remains an imperative: “While development aid may benefit from the measures suggested for the summit’s agenda, humanitarian aid must be safeguarded from becoming drawn any deeper into the present battle between donors, implementing organisations and belligerents alike.”

As the first of its kind, the World Humanitarian Summit beginning in Istanbul this Monday, 23 May, will be committed to achieving a visionary triad of lasting peace, social equality and localized development. Framed by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s recent report titled “One Humanity: Shared Responsibility”, it reflects the best of intentions in providing answers to pressing questions. How can we end poverty, still stifling the lives of 837 million people worldwide, or ensure sufficient food for 800 million suffering hunger? How can we protect parents living in poor conditions from losing their children, of whom on average 16,000 died before reaching the age of five every single day in 2015 alone? How can more than 60 million people find a home after having been forced to flee by war and disaster, many of whom have found themselves trapped in camps or on the fringes of hosting societies for generations without any solutions in sight?

“One Humanity: Shared Responsibility”

In addressing these questions, Ban Ki-moon suggests no less than a total reform of present systems of humanitarian and international development aid. While today, both respond to acute or prolonged crises, the report suggests that aid needs be identified and

addressed pre-emptively. Furthermore, it argues that strategic development objectives should be set by major UN and other aid organizations in close collaboration with local partners, whereby ad hoc funding of aid is to be replaced with permanent financing mechanisms. In this way, co-ordinated planning is presented as a suitable tool for avoiding an aggravation of suffering and the further escalation of conflict. To this end, short-term and life-saving humanitarian aid in response to war and natural disaster is suggested to be merged with long-term development aid, which is traditionally claimed by donors to assist developing countries in building sustainable livelihoods and render vulnerable communities more 'resilient' towards future shocks. Humanitarian aid is to remain separate only in instances where this strategy fails. These, however, are expected to be the exception.

Rarely has there been a time when a push for such fundamental changes could have dared to hope for similar attention. Since 2012, the flight of millions from the Middle East and Africa towards Europe has rendered it clear that 'far-away issues' no longer exist. Caught up in dangerous paralysis, the EU member states have proven unable to cope, while out of a sudden, we owe answers to desperate pleas for protection in our midst. Hundreds of men, women and children have drowned trying to reach safety, hundreds of thousands hold out in intolerable conditions at the borders now closed, and millions more are seeing their life under constant threat. We need to act, and we need to act fast.

Major shifts in aid funding

In his strife for a unified policy, Ban Ki-moon may well be trying to save a humanitarian system, which, at least in its original form, is on the brink of collapse. In 2014, the financial volume of international humanitarian assistance reached an all-time high of US \$24.5 billion worldwide. Of these, US \$19.5 billion were requested in UN co-ordinated appeals; but they reveal an equally unprecedented gap: A whole US \$7.5 billion (38 per cent) of these requests remained unmet. Thus effectively, more than half of all humanitarian aid funded went through channels other than the UN. These figures raise

important questions. To what extent do underfunded UN-appeals mirror actual needs going unmet? Or do they reflect a shift in the institutional landscape of donors and implementing organizations, of whom more and more seem to be rejecting the lead of the UN? Are we speaking of a humanitarian system in crisis, or of that of the UN itself? In actual fact, all of these points are decisive for the future of humanitarian and development aid. As for the question whether needs are going unmet, especially in settings of war or sudden disaster, needs are extremely difficult to assess. On the one hand, mortality rates of more than one death in 10,000 persons per day are taken as the threshold for humanitarian emergencies to be declared. Furthermore, satellite imagery and, where feasible, local samples can be combined to gauge aid required today. On the other hand, shortfalls in funding mean that some crises receive less attention than others, and questions as to which areas are prioritized—both around the globe and within a country in crisis—remain most sensitive. Indeed, in situations of war, the political consequences of local imbalances in the distribution of humanitarian aid for population movements, peace negotiations and future reconstruction are in urgent need of being better understood. Although newly introduced inter-agency bodies such as the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) are making crucial contributions to standardizing aid, in situations of war in particular, the hands of aid organisations are often tied. Even where needs are identified, access for delivering aid is often tightly restricted, and situations change quickly on the ground. Decisions as to where, when and how humanitarian aid is accessible to local populations in need are still dependent on the willingness of belligerents to grant safe passage to humanitarian staff and goods and expose humanitarian workers to the greatest possible risks. To summarize, humanitarian aid needs are difficult to determine, and even when needs are being identified, recipients may remain out of reach. Hence unlike its public image, humanitarian aid is far from being equal and accessible to all for myriad reasons, which represents a major challenge that the Summit is seeking to address.

In addition to this goal though, it is also clear that the present proposal for reform also endeavours a re-enhancement of UN co-ordination at a point in time when humanitarian aid increasingly escapes its grasp. While in the shadows of the Syrian war, the world faces the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II, the present Summit undoubtedly capitalizes on a rare peak of public attention. In suggesting to combine humanitarian and development aid, however, it may also silently account for the fact that despite urgent humanitarian needs, the major interest of donors has remained in development nonetheless. In 2015, net official development assistance (ODA) amounted to US \$131.6 billion worldwide. Problematically, war causes 80 per cent of humanitarian aid needs, but violent conflict is becoming increasingly protracted—which is another reason as to why humanitarian aid is increasingly difficult to fund. The merger of both to act prior to the outbreak of major crises may thus appear as a tempting solution to grave dilemmas. Instead, however, it is charged with risks that outweigh its potential benefits by far.

Development aid can change lives—humanitarian aid saves them

There are three essential reasons why the separation of humanitarian and development aid remains an imperative. First, humanitarian aid warrants protection of those in need. According to international humanitarian law, humanitarian aid must be delivered neutrally, impartially and independently to those whose very chance to survive is under immediate threat. In this sense, humanitarian aid ought to be neutral in not siding with any party to a given conflict; it ought to be impartial in providing assistance irrespective of the ethnicity, political conviction, religious beliefs, gender, age, or sexual orientation of any person in need; and the organization distributing this aid ought to be organizationally independent. These rules are upheld by law in the knowledge that those receiving this aid find themselves in a most vulnerable position.

Development aid, in contrast, is inherently political. It is often introduced alongside countrywide economic readjustment programmes that, since the 1970s, are overtly neo-

liberal in outlook. Often, development aid exceeds technical assistance. Majorly Western donors frequently aim to enhance local participation, to strengthen civil society groups and to foster democratic governance. In parallel, newly emerging Muslim donors often seek to implement their own vision of what they consider just development. If in peaceful settings, the legitimacy of such goals is debatable, in contexts of war, they are fatal. Without any legal redress and protection, recipients of aid are highly vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination by powerful armed and civilian actors alike. In these environments, dissolving humanitarian aid into development aid thus puts at risk the very lives of those who need protection the most.

Second, in settings which are peaceful, international policy must not become a means of designing national welfare and development, which should remain the duty of local governments and the right of local citizens themselves. Also, socio-economic grievances and political unrest often coincide, but here as ever, correlation does not equal causation. Where military state- and non-state actors fight wars over natural resources, long-term and pre-emptive aid alleviating the suffering of the masses will not prevent the outbreak of violence; and where brutal dictatorships yield over the lives of those struck by economic underdevelopment, combined aid may effectively enable their persistence. It cannot, and indeed it must not be the aim of aid to resolve military or political conflict. If it did, would it prioritize the suffering of those considered more likely to fall victim to conflict over those who do not?

Third, the present war in Syria, where strategies of combining humanitarian and development aid have already been adopted, should serve as a stern warning against any such attempts. Here, humanitarian aid has come to be perceived as deeply politicized. Although the UN have recognized the government's tactic of cutting areas outside its control off aid early into the war, cross-border deliveries have remained utterly insufficient: For example, only 27 per cent of medical aid provided by the World Health Organization in 2015 reached areas under opposition control. In response, aid deliveries on the opposition-side have been carried out by Syrian NGOs or international NGOs

instead. These efforts have, for the most part, remained unacknowledged and unfunded by the UN, and accordingly, they lack co-ordination. Problematically, many organisations that do provide aid also do not adhere to the humanitarian ethos. In some cases, donors have indeed been found to pass humanitarian aid on to local councils for purposes of 'state-building' amid ongoing war, thereby opening the doors for armed groups to misuse aid in an attempt to harness political support. Conversely, the UN have become perceived as strongly biased in favour of the government. Deliberate attacks on civilians, including schools and hospitals, continue to occur despite the current truce officially holding. While humanitarian neutrality has been eroded, it is Syria, alongside with Afghanistan, which has become the most lethal conflict for humanitarian aid workers around the globe.

Beyond institutional battles: Safeguard the principles, reform the system

There can be no doubt that the humanitarian system is at a crossroads. Never has aid been as privatized, diversified, or politicized. Theoretically, the UN Security Council resolutions remain binding for decisions on UN co-ordinated humanitarian aid, such as the requirements for government permissions, cross-border aid or air drops. But practically, UN co-ordinated appeals no longer represent the majority of actual aid flows. Also, Russia's and China's vetoes e.g. against Syria's referral to the International Criminal Court makes it clear that the Security Council represents a highly political body, and yet it is charged with decisions on allegedly neutral aid. The realities of humanitarian aid deliveries have clearly outpaced its current structure; the aid sector is in urgent need of reform.

While development aid may benefit from the measures suggested for the Summit's agenda, humanitarian aid must be safeguarded from becoming drawn any deeper into the present battle between donors, implementing organizations and belligerents alike. Uncounted lives have been saved under most critical conditions precisely because humanitarianism has been perceived to be neutral; a merger of both strands of aid will

forsake those in need this opportunity for good. At a time when evidence points to this trend already occurring, leading humanitarian organizations need to resist. Doctors Without Borders pulling out of the Summit in protest is a crucial first step; the redesign of a separate humanitarian system should be the next.