

UCL Humanitarian Summit 2023

Doing even more with even less

21 June, 2023

With the amount of money needed for humanitarian assistance at an all-time high, it has never been more important to address the gap between what is needed and what is being done. This was the topic of conversation at this year's Humanitarian Summit: *Doing Even More With Even Less?* Over the years, humanitarians have faced the daunting challenge of meeting escalating needs while grappling with increasingly limited resources. The discussion revolved around the practicality and validity of this imperative, considering both the perspectives of those in need and the availability of funding. Can it truly be achieved in the face of such complex realities?

Attendees were welcomed by Professor Joanna Faure-Walker, Head of Department at the IRDR. Faure-Walker emphasised the importance of the community coming together to ask such questions, and how it is crucial that we inspire future minds to do things even better. The IRDR is at the forefront of this, with a number of programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels tailored to train the next generation of humanitarian leaders.

Dr. Lisa Guppy, Lecturer in Global Humanitarian Studies at UCL, then introduced the topic at hand – emphasising that humanitarians have been exhorted for many years to do even more with even less. Although it is, at base, a very simple topic, finding a solution is far more complicated and demands multiple perspectives coming together to discuss the issue. This was the object and purpose of UCL's Global Humanitarian Summit 2023, and the discussion did not disappoint.

The State of Humanitarian Assistance – Claudia Wells, International Hub Director at Development Initiatives

In her keynote address, Claudia Wells emphasised the importance of data and evidence in informing decisions regarding humanitarian assistance.

One crucial aspect highlighted by Wells was the need to improve data sources in vulnerable areas. Discussing the recently published Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023, Wells revealed alarming findings. The report indicated that the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance has doubled in the past five years and, due to incomplete data, these figures are likely to be an underestimate. Three-quarters of these individuals are experiencing at least two risk factors, indicating an increasing complexity of need. We are rapidly approaching a tipping point. Wells emphasised that as the largest humanitarian responses respond globally to protracted, multi-year crises, a re-evaluation of the original purpose and design of the international humanitarian system is necessary.

Interestingly, Wells highlighted that countries with the greatest number of people experiencing food insecurity may not necessarily have the most 'severe' levels of food insecurity. In Pakistan, for instance, the severity of acute food insecurity has decreased even though the number of people experiencing food insecurity has increased. Such trends highlight the need for nuanced and comprehensive data to inform an effective response.

Wells delved into the topic of humanitarian funding, revealing that international humanitarian assistance from public and private donors grew in amount by over a quarter in 2022. Although funding is falling proportionally to even faster-rising humanitarian need, there is still progress being made in the right direction. However, Wells raised important questions about the sustainability of this improved response. The majority of assistance comes from a relatively small number of donors; the United States, Germany, and the European Union collectively provide approximately 64% of all humanitarian assistance, with the US alone contributing 39%. Wells pointed out that most Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) funding demonstrates geographic or historic preferences, with certain countries receiving more support due to their proximity to donors. For instance, Japan channels a significant portion of its DRR funding to Far East Asia, while the United States focuses on the Caribbean and Latin America. These patterns have remained consistent over time, despite the growing need for funding.

For further information, Wells encouraged attendees to refer to Development Initiatives' Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, which provides more comprehensive insights into these complex and multidimensional challenges. Ultimately, she posed critical questions about the sustainability of the current system and called for a re-evaluation of the relationship between humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and development. Wells emphasised that humanitarian assistance was not originally designed to address underlying causes but is now being asked to do more for longer durations. Complete and accurate data will play a crucial part if we are to address these issues effectively.

Video from the field: UNICEF, Sudan including Q & A live from Beirut - *Leon Chammah*

This address was followed by a discussion with Leon Chammah about how UNICEF is trying to do more with less in Sudan. The organisation is actively addressing various challenges, including flood management, drought, and displacement, in order to meet the pressing needs of the affected population.

One key strategy employed by UNICEF is the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace approach (HDP Nexus), which plays a vital role in achieving more with limited resources. This approach prioritises community ownership, recognising the importance of involving local communities in decision-making processes. It aims to integrate different services, such as multi-purpose community initiatives that encompass education, protection, and food security. By breaking the cycle of dependence on external aid assistance, UNICEF is striving to empower communities and foster self-sufficiency. Interestingly, Chammah reported that he has been inspired by the readiness of the local communities. In Sudan, local people often develop their own plans to address crises and are less inclined to rely solely on external support.

Another important aspect of UNICEF's approach is to help communities adapt to cycles of crises. This involves pooling expertise and resources, and collaborating with different stakeholders to develop effective and sustainable solutions. By leveraging collective efforts, UNICEF has been able to enhance their impact and optimise resource utilisation – a technique which other members of the humanitarian community should definitely take note of.

Panel discussion: Policy and Framework of doing even more with even less – Dr. Estella Carpi

In a panel discussion on the policy and framework of maximizing humanitarian efforts with limited resources, Dr. Estella Carpi shed light on the complexity of Rohingya refugee aid governance. Dr.

Mohammad Salehin from the University of Tromsø, Norway, highlighted the challenges of dependency and resilience in humanitarian aid for the Rohingya refugees. Key points from their discussion included:

The Rohingya refugees heavily rely on humanitarian aid, but international donors have been reducing the amount of assistance, including essential food provisions. For example, as of June 1, 2023, the monthly food vouchers for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar were reduced for the second time in three months. International donors are now emphasising the importance of self-reliance and reducing dependency on aid, with little regard of how to fund or facilitate this transition. This raises the question of whether localisation is always beneficial, and Salehin noted that it can be complex and counterproductive if not done effectively. Aid management in the camps has faced challenges such as overlapping and redundancy in resource distribution, an influx of foreign aid workers, lack of coordination among different agencies, and the absence of formal justice systems within camps. Importantly, Salehin emphasised that the romanticised concept of 'the local' as a buzzword has disregarded the practical challenges of its implementation.

Despite the presence of refugee-led organisations in the camps, they often function without additional help or funding from international organisations. This is especially problematic in Bangladesh, where the Rohingya are not formally recognised as refugees by the Bangladeshi government, and therefore have some limitations to their opportunities – such as formal employment.

The panel also discussed the increasing complexity of crises and the need for a radical shift in humanitarianism. The largest humanitarian responses in the world are not short events but are protracted and cyclical in nature. There is a growing disillusionment and distrust, highlighting the importance of addressing underlying issues rather than providing short-term emergency solutions. Prioritising short-term aid without addressing root causes perpetuates dependency; instead, the promotion of initiatives that restore livelihoods and empower local communities is crucial. In short, humanitarian architecture must change to reflect the communities it serves.

Dr. Rozana Himaz emphasised the importance of evaluating the impact of humanitarian interventions. Rigorous impact evaluations are rare but necessary to determine the effectiveness of aid programs. Needs assessments should go beyond infrastructure and crop damage, considering the broader impacts on education, health, household income, and the local economy. Himaz argued that collaborative research involving various disciplines and close integration with people on the ground is essential to understand the multifaceted impact of crises.

Anne Harmer similarly emphasised the need for an evidence-based approach to maximise humanitarian response resources. The demand for humanitarian assistance almost always surpasses available resources, making it crucial to avoid wasteful policies and programmes. Research contributes significantly to improved humanitarian response, as exemplified by the discovery that severe acute malnutrition in children does not always require expensive treatment. However, there are major data gaps, meaning that the potential of research in supporting humanitarian action is not being fully harnessed.

In conclusion, the panel discussion emphasised the complexities and challenges faced in maximising humanitarian efforts with limited resources. Addressing dependency, promoting localisation, breaking the cycle of crises, and ensuring evidence-based interventions are essential steps towards an effective and sustainable humanitarian response.

Video from the field: Care, Syria including Q & A live from Türkiye - Thomas Bamforth

During a video from the field featuring Care in Syria, including a live Q&A session from Türkiye with Thomas Bamforth, the following key points were discussed:

The perspective provided was from North-West Syria, where people are living in incredibly challenging conditions resembling a siege, with severely limited resources available to them. Bamforth remarked that provision of assistance is heavily reliant on the six-monthly renewal of a UN Security Council Resolution, highlighting the critical role of international support in sustaining humanitarian efforts in the region.

A sobering observation made during the discussion was that attempting to achieve more with fewer resources ultimately leads to accomplishing less. The constrained environment necessitates making difficult choices and compromises, which can hinder the overall impact of humanitarian interventions. One consequence of striving to do more with less is the reliance on short-term humanitarian assistance, which often falls short of meeting the evolving needs of the affected population. Assistance that was intended to be temporary becomes a long-term reliance, creating a cycle of dependency on aid that may not adequately address the underlying issues.

To address this challenge, Bamforth emphasised that a long-term planning approach is crucial, especially at the onset of a crisis. This entails building critical infrastructure and establishing sustainable solutions that can provide lasting support to affected communities. By taking a proactive and forward-thinking approach, humanitarian organisations like Care aim to promote stability, resilience, and self-sufficiency within the communities they serve. Throughout the discussion, the importance of preserving human dignity emerged as a fundamental principle guiding humanitarian action. Recognising and respecting the inherent worth and rights of individuals affected by crises is crucial in providing meaningful support and fostering a sense of empowerment.

In conversation: Professor David Alexander interviews Stuart Kefford, UN Resident Coordinator's Office; Maria Kett, Associate Professor of Humanitarianism and Disability at UCL; and James Smith, Lecturer in Humanitarian Policy in Practice at UCL

During a fascinating panel discussion, Professor David Alexander engaged in a conversation with Stuart Kefford, Maria Kett, and James Smith. One of the main concerns raised was the effectiveness of the substantial financial investments in the humanitarian sector: do these investments truly yield positive results? The panellists agreed that the current system tends to exacerbate existing inequalities, leading to a situation where more people are likely to be left without assistance, especially as resources and funding become increasingly scarce. The panellists pointed out that the sector is often influenced by geopolitical interests, which diverts attention from addressing actual needs and, in some cases, causes more harm than good.

The panel explored the reasons behind this deviation from addressing needs. One key factor identified was the lack of information and data, which hinders decision-making processes. For Kefford, the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector has shifted focus away from its original purpose. Previously, individuals were motivated by a genuine desire to help people, but now the sector has transformed into a multi-billion-dollar industry often driven by political interests and

power imbalances. Humanitarian agencies prioritise marketing themselves as success stories, which is measured by the amount of money they attract, rather than the number of people they actually assist. Consequently, a competitive environment based on business principles has emerged, leading to a fragmented and less coordinated approach among agencies.

The group also discussed the decrease in assistance provided and whether it was a failure of philanthropy or a result of an increase in global needs. While funding has been increasing annually, it is not keeping pace with the growing demands. Although the larger agencies have expressed concern, their responses have not been adequate. There is a tendency within the system to exaggerate funding needs to secure resources, as organisations are aware that they will only receive a fraction of what is requested. Agencies are also being asked to expand beyond their core humanitarian mandate, encroaching into areas of development and peacekeeping. While this may not necessarily be negative, the challenge lies in the practical implementation of these expanded roles. The panellists observed that discussions have been ongoing since the 1990s, yet actual change in the field remains lacking. All panellists agreed that there is a need to connect with colleagues beyond the humanitarian sector and translate policy rhetoric into tangible action and change.

Smith remarked that by framing problems solely as humanitarian issues, innovative solutions are limited. Lack of rigour, low energy, poor leadership, and resistance to adaptability were identified as factors hampering progress. The system's hierarchical structure, lack of incentives for innovation, and inefficiency in utilising new technologies were also highlighted as impediments to improvement.

The importance of working with local partners and communities was cited as a more effective approach. The panellists criticised the tendency of humanitarian organisations, such as the UN, to work from compounds rather than engaging directly with the affected population. Working closely with communities allows for bridging evidence gaps and a more collaborative – and, ultimately, effective – approach.

The group recognised the significance of academia's involvement but stressed that its usefulness lies in being connected to engaged organisations. They cautioned against the casual use of terms like 'localisation' and emphasised the need to support smaller NGOs, enabling them to directly receive funding from donors. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was cited as an exemplary organisation that operates effectively. Its national societies have considerable independence, and the panellists agreed that this model should be capitalised on.

Although the system has its flaws, the general consensus was that there is currently no better solution to replace it entirely. However, the panel emphasised the necessity for a thorough and honest review of the system's operations and ways of working. They acknowledged that exposing failures is not a strong suit within the humanitarian sector, as decisions often revolve around financial considerations. To bring about positive change, there was a call to integrate youthful voices into leadership positions, promote flexibility and creativity in thinking, and dismantle hierarchical structures that impede progress. The panellists acknowledged the difficulty of challenging ingrained thinking patterns and the prevalence of ego within the system. But these systemic issues must be addressed in order to carve a more innovative way forward.

The system's slow and reactive nature was also acknowledged, with climate change only recently entering mainstream humanitarian discourse, despite knowledge of its existence for decades. The panellists also expressed concerns about donor practices, such as hiring 'third-party' consultants to evaluate programmes and projects, who may lack impartiality.

In summary, the panel discussion shed light on the challenges and shortcomings within the humanitarian system. It highlighted the need for critical evaluation, data utilisation, stronger engagement with local actors, and a shift towards a more inclusive and flexible approach. By addressing these issues, the humanitarian sector can strive to improve its effectiveness, better meet the needs of affected populations, and navigate the complex interplay between humanitarianism, politics, and societal change.

In our current climate, bridging the gap between humanitarian needs and available resources is not just a challenge, but a moral imperative that demands our collective action and unwavering commitment. The Humanitarian Summit served as a powerful reminder that we can no longer rely on outdated approaches; instead, we must embrace data-driven and innovative solutions, with a focus on long-term planning and community empowerment. It is crucial that we break free from this cycle of aid dependency and instead prioritise local partnerships, addressing the root causes that perpetuate suffering. The road ahead is riddled with complexities, from geopolitical influences to fragmented and uncoordinated approaches. If there is only one message to take from the Humanitarian Summit, it is that we need to shatter the barriers that hold us back by fostering transparency, collaboration, and inclusivity in decision-making processes. By doing so, we can usher in a new era of humanitarian action - one that is agile, creative, and unyielding in its pursuit of meaningful change.

Evie Lunn – Second-Year Global Humanitarian Studies BSc Student at UCL

Convener: Dr Lisa Guppy, IRDR

Conference event page: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/events/2023/jun/ucl-humanitarian-summit-2023-doing-even-more-even-less>

Conference playlist:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi9vmTDePsrFw666cxyakwu1DBbDVuyPy&si=oPJWeyFHqaKB011x>