

World Humanitarian Summit

What to watch out for

What is the World Humanitarian Summit?

On 23–24 May, the UN will convene a World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, Turkey. The first of its kind, the purpose of the WHS is to secure commitments from governments, aid agencies and civil society organisations to deliver more effective humanitarian assistance for the 125 million people living in crisis around the world.

As its outcome, the WHS is expected to launch an Agenda for Humanity, which should include both a vision for the future of humanitarian action and the specific commitments made during the two-day meeting.

This briefing provides an overview of the key issues on the Summit's agenda, what it should deliver and the likely outcomes of the discussions.

What is happening at the Summit?

Following a year of consultation with more than 23,000 people in 153 countries, 6,000 people are expected to attend the Summit, including representatives of over 150 governments and 50 heads of state.

The official WHS programme includes seven High-Level Roundtables and 15 Special Sessions, where states and leaders in humanitarian action will announce a range of commitments. There will also be hundreds of side events and exhibitions.

What is at stake?

During the past decade, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance per year has increased from 30 million to more than 125 million. This has been mirrored by an increase in the funding required to respond to humanitarian emergencies, from \$4 billion to \$24 billion per year during the same period.

Humanitarian crises are becoming more frequent and more complex, affecting more people – particularly in so-called 'fragile states' – and lasting longer.¹ Conflicts are more protracted and are as likely to be fought by armed groups as sovereign states.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI)'s research has found that changes in who is funding and engaging in humanitarian work are shifting the locus of humanitarian action from its Western roots to a more diverse set of players – including Gulf states, middle-income governments, diaspora groups², regional³ and local organisations⁴ and businesses⁵ – who see humanitarian action in different terms. Such trends should have changed the way humanitarians work, but have not.⁶

Recent research suggests that the humanitarian system is underperforming and lacks the speed, coverage and cultural knowledge needed to be truly effective.⁷ There is an overarching concern that a failure to change will render the humanitarian system fragmented and irrelevant.

The Summit agenda: core responsibilities and likely outcomes

The WHS discussions will focus on five core responsibilities with a series of core commitments under each. These have been drawn from the UN Secretary-General's report for the Summit, titled 'One Humanity, Shared Responsibility', which was released in February as a framework to guide the Summit discussions and outcomes.⁸



Core responsibility 1: Prevent and end conflict

The issue: Perhaps one of the most important, but most elusive, ambitions of the WHS agenda is the challenge to world leaders to commit to preventing and ending conflict.

Expected outcomes: Most commitments on this issue will likely focus on pledges to improve conflict analysis and conflict prevention. But what major powers should be aiming for, given what is happening in Syria and Yemen, is a rethink of their material and technical support for armed groups and governments – even allies – involved in war.



Core responsibility 2: Respect the rules of war

The issue: Here, the Summit will tackle the persistent failure of states and armed groups to uphold and respect International Humanitarian Law (IHL), otherwise known as the laws of war. Flagrant disregard for IHL has resulted in intentional and collateral violence against civilians, blockages and delays in the delivery of assistance and attacks against aid workers.

Expected outcomes: Commitments at the WHS will no doubt focus on redoubling efforts to uphold IHL with some specific commitments to protecting healthcare facilities, following recent, high-profile bombings of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)-operated hospitals in Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. There is also the possibility of commitments to minimise the use of deadly explosives in urban centres and other densely populated areas. But without credible sanctions against IHL violations, for example in the form of a global IHL watchdog,⁹ such commitments will likely remain empty promises.



Core responsibility 3: Leave no one behind: A commitment to address forced displacement

The issue: With more than 60 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide, and the highly visible arrival of many of them on European shores, displacement has become a global political priority.

Expected outcomes: As indicated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's attendance at the Summit, displacement may be at the heart of some of the Summit's most tangible commitments. Such commitments are likely to focus on tackling the myriad legal, political, human rights and financial issues surrounding displacement. There is also a good chance of commitments to improve education and economic opportunities for refugees in the countries to which they have fled. Another outcome to watch out for is a possible announcement about a multi-billion dollar platform for addressing protracted crises and long-term displacement.



Core responsibility 4: Work differently to end need

The issue: 90% of humanitarian crises last for more than three years – and more than 60% more than eight years. In places like Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the occupied Palestinian territories, humanitarian organisations have essentially replaced the government in providing essential services, such as healthcare and education, but without the remit, capacity and funds to do it well. Alternative sources of financing and capacity, such as for climate adaptation and risk reduction, seem to pass these countries by.

Expected outcomes: UN agencies will make a commitment to better link together their respective approaches, capacities and funds, so as to handle the short- and long-term needs of people living in crisis earlier, and in tandem with one another. However, the specifics of when and how this will be done are unlikely to emerge until after the Summit. We will also likely see commitments to longer-term and more flexible funding from donors as part of the Grand Bargain (discussed more below).

A more concrete proposal should come in the form of a specific target for the increased use of cash – as opposed to in-kind aid.¹⁰ Cash assistance allows aid recipients to buy what they need from local markets, as opposed to having to accept the standard – sometimes unsuitable – aid packages handed out by international humanitarian organisations. Commitments should also look at increasing funding to longer-term disaster risk reduction in fragile and conflict-affected states.



Core responsibility 5: Invest in humanity

The issue: Despite the highest-ever humanitarian spend in 2015 (\$24.5 billion), there was an almost 50% gap between the amount of funding requested and the amount pledged. The rising cost of crisis response, enduring organisational inefficiencies and sector-wide cash flow problems driven by short-term funding cycles all contribute to a system that is both ‘broke’ and ‘broken’¹¹ in the way it sources and uses funds.

Expected outcomes: The headliner at the WHS is the Grand Bargain, a pact between humanitarian donors and the organisations they fund. It will promise more and longer-term funding in exchange for more efficiency and transparency in how those funds are used.

Critics say that the Grand Bargain is likely to be non-specific, lacking concrete targets and timelines for reduced overheads, increased transparency, less earmarking and direct funding to local organisations. The fact that the deal only involves the ‘humanitarian oligopoly’ of the top 15 donors and top 15 recipients of humanitarian funds undermines the Summit’s core message of inclusivity and localising response.

Other important outcomes to watch on the financing front include a global humanitarian innovation fund and multi-billion dollar fund for education in emergencies.¹²

What is missing?

Disappointingly, and despite calls from ODI¹² and others, wider reform of the humanitarian system seems to be off the table at the Summit.

This is a missed opportunity to tackle the system's power dynamics, incentives and structures and translate the Summit's momentum into fundamental change.

This may ultimately be setting up the Summit for failure as making good on many of its core responsibilities will require major and unpopular shifts in the business models of its major players. This includes devolution of power, decentralisation of responsibility and a more rational distribution of humanitarian funds.

The Summit is not an inter-governmental process, so its decisions and commitments have no official standing among states or humanitarian organisations (unlike the Sustainable

Development Goals or COP climate change conferences, for example) and, to date, there's no clear blueprint for its implementation or an accountability framework to track and monitor progress.

As such, many fear it will be just another 'talking shop' where well-meaning aspirations and big promises change very little. This frustration compelled MSF to pull out of the WHS just two weeks before its start, calling the meeting 'a fig-leaf of good intentions'. This may well be the case if the Summit outcomes are weak and no credible roadmap emerges for translating Summit aspirations into achievements.

ODI's work on the WHS is available at www.odi.org/whs. ODI is hosting and participating in several events as part of the Summit's formal and informal programme. For more information or for media inquiries, please contact Tania Cheung at t.cheung@odi.org or +44 7342 994515.

Endnotes

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