

Pitfalls and Possibilities of the Humanitarian System

The Hague Launch of the SOHS-Report 2018

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KUNO is an initiative of ten NGOs and seven knowledge institutes from the Dutch humanitarian sector. KUNO's goal is to strengthen the humanitarian sector in the Netherlands. KUNO is a platform for joint learning, reflection and debate. We organize expert meetings, working sessions for professionals, webinars, training and public debates. All our events are cross-sectoral and organized in cooperation with our partners.

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1. Summary

The humanitarian system is under pressure from a changing global landscape, declining respect for International Humanitarian Law and Refugee Law, the bureaucratization of aid, restrictions in access, and the decline in multilateralism. At the same time, the available resources have reached their limits, while the number of people in need continues to grow in even more complex settings. This might sound disheartening, but the humanitarian system has demonstrated it is an effective way to safeguard the life-saving needs of people. These statements reflect the findings of the latest edition of the *State of the Humanitarian System Report 2018*, which analyses and researches both the scope and performance of the humanitarian system over the years 2015-2017, and the current needs of affected populations and the resources available to address those needs.

An event was organized in The Hague to discuss and reflect upon the possibilities and pitfalls of the humanitarian system. François Grünewald was one of the researchers involved in the project and presented answers to the following question: 'What is the state of the humanitarian system?'

- Reintje van Haeringen took note of the depiction of the humanitarian system in the report, and stressed that we have to move away from the portrayal of 'affected communities' as just receivers of aid, to actors who act alongside other actors and are actively dealing with crisis by themselves. Choosing for the perspective of the humanitarian system, tends to neglect the opportunities that a local perspective and context has to offer. Local organizations possess the knowledge to deal with limitations in access and the risk-averse attitudes of organizations.
- Hans van der Hoogen is positive about the progress that the system has made and stressed that the Dutch government is committed to sustaining this progress, and to improve the system in the different roles that it plays within the humanitarian system. He pointed out that the Dutch government and other EU member states, as a collective, could have leverage on policies. The Dutch government is a large provider of unconditional aid, but continues to rely on the support of its constituencies and remains accountable to them. Additionally, Van der Hoogen expressed his concern for the decline of respect for IHL and the way vulnerable people, especially people with disabilities, are treated.
- Sarah Telford discussed the role of data in both the report and the humanitarian system in general. The lack of systematic monitoring of progress over time and the use of diverse methodologies results in

different cycles of patchworks of data. The humanitarian system needs to invest and commit to indicators and baseline measurements, even if this turns out to be a challenging progress. Questions on how to use data correctly and how to gain a better understanding of information needs to be addressed and talked about. Overall, the system is making progress and we need to reject the feeling that it is not going fast enough.

- Thea Hilhorst pointed out that our main concern should be the geopolitical landscape the humanitarian system operates in. Humanitarian aid and development aid are under pressure. The humanitarian system relies largely on funding from only a few donors that are also confronted by populist trends. Even though governments get more involved in humanitarian assistance, they could also be part of covering up or contributing to humanitarian suffering. Thea added that the link between humanitarian aid with peacebuilding and advocacy is underutilized. Hence, the humanitarian system has made progress, but this should be taken into a broader perspective of other systems.
- The discussion with the audience addressed the subsequent issues: how to gather data in a responsible way that does not inflict harm and could benefit the affected population, the need to provide data about the quality of aid, the leverage of the Dutch government on changing the humanitarian system, and a recommendation for the next SOHS Report to include monitoring and assessments of governments in their role within the humanitarian system.

The following chapters elaborate on the presentation of the report and the subsequent discussion with the panellists and the audience. Specific and extensive data and additional information on the state of the humanitarian system can be found on the website of ALNAP or the SOHS Report 2018.

- [Click here](#) to go to the website of the SOHS Report 2018
- [Click here](#) to read the full report
- [Click here](#) to read the summary

2. Introduction

Every three years, a global network of humanitarian actors concern themselves with one key question: ‘what is the state of the humanitarian system?’. Its answer could not only keep us informed about the systemic trends, but could also make us rethink our roles in the system and the areas that we could change our own ways of working. Last December, ALNAP shared their findings for the fourth time in the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) Report 2018, covering the period between 2015 and 2017. This edition built on previous publications in order to uncover changes and provide evidence on the scope and functioning of the humanitarian system, including the current needs of the people and the available funding to address those needs. In light of this, ALNAP changed course slightly and decided to give more voice to local agencies and affected populations in their research strategy. As a result, the current ALNAP report is informed by multiple sources of data, from surveys conducted with aid practitioners and recipients to reviews of literature, databases and evaluations. These all took place in 116 countries, including five specific case studies in Yemen, Mali, Lebanon, Kenya and Bangladesh.

a. The Hague Launch

“The Humanitarian System is growing and is getting more complex and bureaucratic”

After presentations of the SHOS Report 2018 in New York, London and Washington, KUNO initiated a Dutch launch of the report in The Hague on December 20. Together the Centre for Humanitarian Data of UN OCHA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA), and the Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation (DCHI), KUNO organized the presentation of the report and discussions on its findings. It was an opportunity to discuss the current pitfalls and possibilities of the humanitarian system among those involved in this system.

An introduction to the SHOS 2018 Report was given by François Grunewald. As the executive and scientific director of URD, he was one of the members involved in the field case studies and analysis of the key informant interviews of the SOHS Report. After Grunewald’s introduction, a panel of specialists and an audience of humanitarian professionals shared their impressions of the findings.

The following panellists were involved:

- Reintje van Haeringen, CEO of CARE Netherlands, board member of DCHI, and chair of the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA)
- Hans van den Hoogen, Senior Humanitarian Advisor, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Sarah Telford, Lead, Centre for Humanitarian Data, UNOCHA
- Thea Hilhorst, Professor of Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction, Institute of Social Studies.
- The event was moderated by Peter Heintze, coordinator of KUNO.

This report offers an overview of the main findings from the presentation as well as an overview of the remarks that were shared during the discussion. What became clear was that the humanitarian system is evolving, but the world changes even faster.

3. SOHS Report Findings

François Grünewald presented an overview of the State of the Humanitarian System Report 2018, based on the structure of the report. The presentation started with an overview of the humanitarian needs within the system, followed by the available resources within the system to address those needs. Moreover, details were shared about the performance of the system, including its current scope and structure. For full details on the results, the report and the summary can be consulted. The following paragraphs detail the most important transformations as presented during the launch.

a. Humanitarian Needs

The humanitarian system faced several crises in the last three years, of which two unexpected and new ones were pointed out: the migration crisis in Europe and the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. Overall, humanitarian needs continued to grow. It is estimated that there are over 201 million people in need, with the highest clusters in the South and North of the Sahara and in the Middle East. What was striking is that half of the resources were allocated to the four crises in Yemen, Syria, Sudan and Iraq. This reflects the humanitarian reality in which some crises receive more attention from the global landscape than others, while other crises are ignored. At the same time, humanitarian aid is accompanied by developmental and political agendas.

b. Humanitarian Resources

In the years 2015-2017 the available resources seemed to have reached a plateau. The amount of funding has increased slightly over the past years, reaching over 27 billion dollars, but seemed to reach its limits. Furthermore, the funding gap remains the same at around 40–50%, as the humanitarian needs have increased simultaneously. The question arises whether the humanitarian system would be capable of dealing with a future scenario of multiple unexpected crises at the same time. Would it encourage donors to step up their game? Or is the humanitarian system itself capable of increasing its efficiency? Additionally, despite the localization debate within the humanitarian sector, pushed forward by the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, only 14% of funding goes directly to local and national NGOs.

“The world changes fast, the humanitarian system adapts slowly”

c. Performance of the system

In the SOHS Report, the performance of the humanitarian system was assessed according to the following indicators: sufficiency, coverage, relevance and appropriateness, accountability and participation, effectiveness, coherence, connectedness, complementarity and impact. Each indicator was ranked by its level of progress over the years, using the previous reports as benchmarks. The following paragraphs highlight some of the indicators and corresponding findings.

The context in which aid is delivered has changed over the past years. In general, the structure of aid has been changed, reflecting a decrease in multilateral aid and an increase in bilateral aid. Also, there have been concerns about a decreasing respect among states towards International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Refugee Law. Another feature of the system highlighted during the presentation is that the system faces difficulties in access and coverage, resulting in areas in which INGOs are not active nor present. The diminished access results from a bureaucratization of aid on both the donor and the recipient side and a trend towards risk-averse

attitudes based on a legitimate concern of dangers and difficulties in the provision of aid. As a consequence, the burden of providing aid has shifted to local actors, who must replace the retracting organizations. Finally, new actors are entering the protracted areas of aid.

A positive trend has been the improvement of effectiveness, especially in addressing the life-saving needs of people. The implementation of cash aid, better coordination, and a larger network of local partners is attributed to a more effective and timelier provision of food aid in times of emergencies. In terms of accountability and participation, there has only been limited progress. The results of the surveys showed that people who were consulted for feedback were more likely to say they had been treated with dignity and respect and to give a positive response about the quality and relevance of the aid delivered. Nevertheless, participation and feedback still run the risk of turning into a 'box-ticking exercise', so an active and careful approach continues to be necessary.

During the timeframe of the SOHS Report, efforts to change the humanitarian field were made at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Despite those attempts to improve the humanitarian system, changes on the ground in terms of localization and improved connections between humanitarian and development aid have been limited. For local people, understanding the humanitarian system is the least of their concerns. What only counts is the actor who eventually provides help. Furthermore, the nexus between development and humanitarian aid is reflected within the 'resilience' movement, and this could change the separation of funding streams in the future.

4. Panellists and Audience Discussion

i. Reintje van Haeringen – (Dis)empowering local actors and risking lives

Reintje van Haeringen commented on the way in humanitarian practice professionals tend to portray local communities on page 33 of the SOHS Report. In this overview, different stakeholders are identified and portrayed. The people that receive aid are positioned in the centre and called 'the affected communities'. Van Haeringen would like to move away from this semantic portrayal of communities as just receivers of aid. Instead, they should be seen as a group of actors alongside other actors and first responders in the field, such as governments, private actors, civil society, or women's organizations. They all play a major role themselves in responding to different types of crisis. Therefore, talking about affected communities in one particular way could be disempowering. Moreover, it does not do justice to all the other actors involved. She pointed out that within the Dutch

Relief Alliance (DRA), they build upon each other's networks and presence. When people talk about humanitarian aid from a system-level perspective, we tend to neglect the local context and the opportunities for efficiency and effectiveness that this offers. She gave the examples of the usage of innovations or the role that women could play as first responders in a crisis.

Related to the declining respect for IHL, and the way that is noticed in the field, Van Haeringen referred to the current crisis in Yemen. Humanitarian practice is to notify the parties involved in conflict before humanitarian organizations enter an area to provide aid. Whereas normally humanitarian organizations would get a response, this conformation is lacking nowadays. She expressed that the declining respect for IHL is difficult to change, and the nature of the conflict is different. In this regard, any solution would probably be found in the role of the government or politicians.

Grünewald underlined that humanitarian aid providers have become targets. As a result, a risk-averting attitude is growing within organizations. On the one hand, this reflects a legitimate reaction to a changing and dangerous situation, because if something goes wrong in the end, it will have a major impact on the organization. On the other hand, the system could evolve into a 'republic of lawyers', in which aid providers start being afraid of potential legal consequences and begin to create control mechanisms and security preparedness measures. In this way, organizations could lose their connection and access to the field, thereby creating negative impact feedback from the field to the organization. Van Haeringen agreed with this negative implication of a risk-averting attitude, but stressed that a possible solution could be found in working with and through local actors. They have required knowledge about the local context and how to move around in the field.

ii. *Hans van den Hoogen – Fighting bureaucracy and promoting change*

In response to a question on the increased bureaucratization of the humanitarian system by donors, Hans van den Hoogen replied by stating that the Dutch government is more than just a donor: it are part of the international community. The Dutch government, in its roles as donor, political, and humanitarian actor, needs to reflect upon the findings of the SOHS Report. Overall, the Dutch government wants to sustain the positive changes made and to improve the areas that can be improved.

Van den Hoogen reminded listeners that the Dutch government is one of the donors with the highest percentage of unearmarked and unconditional aid, above the criteria set by the Grand Bargain. The Netherlands could be an example for

other countries, but their willingness to change also depends on their constituencies. For example, until two years ago the Dutch government did not have to report any results back to the parliament, but this has changed. This is a concern, as we can only continue with our policies if we are able to show results.

Van den Hoogen took note of improvements of the humanitarian system. Out of the ten criteria in the report, six of them indicate limited progress or improvement. This can be seen as a success, because we are still moving forward. However, there are areas of concern, especially reaching all the people in need and respect for humanitarian principles. As a political and humanitarian actor, the Dutch government is committed to raising these concerns within its range of influence. In order to promote change, the Netherlands needs to collaborate with other countries. Another issue within the humanitarian system is accountability. Instead of conducting a 'ticking-of-the-box-exercise' in consulting the local population, we need to perceive people in crisis as people with agency. The international community could set up an Ombudsman to make use of this agency and to give these people the opportunity and an instrument to hold the system accountable. Finally, Van den Hoogen pointed out one of the critiques in the report about the lack of support for vulnerable populations, and he expressed the commitment of the current government to improving the coverage in crisis for people with disabilities, especially those with mental health issues.

iii. Sarah Telford – Measuring progress and understanding data

Sarah Telford commented on the data about the people in need, used in the SOHS Report, which is different from the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) presented last December. Therefore, she argued for a more systematic way to measure progress over time, in order to provide consistency in measuring change. Currently, we only have these cycles of reports looking at progress. The numbers presented can differ and the question is raised if we could really trust these numbers. She made a comparison with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which took time to develop, but represent reliable indicators to measure progress over time. If the humanitarian sector wants to measure progress over time, we have to agree upon the baseline measurements and the indicators, but this will require investments. There is large humanitarian community with multiple actors, all measuring data in their own ways. As a result, conversations about creating uniform methodologies are challenging. Donors could use their leverage to get these conversations started. She made a reference to IATI, which is part of the Grand Bargain. We all agreed upon the need for transparency and efficiency of financial aid flows, and everyone is trying to change their behaviour accordingly. IATI has set a certain focus and gets all the parties aligned.

Asked about the changing world and the need for changing the humanitarian system, Telford replied that it is a human feeling that everything is changing all the time and that we have the urge to keep up with this. She thinks that the system is adapting, considering the increased level of funding going to local organizations, the use of pooled funds, and the increased voice and involvement of affected populations. We therefore have to resist the feeling that the system is not changing fast enough. Even though it is challenging, change is possible, and we are definitely making some progress.

Grünewald replied to the comments made by Telford by pointing out that it is not just about the gathering of data, but about gaining an understanding of what is going on. The system collects data that is not always analysed. Instead, we should look at what kind of knowledge the system needs and in what way this knowledge could be gathered. Some of this knowledge can be acquired with quantitative data, but sometimes you need other information that needs to be gathered in the field through interviews. We need a better understanding of the context in which crises take place. Thus, it is about getting the right information or the right data, and these are not the same.

iv. *Thea Hilhorst – Political and global landscape*

As an opening remark for the panel discussion, Grünewald mentioned that the decreasing respect for IHL is particularly worrisome. Nowadays, more actors do not seem to comply or care for these rights anymore. Another critical issue is if the humanitarian system can cope with the challenges of multiple major crises simultaneously.

Thea Hilhorst stressed that her main concern is not the humanitarian system itself, but the world in which the system operates. She agreed with Van den Hoogen and Telford that the humanitarian system has made progress, especially if we consider the satisfactory levels of the quality of aid, and that the majority of people have felt to be treated with dignity and respect. However, the results of the SOHS Report must be taken into perspective of the larger changes in the world. The political environment in which the humanitarian system operates has to be taken into account. She finds it worrisome that the humanitarian system relies strongly on a few donors that are also dealing with internal political shifts.

Hilhorst continued her argument by discussing the role of governments within the humanitarian system. In general, the SOHS Report showed that multilateralism and respect for IHL is declining. The top donors of humanitarian aid are, in comparison with the political system, often small countries. As a result, their

influence in promoting change in the humanitarian system remains limited, and countries seem to have a declining respect for their own democratic values. Finally, the matter of authoritarian regimes is not as clearly addressed as it should be. There is a positive trend going on in which governments are more involved in humanitarian aid and are taking their responsibility in times of crisis. At the same time, increasing numbers of governments are non-democratic in the way they deal with minorities, civil society and the media. Therefore, even though the humanitarian link with governments is strengthening, these same governments could be part of covering-up data on humanitarian suffering. Thus, if we take a broader perspective, the positive view on the humanitarian system swings back to a somewhat negative perspective.

Grünwald responded by agreeing that the world is changing. This is reflected in the conclusion of the report, stating that the humanitarian system is evolving, but not as fast as the world is changing in dangerous directions at the same time. This is a concern for the humanitarian system.

v. *Questions from the audience: auditing governments and cooperation.*

The first comment is about gathering data from affected populations. The humanitarian system should not just collect the data, but also give something in return to the people. Especially in terms of accountability and the use of feedback mechanisms. Even if we conduct a small study, we have to maintain a dialogue in order to remain accountable. How do you give something useful in return to the population? How do we make sure this is happening?

Grünwald agreed that it is important to get back to the people you collected data from. He added that researchers often encounter a 'survey-fatigue'. He stated that the problem for the population is not merely that researchers are not coming back, but that others return to do the same research again. So when we do a field evaluation, we try to come back to present the results in some way. However, it is difficult to get funding for these feedback sessions and this needs to be covered by the organizations' own resources.

Another commenter turned to Van den Hoogen, asking him about the leverage of the Netherlands as a political actor within the European Union regarding the respect of IHL and refugee law.

Van den Hoogen responded that in terms of leverage, the EU member states together were the largest donors of humanitarian assistance last year. However, these numbers consist of humanitarian assistance only, and it remains difficult to

estimate the influence of policies or statements on the entire humanitarian system. The Netherlands tries to cooperate as much as possible. In Brussels, the members states and ECHO (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) are working together in COHAFA (Working Party on Humanitarian Aid and Food Aid), to align and discuss our joint positions. In the end, 28 states have more impact on changing the system than one state on its own. For example, all EU countries dedicated themselves to the five core commitments agreed upon at the last WHS, and this was coordinated and aligned in Brussels. However, coordination is not always possible in the case of opposing positions. What is certain is that the EU could play an important role in the humanitarian system, but this requires endorsement from all the political constituencies on the promotion of humanitarian assistance, which is also a concern for NGOs.

Grünwald was asked for further reflections about the role of governments in the humanitarian system, because he and Van den Hoogen portrayed governments as more than just donors. The SOHS Report is focused on the humanitarian system and humanitarian assistance in general. This relates not only to what humanitarian NGOs have been doing, but also to the role of the states. Currently, the role of the state is mentioned in terms of the decline of multilateralism in the report. The question is if ALNAP would consider an evaluation and assessment of states on humanitarian assistance in future reports? For example, creating certain criteria to assess if states are progressing in terms of their role and responsibilities in the humanitarian system.

Grünwald took note of this suggestion and stated that it could be interesting to look at states beyond their engagement in IHL or as their role as donors. This requires the development of analytical tools, and we have to explore how to look at countries in a systematic manner.

vi. Final comments and remarks

Sarah Telford highlighted that the Data Centre is working on both data responsibility guidelines and data illiteracy. It is important that the collection of data is conducted in a respectful way, without inflicting any harm. Additionally, questions related to whether people feel comfortable using available data or the way we use data to inform our decisions need to be addressed. After all, we need to get a better sense of the understanding of the figures.

Thea Hilhorst gave a final comment on the current lack of attention to the linkage between humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. Both the Grand Bargain and the WHS discussed this linkage, together with the connection between

development and humanitarian aid. The latter is being talked about in terms of the continuation of aid and health services during and after crisis. However, the humanitarian field needs to give peacebuilding and advocacy the attention it deserves.

Reintje van Haeringen agreed with the comment of Hilhorst that our problem is not necessarily the state of the humanitarian system, but the state of the world. Another issue is the increasing humanitarian needs and the decline of solidarity for funding. The current humanitarian system could benefit from a framework for measuring results from the ground up. In this way we could not only monitor the efficiency of the use of funding, but also use this information to convince the people that additional funding is necessary.

François Grünewald concluded the session by stating that the humanitarian system is becoming more complex. We first had the humanitarian-development nexus, which developed into the humanitarian-development-security nexus, and now we are facing the humanitarian-development-security-migration nexus.