

**Belgium-Finland co-chairs
High-Level Meeting
Humanitarian Change
16 December 2021
via Teams
Co-chairs' summary**

The first High-level meeting hosted by Belgium and Finland under their co-chairpersonship was dedicated to the theme of humanitarian change, with a deeper look at Decolonization & localization, and Climate change & greening of aid. The meeting, building on the Expert-Level Meeting (ELM) on Humanitarian change held on November 8th 2021¹, was co-chaired by **Erik De Maeyer**, Director Humanitarian Aid and Transition, Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of Belgium, and **Lauratuulia Lehtinen**, Humanitarian Director, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The chairs presented the priorities of the Belgian-Finnish co-chairpersonship for 2021-23 and thanked the members for taking part in the survey on the GHD, the results of which were shared during the ELM. The keynote speaker was **Heba Aly**, Chief Executive Officer of The New Humanitarian, an independent and non-profit newsroom reporting from conflicts and disasters around the world.

Humanitarian change

In her presentation, Heba Aly recalled the watershed moment that the Rwandan genocide was for the humanitarian sector as it highlighted the desperate need to be more professional by improving quality, coordination and accountability of humanitarian response. In her view, we are also now in an existential moment, but this time because of the predominantly Western, charity-driven and technocratic nature of the system. We are currently faced with mounting needs that the system is not able to meet, and needs are likely to further rise in the future.

According to Heba Aly, the current humanitarian response model is reaching its limits on four levels:

¹ One of the speakers of the ELM, Arbie Baguios, gave recommendations coming from varied sources (Bond – [Racism, truth and power](#); Peace Direct – [Time to Decolonise Aid](#); British Red Cross – [Is Aid Really Changing?](#); ODI – [Localisation as the journey towards locally-led practice](#); ALNAP [Localisation Re-imagined](#)) to donors:

1) Changing donor practice: **Change the funding rules** (increase ambition, recalibrate risk thresholds); **Reconsider 'capacity'** (how can we understand 'capacity' if we also include agency and ways of being); **Rethink ways of working** (e.g., subcontracting; compliance), there are emerging approaches to learn from; **Invest in learning** (particularly in Global South-led / indigenous knowledge, and research and evidence). 2) Challenging donor mindsets: **Recognise your positionality** (your privileges, biases, motivations, fears, hopes); **Mind your language** (it can be disempowering; how might we change our language and narrative, e.g., 'capacity?'); **Remain humble** (Global South must be in charge of their own destinies, you are not the protagonist); **Foster personal relationships** (this is the most effective way to change our assumptions and biases). 3) Countering donor pressures: **Review bureaucratic requirements/structure** (how are they impeding shift of power? Are they fit for the future?); **Challenge aid narratives** (unhelpful narratives shape public opinion - e.g., white saviourism; no awareness - how can this be challenged and changed); **Create space for dialogue** (platforms that bridge North and South and create solidarity); **Redouble efforts on collective commitments** (sectoral norms can change with numbers).

- 1) Financially, the system is challenged because the gap between humanitarian needs and available funding continue to grow. While the financing has grown in absolute terms, there are signs of it having plateaued.
- 2) Operationally, COVID-19 has shown that the system cannot 'surge' everywhere during a global crisis, which we will be confronted with climate change. Crises are increasingly protracted and humanitarian assistance will e.g. no longer be operationally efficient year after year when crises are no longer temporary. Also, a rise in sovereignty and governments' desire to control their own aid responses will continue limiting humanitarian access.
- 3) Structurally, the multilateral system is ill-designed to tackle transnational problems, and the current system - the UN-driven response model - does not match the power structure of today's world, where private companies might be more powerful than some States.
- 4) Ethically, the competition in the sector (pushing some agencies to act in their own interest rather than in the best interest of those in need), the logofication (focus on own brand & fundraising), the dominance of a few large agencies or international organizations acting as an oligarchy, the lack of participation of affected the people, and flawed accountability systems leading to conflict of interests, all cast a shadow on the system. Underlined in the wake of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, many also accuse the system of racism, white supremacy and neo-colonialism.

In Heba Aly's view, change is inevitable sooner or later, and that change would more likely be forced from outside the system than from within. *"If the goal of the humanitarian endeavor is to alleviate human suffering, are there now more effective ways of focusing that energy in this day and age?"*

Heba Aly presented emerging forms of aid. Fundamentally, she saw that aid needs to be locally driven in terms of representation, decision-making, accountability, and implementation. While there will always be a need for large organizations, their focus should be about finding how they can best enable local humanitarian action, as advocates and connectors rather than operational service providers. The humanitarian system itself will be less central in humanitarian response – as diplomacy to end conflicts, local governments, and the private sector play a bigger role. Beside a more pluralistic and locally driven approach, Heba Aly also claimed that aid should be more networked, activist ("what communities need most is social justice and solidarity, not bags of rice and plastic sheeting") and long-term driven.

She noted that change has taken place (e.g. Grand Bargain, anticipatory action, etc.), but many of the past humanitarian reforms haven't been solving the right problem. They've been technical in nature whereas the problems are about power and structures.

In addition, the system has an interest in maintaining the status quo.

For example, about COVID-19, which should have been the biggest disruptor of all and a vehicle for change, she noted that the system hasn't changed as much as expected. It has in fact consolidated the power and centrality of big UN agencies. Even though local humanitarian leadership is often seen as the only way forward, the role of locals has remained invisible and parallel and they are still hampered by the burden of proving their worth, while international aid organizations and staff benefit from a certain presumption of competence.

In line of this, she noted there are two lines of thinking on change for the humanitarian sector: evolution (she quoted one NGO leader as saying: "We don't need to wait for a systemic overhaul to start doing better") to revolution (there are many people who just want to "burn it all down", she said).

She concluded this introduction by asking what does good humanitarian donorship mean today. According to her, unearmarked, multi-year funding, less reporting and more use of local pooled funds are definitely part of the answer and have a positive impact on the questions of power imbalance. As food for thought for the discussions, she raised some questions² based on the concept of allyship³.

In the discussion on the topic with members, the role of large intermediary organizations as either operational or normative/enabling actors was discussed. Local organizations' capacity to negotiate access, and sometimes being less neutral (activist aid) generated conversation. Some also pointed out that local organizations may actually be better suited for natural disasters while Heba Aly argued that they could also play an important role in armed conflicts (e.g. Syria, Yemen) as they are often the only ones to have access. Pooled funds were seen as a relevant tool to give access to funding to local organizations, while Heba Aly noted that these could also be managed by locals instead of the UN. Bringing the discussion to the next topic, there was also a discussion on how tightly humanitarian aid resembled colonialism e.g. in terms of financial flows and history. Different official change processes were noted, while the keynote speaker encouraged members to support organic change and courageous leaders where they saw it happening.

Decolonization and localization

Heba Aly defined decolonizing aid as “Dismantling power structures within aid that echo colonial power relationships”. In her view, many facets of the humanitarian sector reflect neo-colonial aspects: Power structures continue to follow largely Western lines, in terms of funding, representation at management level, and standards to be applied. The “beneficiary” has been constructed as a post-colonial “Other”, while local civil society is shaped to fit the mold of “the NGO” rather than more culturally appropriate or politically effective forms. Aid flows frequently map to soft power relationships between former colonial powers and former colonies and the career paths and lifestyles of many international aid workers often resemble those of colonial administrators.

Heba Aly noted that many believe the aid system has been designed to maintain the current power dynamics in the world: by continuing to respond to what are now chronic crises, rather than their structural causes, international aid reinforces – or even props up – an international architecture that keeps certain countries perpetually poor and in crises and maintain the power of others.

She also noted that foreign aid is not always for the benefit of the recipient country or its population. In many cases, humanitarian aid is part of the countries' foreign policy toolkit. One example is directing aid to stop migration flows to donor countries. Another is to make aid conditional to the purchase of food or the use of subcontractors from the donor country.

For Heba Aly, key sub-sets of de-colonizing aid included increasing diversity and representation within aid institutions, and localizing aid. Despite organizations reporting internal progress being made on diversity, equity and inclusion, a The New Humanitarian survey found that 85% of employees said the actions taken hadn't resulted in any change in their work experience. She was also concerned that this topic was being

² “What conditions do you insist on in your contracts? Who do you invite to inform your strategies? Are you supporting those organisations that are trying to encourage or facilitate the change? How are you supporting solidarity networks? How are you using your roles on the governance boards of agencies to incentivize changes to the architecture? Where does most of your money go? Are you working within the system that exists – giving out humanitarian money as mandated by your department – or working to change the system altogether? How are you advocating with the political side to play a role in ending the conflicts humanitarian have to respond to? How are you using the power you have as states? Are you willing to give up some of the power you as states hold?”

³ “Allyship is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals and/or groups of people.”

sidelined by issues considered more crucial by the large institutions, such as the growing gap between needs and funding.

In the discussions, members shared good practices especially around Accountability to Affected Populations such as the donors' partners needing to have a framework in use for how they ensure beneficiaries' participation. Some donors were trying to look more closely at how the affected population's input actually affected the design of humanitarian programmes. One member also required a localization plan from partners, while noting the challenge of these being extremely context specific. Some have also emphasized community-based protection in their strategy, so that local people are empowered to define what their own risks are. Many again highlighted the role of pooled funds. For most members it was administratively and/or legally not possible to fund local organizations directly, and even small funds quickly required heavy administration, and understanding of local dynamics. This meant that many were dependent on 'intermediary' organizations. Domestic accountability on the use of the funds was also raised as an issue.

Heba Aly noted that one key question was to what extent larger actors enable local actors to provide humanitarian assistance within their means, including by giving them access to funding and allowing meaningful participation in decision-making. Donors can play a role by encouraging their partners to engage directly with local actors, as it is difficult for donors to engage directly themselves. While she welcomed the initiatives mentioned by members, she wondered whether they were fast enough (evolution) for the changes that needed to happen. She also raised again the conflict of interest of organizations being directly responsible for handling feedback and complaints about themselves.

Some members raised questions on how accurately financial flows for humanitarian aid actually resemble colonial relations, especially in cases where countries had little colonial history; and whether there was actually such conditionality with 'traditional' humanitarian aid, especially comparing to other forms of aid (e.g. development aid) or the way some rising powers use their aid. Heba Aly disagreed, giving the example of how aid had been given to Afghanistan, while noting that colonial forms of aid were not limited to Western countries. It was also pointed out that to assess how a country is approaching the decolonization of aid, it might be useful to look first at the power structure at the national level and then only compare it with what the country does at the international level. Some also appreciated that the term "decolonization" was demystified, while others thought localization might be a more palatable and constructive term.

Heba Aly noted that she observed from this meeting an encouraging shift in the narrative amongst donors: whereas previously discussions on localization centered on why it could not be done, now the discussion focused on *how* it could be done. She encouraged members to raise these discussions also to a political level, while being conscious of aid budgets' potential precariousness. She also stressed that the sector needed to change its mind set: colonial legacies are "not its fault but its responsibility" to address. Though the term decolonization was not easy, TNH had decided to use it, because it underlines the power -dynamic that they see as crucial.

Climate change and greening of aid

In terms of carbon emissions, a The New Humanitarian's survey of humanitarian organizations showed the humanitarian system had no uniform way to measure carbon emissions, and that critically, less than half measured their total emissions, including the indirect emissions arising from their supply chain for goods and services. Nonetheless, many claimed to be carbon neutral. Those organizations that did measure their indirect emissions, found that this accounted for nearly half their emissions or more. Without measuring and tackling the supply chain side, mitigation measures might have limited impact.

Key questions put to donors included the use of sustainable solutions that could be more expensive – would donors absorb the cost (including in the audit phase)? Also, the administrative and compliance requirements imposed by certain donors were often unrealistic for local suppliers, hampering purchases with potentially less transport involved. Lastly, annual funding cycles were sometimes detrimental, whereby e.g. water trucking and diesel pumps might be cheaper for 1 year, but a solar powered water system might be environmentally superior and cheaper over time. The initial investment could, however, be rejected by donors as too expensive for the initial project cycle.

In her presentation, Heba Aly also noted the interesting idea presented in an [article](#) by Hugo Slim to shift from war humanitarianism to climate humanitarianism. This would include anticipatory action, transition aid as more people move to cities or newly emerging areas with more human-friendly conditions, leveraging universal social protection, accessing climate funding and developing some form of International Climate Law.

During the [discussion](#), members shared some good practices. One example was funding an energy roster to have experts deployable to humanitarian organizations without cost. A few members also stated they were in the process of endorsing the Climate and environment charter launched by IFRC and ICRC before the COP-26 climate meeting in Glasgow. One member also noted that it was now generally allowed by donors to include more expensive but more environmentally friendly products and services in programmes; this should not be an excuse anymore for organizations for not using greener solutions. One member was piloting 5-year programming, also hoping this could help with the upfront-investment dilemma cited above. Some called for multi-year and flexible funding as well as moving beyond the purely humanitarian and taking the nexus better into consideration. It was also highlighted that greening aid was not only about the carbon footprint, but also things like waste and biodiversity. There can also be trade-offs between different environmental aspects. Some were developing environmental criteria for project selection and some also suggested to use climate data for funding interventions, focusing on anticipatory actions. One member noted that it is important to also be patient with what we are expecting and asking from organization on this front.

Heba Aly noted that based on their discussions with stakeholders for TNH's study, environmental expertise was in short supply across the sector and that there were some fears about finding and financing this technical capacity. Common standards were also important, noting the ICRC initiative on carbon footprint tool for the sector. She highlighted the positive impact that localization could have from this perspective as well. Members observed that there were many initiatives amongst big actors that were uncoordinated; and similarly that there were a number of different coordination platforms for different issues. Coordination, especially amongst donors, was a key element that was called for by many members. It was also stressed that time should be invested in research analyzing climate change and conflicts as a whole. It was finally mentioned that it was important that climate funding was an addition to, not carved out of, humanitarian funding.

Finally, the co-chairs updated members on future GHD plans for next year with a focus on protection, especially gender-based violence and disability inclusion for the first half of the year.