

# HUMANITARIAN AID: TIME FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

DR. MAUREEN MALOWANY

Of the manifold consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian aid organizations will likely experience significant budget cuts and funding losses. The looming crisis had been anticipated; thus, humanitarian aid professionals have already begun to think about a response, and how the field can best respond to the new challenges. Collaboration, solidarity, and embracing the complexity inherent in addressing multiple priorities; these three themes point the path to the future of humanitarian aid.

---

The recent announcement by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) of their withdrawal from Beirut, due to an ongoing staffing and financial crisis signals a warning for all organisations involved in humanitarian aid. The ICRC is the founding organisation of the humanitarian aid movement. Founded in 1863 by Henri Dunant to provide assistance to victims of armed conflict, the ICRC, which is based in Geneva, laid the foundation for humanitarian aid action. Their advocacy for the support of victims of war and other situations of violence led to the declaration of the Geneva Conventions. Henri Dunant was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, for the creation

of the ICRC and initiating the first of a series of Geneva Conventions in 1864. Today, however, the ICRC faces not only massive budget cuts, but also anticipated funding losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ICRC, in common with humanitarian aid organisations, will have to share a decreasing funding pool in a post-pandemic world that anticipates increased demand. According to a report in *The New Humanitarian*, this projected increase was based on data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) dated January 2020, which could not have anticipated the actual increase from 2021 onward due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Every country in the world has designated funding to address the immediate health costs of the pandemic. In many countries, these funds would have previously been allocated to humanitarian aid. The shortfall in many regions of the world will be much more than that estimated in the graph below, dated 1 January 2020.<sup>1</sup>

## ‘Building Back Fairer’<sup>2</sup> —

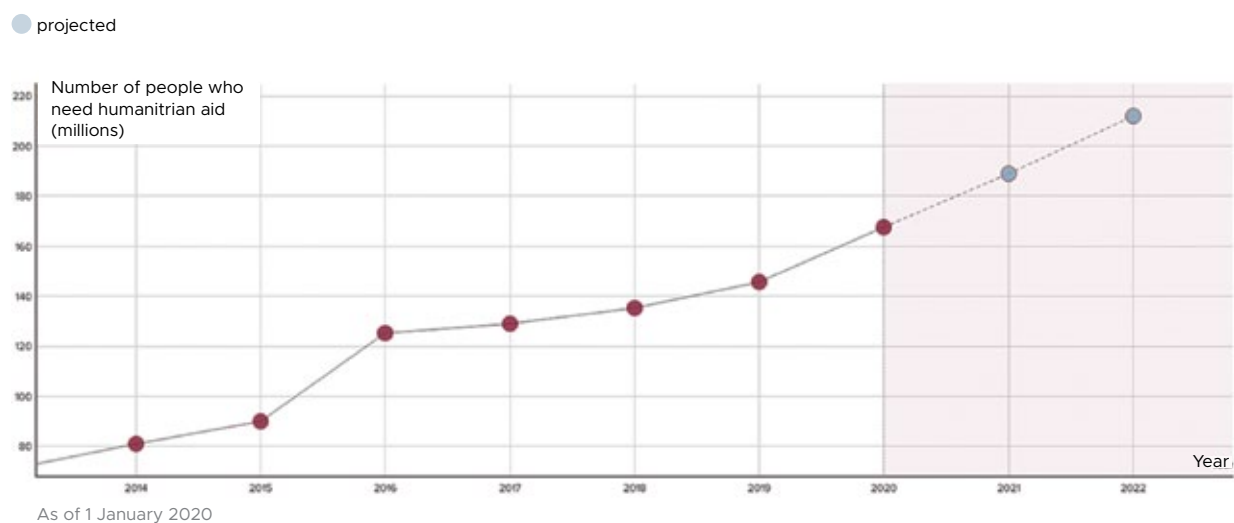
### Challenges and Opportunities

Through this pandemic, we have learned new ways to work; new ways to balance our work and home lives; and new ways to communicate. Travel restrictions have forced international aid organisations to rely on domestic resources at the community, urban, regional, and national levels, and to adjust, revise, and deliver programs through remote collaboration and consultation.

The terms “global North” and “global South” have been revealed as insufficient to capture local nuance, diversity, and strengths. We have a unique opportunity in this next period to reform the structure and delivery of humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup> In December 2020, The New Humanitarian conducted a survey of humanitarian aid workers in policy and in the field, asking them for recommendations — a wish list for the renewal of humanitarian aid able to meet current challenges in this financially under-resourced, post-pandemic world. Their responses, reflections from the field and suggestions for a way forward, will resonate with all currently working in humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup>

Three underlying themes emerged from the published responses. First, building upon the mantra of “trade not aid,” is a call for economic cooperation. What is significant about this theme

### Estimated HUMANITARIAN NEEDS, 2014–2022



*The number of people who need emergency aid around the world will exceed 200 million by 2022, according to UN projections. The trend is driven by climate extremes and conflict*

source: OCHA, needs overview, 2014–2020.  
Financial Tracking Service

is its starting point. It is a call to begin with the citizens and with civil society, not with state-state cooperation. At the community, district, and national levels, agencies should foster the mergers of NGOs, rather than competition between them. We have heard from numerous NGOs, as with small businesses, that they have been unable to survive the pandemic working on their own. The funding is too fragmented. Anticipated cuts for the next budget year have forced NGOs to abandon any plans

for expansion. Indeed, NGOs are struggling to maintain programs currently underway, often at the expense of laying off local staff.

What would a new model of collaboration look like? Sharing data, staff, interventions that cut across aid categories (nutrition, gender-based violence, disease management/control, education) may ensure continuity in fragile or vulnerable situations. If we look at Venezuela, a country that has shunned international aid support, over the past year, we read of “micro-NGOs.” These are organisations of three people addressing a community-level need, using community-level resources. We need to think about scale as well as delivery.

The second theme, solidarity, builds on the first. The climate crisis is real, in some countries devastatingly so. The recent floods in South Sudan may render any relief work currently in

place undeliverable and requests for increased funding unmet. The pandemic has highlighted our climate crisis as we focused on respiratory challenges due to COVID-19. We witnessed media videos of air pollution in Delhi, with civilians

unable to see across a street. Restrictions on cars and other transport vehicles demonstrated to the Indian government and people that their air could become breathable again. “Climate crisis” and “humanitarian crisis” are now inter-related in our

**“The terms ‘global North’ and ‘global South’ have been revealed as insufficient to capture local nuance, diversity, and strengths. We have a unique opportunity in this next period to reform the structure and delivery of humanitarian aid.”**

humanitarian aid vocabulary. These challenges require more than a state-level response. How do we enable the inter-level, inter-national, inter-generational conversation to move to policy?

The third theme takes us to the global levels of policy and guidance. It is not only the ICRC that currently faces a deficit of millions of dollars. We have not yet seen the effects of Brexit, and the uncoupling of UK aid from the European Union, on UK-and-EU-funded humanitarian aid programs. We do know there will not be funding increases. We need to pool resources — human, social and economic — in a world that, partly due to COVID-19, rests very easily on the level of nation-state. The reasons for this shift to the national gaze are understandable. We realise that the pandemic does not look the same in Fiji as it does in Colombia. Strategies

for countering the pandemic will vary between Myanmar and Ghana. We acknowledge the need for policy that is set at the national level. The question arises: how do national priorities mesh with global policy-making? While it is necessary to focus on the national level to develop and implement appropriate strategies, do these undermine “universality”?<sup>4</sup> I think not. We can embrace the complexity of meeting local, national, regional, and global challenges as opportunities to construct truly collaborative and cooperative intersectoral, international programs and policies. We start with the recipients of humanitarian aid — their voices, their needs.

*Dr. Maureen Malowany was trained in the History of Medicine, sub-Saharan Africa and Public Health from McGill University and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. As a Wellcome Trust Research Fellow, she taught at the University of Oxford. She is currently Lecturer in Global Health at the Glocal Program and Lecturer and IMPH Alumni Academic Coordinator with the Braun School of Public Health & Community Medicine, Hebrew University–Hadassah.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in The New Humanitarian. 2020. “Ten Humanitarian Crises and Trends to Watch in 2020.” Accessed online 3 January 2021.

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/1/1/humanitarian-crisis-to-watch>

<sup>2</sup> Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P., Herd, E., Morrison, J. 2020. “Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. The Pandemic, Socioeconomic and Health Inequalities in England.” London: Institute of Health Equity.

<sup>3</sup> The New Humanitarian. 2021. “My hope for 2021 is...” Accessed 7 Jan. 2021:

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/01/05/humanitarian-aid-hopes-2021>

<sup>4</sup> Horton, R. 2021. “Offline: The Age of Universal History.” *The Lancet*, Vol 397. p. 11.