

WHAF Summit Series

Aid Re-imagined Global Summit 2020

Background

As a follow up to the World Humanitarian Action Forum (WHAF) held in October 2019, we are committed to continuing to strengthen the connectivity, cooperation and dialogue within the humanitarian aid sector. Our aim is to protect the sector and contribute to making it fit for purpose.

At times of major global crises, change is inevitable and questions need to be asked. COVID-19 has indeed changed the way the world works. Could COVID-19 be the latest opportunity for the much-needed change to happen in the aid sector too? How do we reimagine aid through the “core responsibilities” that were set out in the “Agenda for Humanity”? The need to give greater control to local groups has been widely acknowledged, but efforts to this effect have seen little progress. This discrepancy has been especially evident during the current COVID-19 crisis, with countless examples of local actors taking on increasing responsibility and risk with very little if any credit or direct funding to do so. International actors, despite the commitments on paper, continue expanding their fundraising base in global South, thereby continue marginalising local/national actors within their own contexts. How will our leadership’s responses to the economic and geopolitical shift and the narrative of global economic trends shape the future of aid and humanitarian financing in particular? What should the humanitarian space and aid sector in general look like and more importantly *feel* like?

With the “new normal” of COVID-19, characterised by “overwhelmed healthcare systems, grounded planes, crushed economies, and forced changes to the very way we all live and work,” it is imperative for the aid sector to adapt accordingly.¹ While these challenges are unprecedented, they present a unique opportunity to reflect and to act on many of the existing commitments that INGOs, NGOs, and CSOs alike have already made to transform the sector. Moving forward, it is crucial that humanitarian and development projects are not only self-reflexive but also constantly acknowledging, interrogating, and challenging the existing paradigm in order to respond to our rapidly changing reality. The pandemic may indeed serve as a catalyst for change that dramatically disrupts our way of understanding the world, laying bare the inadequacies and injustices of the current system so clearly that challenges to the status quo may no longer be placated by rhetorical shifts. In the pursuit of a humanitarian sector that works for everyone, international practitioners must prioritise localisation not only to magnify the voices of those directly affected by crises but also to actively ground understandings of the economic, social, and political structures that produce poverty and inequality in grassroots realities. Fundamentally, the geopolitical power dynamics that underpin the international aid ecosystem must be reimaged truly from the bottom up—allowing local organisations to take the lead. Change is the only option if we are to adequately address the growing demands of global inequity and instability.

¹ Jessica Alexander, 2020. The New Humanitarian.

In particular, the summit will aim to address the following key question:

How can aid organisations proactively reshape the aid sector such that it is fit for purpose to protect and address the needs of the most vulnerable communities?

Previous Reform Efforts & WHAF's Contribution

The available literature on existing and previous efforts to reform the aid sector largely consists of reports that suggest reforms similar to those outlined in the concept note above. Unfortunately, there is little evaluative information on the success of such efforts. While useful, much of this information is outdated—please review some examples listed below. Ultimately, it is necessary to better understand how WHAF can contribute to and align with these efforts, push the boundaries of aid, and work to fill the gaps that exist within the sector.

- Overseas Development Institute (ODI):
 - In 2006, ODI's Working Paper 278 entitled "Reforming the international aid architecture: Options and ways forward"² listed five options for reform of the international aid architecture including their respective advantages and disadvantages.³ The paper concludes by suggesting a "twin-track approach" that focuses on implementing the Paris Declaration and strengthening recipient governments to enhance localized aid coordination.
 - In 2007, ODI released a study that sought to identify and measure the early impacts of humanitarian reform initiatives on the financing of humanitarian action.⁴ This study included a number of new financing mechanisms of the time,⁵ and found that Global humanitarian funding did not appear to be growing more predictable or needs-based, and in fact often contradicts the stated requirements of the international humanitarian system. Additionally, the study found that UN agencies increased their share of direct contributions from donors while NGOs received a smaller share of direct bilateral contributions from donor governments. There were some positive findings associated with Humanitarian Coordinators engaging in a more comprehensive planning process that channeled funds more effectively—leading to more focused positive impact.
- ALNAP
 - The most recent ALNAP SOH Report (2018-2021) aimed to define and describe the architecture of the humanitarian system(s), assess the humanitarian caseload, and assess performance and shifts in practice.⁶ The final report for this study is expected to be published Quarter 2–3 2022.
 - The previous edition,⁷ published in 2018, found no progress in sufficiency; limited progress in relevance & appropriateness, accountability & participation, and efficiency; improvement in effectiveness, connectedness, and complementarity; and a decline in coverage and coherence.

² <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/892.pdf>

³ Option A – Do nothing. Option B – Rely on Harmonisation and Alignment, in the Paris Declaration. Option C – Harmonisation and Alignment, with additional features. Option D – Multilateralism (i.e. increased multilateralisation of aid delivery). Option E – Empowerment of aid-receiving countries.

⁴ <https://www.odi.org/publications/3181-humanitarian-financing-reform>

⁵ Including the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Common Humanitarian Funds (CHF), country-specific Emergency Response Funds (ERFs), the roll-out of the Cluster Approach, and the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative.

⁶ <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-fifth-edition-inception-report>

⁷ https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/SOHS%202018%20Summary%20online_2.pdf

- United Nations
 - o The UN development system reform effort, mandated in May 2018, aims to create a system that is more integrated, more focused on delivery on the ground, more accountable, and with capacities, skillsets and resources better aligned to the 2030 Agenda. This reform is focused on achieving the SDGs and has unanimous support from Member States. Unlike previous reforms, it seeks to address structural challenges in coordination mechanisms and mindsets, and places significant responsibility on Member States for transformational impact.⁸
 - The ongoing UN development reform includes the development of a Business Innovations Strategic Results Group (BIG), a Business Operations Strategy (BOS) that will facilitate the strategic planning, management, and M&E, and the integration of the Development Coordination Office (DCO) into the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of Official Development Aid (ODA)-eligible organizations.⁹
- Centre for Global Development (CGD)
 - o The CDG’s 2019 “**Five Takeaways on the Future of Humanitarian Reform**”¹⁰ calls for practical steps toward people-driven aid including a shift in power dynamics, new financing models that prioritize collective impact over siloed programming and fragmented funding practices, and geographically targeted, explicitly multisectoral, and participatory area-based coordination to compliment the cluster system. These changes, Konyndyk suggests, require a model of aid that is more efficient and user-centric, and will require significant political will and political space to come to fruition.
- For US-specific initiatives see Brookings Institution 2007¹¹ and 2016.¹²

What makes WHAF different from the efforts mentioned above?

- WHAF is unique because of its global and inclusive approach. Crucially, WHAF approaches the re-imagining of the aid sector with a focus on collaborating with and elevating the voices of actors from the Global South. While international powers shape most reform agendas, the Aid Reimagined Summit Series will centre perspectives from the Global South to create an environment of inclusive and equal exchange and ideation. Additionally, WHAF aims to address the system as a whole—breaking down silos within the aid sector in order to better understand how our focus areas span across issues and efforts. We hope that the WHAF series can act as a catalyst for a whole-system approach to the reimagining of aid that allows for increased collaboration, coordination, and inclusion.

⁸ <https://reform.un.org/content/un-development-system-reform-101>

⁹ <https://reform.un.org/content/development-reform>

¹⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/five-takeaways-future-humanitarian-reform.pdf> (Konyndyk 2019)

¹¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/foreign-assistance-reform-successes-failures-and-next-steps/>

¹² <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ingram-aid-reform-final2.pdf>

Summary

Aim: Contribute to re-shaping the aid sector such that it is fit for purpose

Approach:

- 1) Provide a cross-cutting platform for engagement of local and international NGOs to exchange ideas and strategies on re-shaping the aid sector
- 2) From the consultations, inform the research and develop a set of priorities for future advocacy campaigns
- 3) Commission a research study on ‘Aid Reimagined’ with a policy brief on the key changes to be made to the sector

Who is it for?

Local, national NGO, INGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, UN institutions, Donors, Philanthropists, Academics, the private sector, the media and community organisations.

Proposed timeframe:

- **Virtual Summit: 24 & 25 November 2020**
- Regional Summits: March and June 2021
- WHAF Global Summit: October 2021
(and launch of Aid Re-imagined Research Report)

Summit Series 2020-21

The Aid Re-imagined initiative consists of two series, with the second series made up of three regional summits (see summary map on p9).

Series one is made up of the November 2020 Summit and the Research Study.

The 2020 Summit will set the scene for the Aid Re-imagined initiative, addressing the question of *what* issues specifically and realistically need to be addressed and *why* we need to act now.

Some of the key questions include

- What is the specific problem we are looking to solve? The related context and research for the need to address this issue, with examples from the past and present and a look into the future
- More than a local actors’ perspective – led by locals for internationals to discuss the following 3 key topics (*Refer to p.5 for more details on each topic*):
 1. The Future state of Humanitarianism
 2. The Decolonisation of Aid
 3. Local Coordination and Representation

At the end of the November Summit, we will launch the Research Study which aims to address what needs to change within the system and how to get there.

Series two will be made up of regional summits that will occur quarterly, such that the change is led from the local context and culminating in the final WHAF Summit (October

2021). Each regional summit will address a specific issue or set of issues relevant to a regional context and set the agenda for the change that needs to happen. The regional summits will contribute to the research report which will be presented at the final Summit for policy makers to take forward.

Tangible outcomes of the Summit Series:

- A comprehensive research study on 'Aid Reimagined' with a policy brief on the key changes to be made to the sector
- A series of advocacy campaigns and activities to deliver on the recommendations of the policy brief for the system change needed
- A global south-led consortium of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors to share and follow up on change initiatives

Topics addressed at the Aid Reimagined Global Summit 2020

1. The future state of humanitarianism - what should aid look and feel like?

Historically, political, economic, and environmental disasters such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2013 Typhoon in the Philippines have prompted shifts in humanitarian practice. Despite constant efforts to become more effective, Jessica Alexander (2020) suggests that the system itself has failed to consider a humbler and more complementary role that would “plug gaps in the domestic response but not overrun it.” Additionally, Raphael Gorgeu suggests that the contemporary moment calls for comprehensive, integrated, and multidimensional approaches that operate simultaneously with increasingly tailored responses that require incisive contextual insight. Unfortunately, the existing system controlled by a select few elite institutions limits space for local actors and smaller humanitarian outfits—often relegating them to the margins. In light of the current crisis, the future state of humanitarianism must take into account the everchanging landscape of stakeholders that shapes humanitarian practice, principles, and the very concepts of aid and assistance. Ultimately, as Ann Hendrix-Jenkins suggests, “[t]he dark side of international development needs to be dismantled, and then transformed by developing different systems that are humane and restorative,” and both local and international actors have a crucial role in this shift. A post-COVID humanitarianism could very well be characterised by increased community involvement, solidarity, and new forms of cooperation if managed effectively. A concerted and coordinated effort to challenge existing power structures, improve accountability, and strengthen trust is essential for building an aid sector that looks and feels right not necessarily for those at the top, but first and foremost for those living through crises.

Questions:

- Despite laudable aims, the aid sector is often criticised for becoming exceedingly complex, Northern dominated, overburdened, and even structurally obsolete. *What could a more agile aid sector look like? And, would a paired down system be more desirable or are there other pathways to reform?*

- In reference to Raphael Gorgeu’s query: “Which humanitarian agencies and organisations will survive the crisis, which will collapse, and which may come out stronger?” ...
 - *How can we interrogate their respective practices to build a more resilient sector that is fit for purpose?*
 - *Will the current economic and political trends prove detrimental to the existing diversity and complexity of local NGOs, resulting in consolidation within the sector? If so, what can be done to protect this diversity?*
- Gorgeu suggests that the “increased role of national governments and State authorities may also translate into a growing tendency...to impose normative and administrative frameworks on aid organisations in order to regulate, register and control their activities” in a post COVID-19 era. *How can we work to minimise this without depoliticising aid responses and continuing to acknowledge aid as Ferguson’s anti-politics machine?*

2. The decolonisation of aid – shifting the power and political balance

Colonisation in aid is often understood as Western practitioners imposing their agendas on low and middle income countries by controlling key resources, often with little input from local stakeholders.¹³ Today, despite laudable aims, development remains marked by the vestiges of a global colonial past as unequal power dynamics of racism and classism permeate the sector. Paul Currión cites these realities as the “original sin of the modern aid industry” which is itself the direct descendant of the European colonial empires. These dynamics manifest in countless ways, including funding flows that tend to map to soft power relationships between former colonial powers and colonies, capturing the domestic fundraising sources, and the systemic disregard for local knowledge in favour of “expert knowledge” exported from the West.¹⁴ This unequal dynamic allows Western powers to not only determine economic policy in the Global South, but also to leverage influence to shape social and political realities that have tangible consequences for communities in crisis. COVID-19, however, may be a long-awaited catalyst for decolonisation efforts as international NGOs scale back overseas operations and local NGOs and CSOs must rapidly organise to respond to the crisis on their own. Additionally, rising racial tensions around the globe in conjunction with the growing Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the white supremacy culture in aid and brought anti-racist policy and practice to the forefront of development discourse. Will this shift prompt powerful Western organisations to view their local partners as indispensable to the design and implementation of their programs? It is crucial for the contemporary aid sector to explicitly prioritise the decolonisation of aid through progressive practices that actively seek to shift power dynamics and centring local voices in all arenas including research, funding decisions, program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. More sustainable and equitable practices must include prioritising the agendas of field workers, researchers, policymakers, and emerging leaders from the

¹³ Full video of Dexev discussion of decolonisation [here](#).

¹⁴ Paul Currión gives a number of useful examples of the manifestations of the legacies of colonialism within aid including: “in how the career trajectory of many international aid workers often resembles that of colonial administrators; in how the “beneficiary” has been constructed as a post-colonial Other; in how local civil society is shaped to fit the mold of “the NGO” rather than more culturally appropriate or politically effective forms; in how “national” staff must learn how to conform to “international” norms in order to be allowed access to positions of power within international organisations”

Global South. It is crucial to remain conscious of whose visions for the future of aid are being privileged in this post-COVID re-imagining, and that industry leaders demonstrate their commitment to the decolonisation of the aid sector by tackling the structural issues that perpetuate inequality.

Questions:

- *How do we prevent the language of anti-racism in aid from being turned into a “fuzz word” and co-opted by corporate processes (i.e. mentioned only in D&I trainings, workshops, and conferences)?*
- *How do the vestiges of colonialism manifest within different fields within the aid sector? Research?¹⁵ Humanitarian/disaster response? Economic development policy?*
 - *And what steps must we take to unravel the power structures holding these processes in place?*

3. Local coordination and representation – true partnerships and capacity exchange

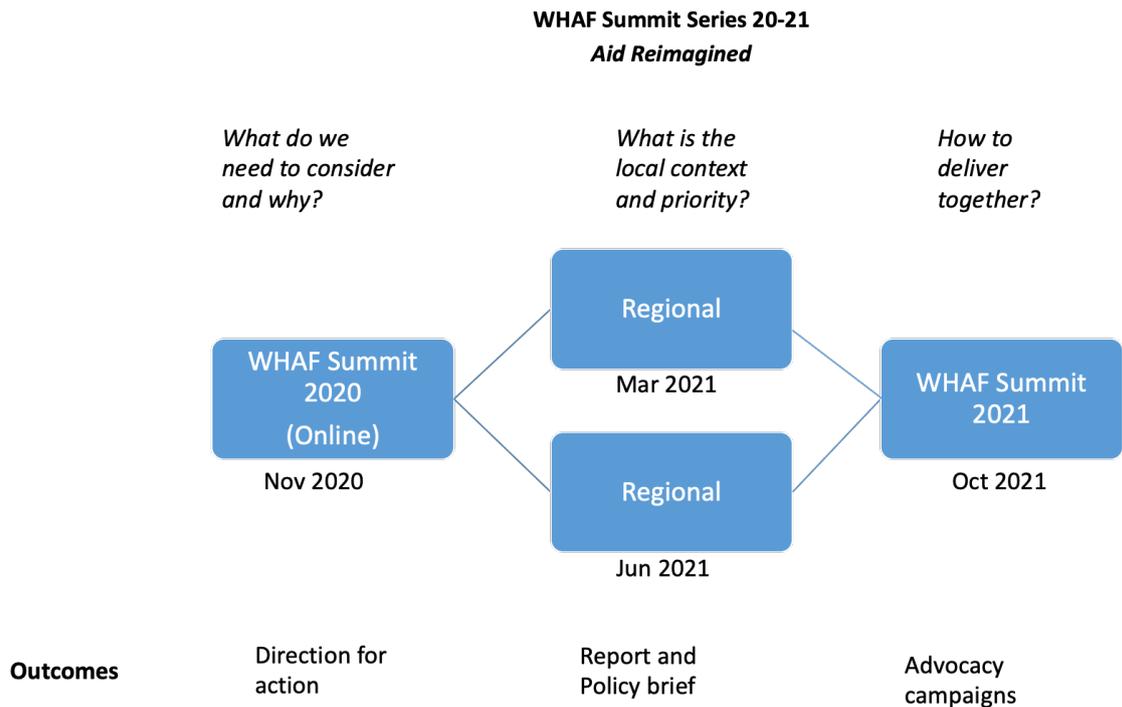
As outlined in the WHAF 2019 report, “localisation” comprises six key elements: improved partnerships and visibility for local actors, increased funding, increased capacities, better coordination and complementarity, policy influence, and participation from the local population. Such efforts often remain confined within normative power dynamics, however, and there is an increasing demand for a more radical reimagining of the relationship between donor and crisis-affected communities. This pursuit of equality is closely tied to the decolonization of the aid sector, as the prevailing rhetoric of capacity strengthening privileges Western values and fails to appropriately acknowledge and utilize the expertise possessed by researchers and organizations from the Global South. The “localization agenda” has been at the forefront of recent discussions around the pandemic, as the vital role of local NGOs and CSOs has become undeniable. Unfortunately, the space for these local actors within the international system is limited by the space provided to them by international organizations and their capacity to access international funding, which can pose a significant challenge. Ultimately, sustainable change is locally driven, and local organizations must not only be incorporated as equal partners in planning and praxis, but must also be given to resources to succeed. A re-imagining of this structure must begin with a true two-way exchange of information rather than a paternalistic transfer of “best practices” from North to South, and positive change within the sector will depend on how power is shared between organisations. Building truly collaborative models is crucial to the success and sustainability of aid programs moving forward, as these processes provide a unique opportunity to reduce power imbalances through increased trust and reciprocity. A shift in the sector will require INGOs to rethink models of engagement and focus more on strengthening relationships with the communities they are supporting, including engaging emerging leaders and relinquishing control. Additionally, international organizations have a responsibility to ensure that national staff are fully supported to deliver assistance. Local voices must not just be heard but actively centred and prioritized, and concerted efforts to accommodate these groups’ genuine participation are crucial.

¹⁵ See June 2020 Oxfam article: “How can Covid-19 be the catalyst to decolonise development research?”

Questions:

- *Although classic aid is often seen as neo-colonial project that exports values and practices from the West, what are some examples of how are things changing? What actors are driving the conversation forward in a meaningful and productive way? What models of capacity exchange and equal partnership should we emulate?*
- *Is localisation a radical rethinking of aid or does it represent a primarily rhetorical shift that fails to eschew broader power structures? Is it, as Paul Currion posits, simply “language used to avoid talking about the lingering effects of racism” (i.e. perceived need for capacity development)?*
- *What can be done to ensure that local NGOs have a seat at the table at high-level meetings? What can be done to reform the process, so that the local actors set agenda and framework through a South-South and/or South-North and triangular framework?*

WHAF Summit Summary Map



*subject to change

Reimagine - Reshape - Realise

About WHAF

The World Humanitarian Action Forum (WHAF) is a global initiative, with involvement of more than 65 humanitarian and development organisations. It aims to encourage effective collaboration to better serve affected communities.

The Aid Reimagined Summit is organised by WHAF and the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and in collaboration with several partners including ALNAP, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) and The New Humanitarian.