



CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
LEADERSHIP



LISTENING AND LOCALISATION

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Cover image: Kenyan children perform
during the closing ceremony of the World
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“Did you think that the UN system would stand by and say, ‘Okay, let’s see how the system can change’. Of course not!”

— Member 1



A scene from the opening ceremony
of the World Humanitarian Summit
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Executive summary

“Did you think that the UN system would stand by and say, ‘Okay, let’s see how the system can change’. Of course not!”—Member 1

The humanitarian sector has long attracted condemnation for its inability to hear criticisms of its actions, ensuring a failure to address them or be accountable for their effects. At the landmark 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul, this long standing ‘dialectical deafness’ appeared to have finally run its course.

Chief among the summit’s momentous commitments was an unexpected pledge by donors and aid organisations to allocate 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local responders by 2020—a commitment that appeared to heed strenuous calls from Global South humanitarians for increased localisation of power and resources during the consultations that led up to the summit.

This surprising pledge followed from two things: listening to the ‘voices’ from the Global South and heeding their calls to reshape the way humanitarian assistance is delivered.

These voices and this listening occurred during a comprehensive, multiyear consultation process that engaged 23,000 participants. There were eight regional

consultations as well as thematic and global consultations which culminated in the attendance of 9,000 people at the summit itself.

During the consultations, a growing sense of anticipation at the possibility of reshaping the sector stimulated a powerful sense of solidarity among those from the Global South. It seemed that momentum had been created and it could not be stopped.

This research asked how opportunities for such revolutionary, effective and inventive listening were created. We asked further whether this was a single listening ‘event’ or indicated a move by the sector to embed such listening practices and spaces into the future.

In our interviews with 20 key stakeholders in the humanitarian system, we questioned whether the WHS process and the Grand Bargain, with its apparently hefty commitment to localisation, indicated a profound shift towards a longer-term trend to listen to humanitarians usually excluded from such summits.



World leaders and heads of state pose for a family photograph on the first day of the World Humanitarian Summit.

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We learned the following:

1

The design of the WHS process was a departure from the norms of UN summitry;

2

A multi-stakeholder process designed to offset existing power dynamics between local and international actors involved the creation of unique consultation spaces across regions and themes;

3

The consultations created what we identify as intentional listening spaces for those who have less power in the system to have some influence, to speak, to be listened to and to co-design the outcomes that would address their needs;

4

The listening spaces were authorised to engage in contentious discussion and disagreement where necessary; there was no demand for consensus;

5

Respondents participated in these spaces alongside others who had shared the same frustrations for many years and whose issues were given “a credible platform”;

6

Despite the many differences expressed in these spaces, significant clashes were avoided by an understanding that “they were all united on the need to localise”; and,

7

There were also indicators of shock by some Global North humanitarians that they were focusing on the wrong things, with more than one conceding that they do not create the space to really listen to what people want.

However, six months out from the WHS, defiance by the Global North began to surface. The intentional listening spaces that had been created were reorienting once again into hierarchical political spaces, and not just between states and others, but within and between UNOCHA, INGOs, and locals who differed strongly on the

need to radically transform the system. There was increased dissatisfaction among member states with the consultation processes, that, according to them, fell outside normal UN Protocols and reduced their legitimate control. This prompted a change to definitions of success. Whereas the active consultation period had been

'field based' and focused on affected peoples, the new challenge was how to "translate all of these nice conversations to meaningful change" (UN North 2).

The member states and some UN leadership, including within OCHA, were concerned that the processes to date had entailed too much listening, and too many voices.

The summit itself was a theatrical affair, with the central show taking place behind closed doors, a range of sideshows, and no space left for listening. The Grand Bargain commitment of 25 per cent of funding to local actors was diluted, reframing localisation to be "as local as possible, as international as necessary".

This, from the perspective of Global South participants and allies, was as much a Grand Silencing of their claims, and a Grand Refusal to convert the listening into action.

There were more than 30 signatories to the original Grand Bargain, all from the Global North. It contained no representation from the Global South.

The listening had definitively concluded.

Our research concluded that the WHS amounted to an historic listening moment, rather than any *ongoing* commitment to modifying the existing humanitarian North-South speaking and listening divide. The consultations with vast numbers of previously silenced humanitarians and the fleeting architecture of listening they represented were extraordinary achievements. This potential, however, was undercut by the very politics and systemic power relations that were being challenged.

Today, this ongoing humanitarian 'deafness', or 'refusal to listen' may represent a short-term return to the status quo, but it has not silenced calls for a redistribution of power, and the momentum for change among those away from the centre endures.



A woman attends the Transforming Humanitarian Action with and for Young People Special Session at the World Humanitarian Summit.
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“[UN] Member States [were] telling them [the leaders of and participants in the consultation process], ‘No, hold on, where are you going, guys? We’ve done tens of summits in relation to all kinds of issues... on the environment to summits on sustainable developments, to summits on human rights, to summits on population... all kinds of things. And we were always in control. So now you want a summit where [Member States] will not be in control? It will not happen’”

— Member 1

Introduction

“[UN] Member States [were] telling them [the leaders of and participants in the consultation process], ‘No, hold on, where are you going, guys? We’ve done tens of summits in relation to all kinds of issues... on the environment to summits on sustainable developments, to summits on human rights, to summits on population... all kinds of things. And we were always in control. So now you want a summit where [Member States] will not be in control? It will not happen’”—Member 1

The World Humanitarian Summit was a landmark event for the humanitarian sector. The outcomes and failures of the 2016 summit are by now widely debated and reported, and while there are a range of perspectives, it is generally accepted that despite its promise for transformative change, the summit failed to deliver on this front.

Yet, it was not without successes. Localisation emerged so powerfully through the summit process, that it is now firmly lodged as a central issue on the global humanitarian agenda. Strenuous calls from Global South humanitarians for increased localisation of power and resources were heard throughout all the consultations that led up to the summit. We report here on the findings of a research project framed through the analytic lens of listening, especially the space created throughout the WHS process and summit to listen to the ‘voices’ from the Global South and heed calls to reshape the way humanitarian assistance is delivered.



President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pose with children during the closing ceremony of the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Metin Pala


The international humanitarian system has been battling a sense of ongoing crisis. Unmet need, increasingly complex humanitarian contexts, the everyday challenges to humanitarian principles, risk, and safety issues, are all headline issues. Deeper issues of power, racism, politics, representation, and colonialism within a humanitarian architecture are emerging as equally significant challenges.

In 2012, the former UN Secretary General, Dr Ban Ki Moon, announced a plan to convene a World Humanitarian Summit, to enhance collaboration among humanitarian actors and organisations for a more accountable, and robust

humanitarian system. His vision was for the summit to be “more than an event” and “much broader” than an intergovernmental process. A multi-year process of consultations would be facilitated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), leading into the Summit.

From May 2014 to October 2015, more than 23,000 people across 151 countries were consulted through eight regional consultations and countless virtual and in-person regional and thematic consultations. This was the most extensive and inclusive humanitarian consultation series ever held.

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This research aimed to uncover how the calls for radical change to the spatialised power relations between the Global South and Global North were voiced and heard.

Representatives of Affected Communities during their meeting with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Oktay Çilesiz

Radical calls for transformative change emerged and were boldly framed in the consultation's final synthesis report, *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action*. This report was shaped by the repeated call to "put people affected by crises at the heart of humanitarian action" (WHS Secretariat, 2015, p. 138), and to open this "outdated" and traditionally "closed" system to a "widening array of actors" (p. 6). The subtitle of the report of the consultations—*Global voices calling for action*—captured the sensibility of the consultations as listening spaces where local knowledge might affect a reshaping of the system.

It was in this context that the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 took place. There were high hopes, to "deliver better... take stock of responsibilities... and proffer new commitments" (Agenda for Humanity, 2016). The humanitarian sector attracts criticism for its 'dialectical deafness' (l'Anson and Pfeifer 2013), and subsequent inability to hear criticisms of its actions, ensuring a failure to address them, and, perhaps more importantly, making it deaf to the call for accountability. The WHS process appeared to provide a counter to charges of deafness.

This research aimed to uncover how the calls for radical change to the spatialised power relations between the Global South and Global North were voiced and heard.

Therefore, this research asked whether and how opportunities for listening were created. We asked further whether this was a single listening 'event' or indicated a move by the sector to embed such listening spaces into the future.

We framed these inquiries through theories and discourses of 'listening'. Conceptually, we draw on Macnamara's 'architecture of listening'

We explored insider perspectives on the processes of speaking and listening that occurred, and importantly how that listening shaped the outcomes of the consultations, the Grand Bargain, and the WHS.

(2015), which highlights the loss of trust created when governments and institutions fail to listen. Empirically, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 20 stakeholders from the UN, members of the WHS Secretariat, staff members from international and national non-governmental organisations, and other members of civil society who participated in the consultations and/or attended the WHS. We explored insider perspectives on the processes of speaking and listening that occurred, and importantly how that listening shaped the outcomes of the consultations, the Grand Bargain, and the WHS. We also analysed secondary documents that emerged from the consultations and the WHS.

This research was undertaken by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership at Deakin University. We express our thanks to the participants who generously gave of their time and expertise. All names used within this publication are pseudonyms unless otherwise indicated (reflective of the desires of each of the research participants).

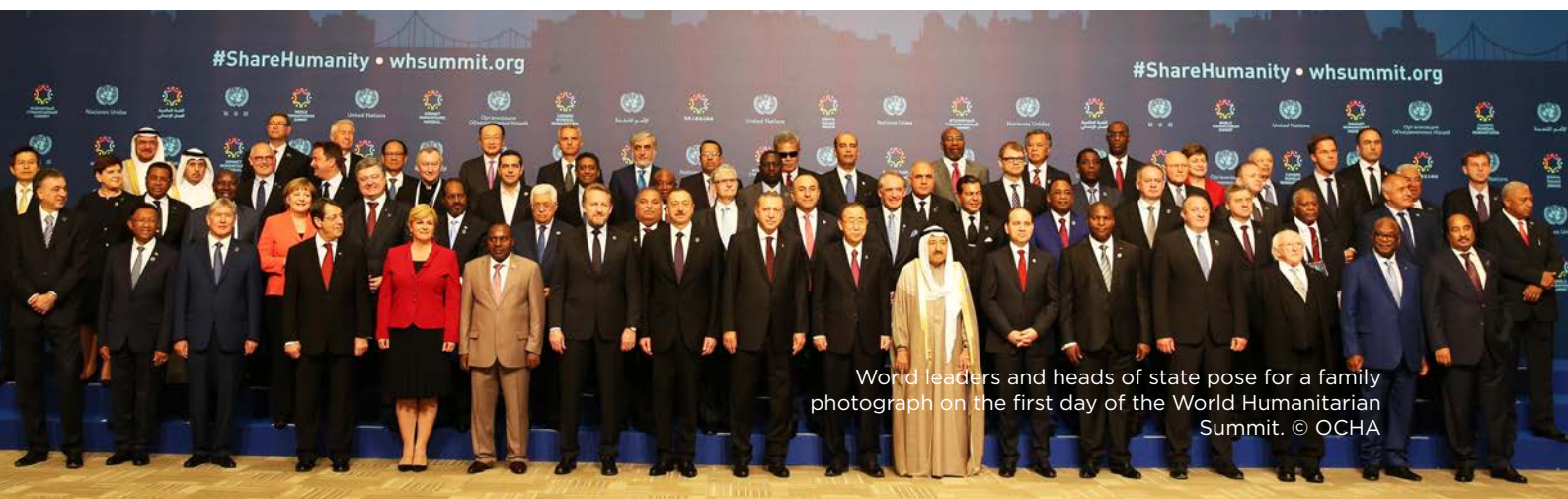
A new way of listening

In January 2012, at the beginning of his second five-year term, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon launched the ‘Secretary-General’s Five-Year Action Plan’. Under objective III, the plan recommends that the UN must “build a more global, accountable, and robust humanitarian system” and refers to “enhancing collaboration among humanitarian organisations, particularly from the Global South”. The same objective lays out the plan to convene a “world humanitarian summit to help share knowledge and establish common best practices among the wide spectrum of organisations involved in humanitarian action”. In September 2013, Ban Ki-moon announced that Turkey would host the 2016 summit, and he announced his expansive vision for the summit to be “more than an event” and “much broader” than an intergovernmental process. A multi-year process of consultations would be facilitated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), led by Under-Secretary-General Baroness, Valerie Amos.

In May 2014, Baroness Amos appointed the founder and former president of Mercy Malaysia, Dr Jemilah Mahmood, to head the WHS Secretariat. Over the next 16 months, with clear political cover and “marching orders” from Baroness Amos, the Secretariat led the most extensive humanitarian consultations ever attempted. This comprised eight regional and seven thematic consultations and included extensive online consultations, involving more than 23,000 people across 151 countries.

The results derived from these consultations were compiled and published on 1 October 2015. *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action* was presented at the Global Consultation in Geneva, which convened from 14-16 October 2015 to consider the outcomes of the multi-stakeholder process. The Geneva meeting hosted more than 1,200 representatives from 153 countries and aimed to “broaden support for the findings of the consultations” leading into the World Humanitarian Summit (World Humanitarian Summit *Global Consultation Final Report*, pp. 2-3).

The World Humanitarian Summit



The World Humanitarian Summit was a climactic two-day event held in Istanbul from 23–24 May 2016, which brought together 9,000 participants from 180 UN member states, including 55 Heads of State, hundreds of non-governmental organisations, the private sector, and academia. The official website of the WHS professed three aims:

1

To re-inspire and reinvigorate a commitment to humanity and to the universality of humanitarian principles;

2

To initiate ... concrete actions and commitments aimed at enabling countries and communities to better prepare for and respond to crises and be resilient to shocks; and,

3

To share best practices which can help save lives around the world, put affected people at the center of humanitarian action, and alleviate suffering.

Outputs agreed upon or launched at the summit were profuse, incorporating 3,000 commitments to action. More than 20 initiatives were either launched or strengthened, including; Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, a Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, Education Cannot Wait—a Fund for Education in Emergencies, Global Preparedness

Partnership, Global Alliance for Urban Crises, Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation, the Connecting Business Initiative, the World Bank Global Financing Response Platform, and the Agenda for Humanity, as well as its associated Platform for Action, Commitments and Transformations, the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change, and the Near Network.

The Grand Bargain

Of this bewildering array of outputs, the *The Grand Bargain—A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need* is the most significant. It is a non-legally binding series of commitments between (originally) 18 state donors, and 16 aid organisations (none from the Global South) aimed at improving aid effectiveness and efficiency. The Grand Bargain incorporated a commitment to provide 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020.

Five years after the Summit, the humanitarian sector has failed to transform, and continues to face the fundamental challenge of providing effective, efficient, and accountable aid. Accordingly, a recently concluded three-year research project found that:

“... the underlying failure to transform is rooted deep in the structures that underpin global humanitarian assistance ... The obstacle is not that we have been setting the wrong goals, but rather that we have not altered the architecture tasked with delivering on them”—Saez, Konyndyk, and Worden (2021).

Five years after the Summit, the humanitarian sector has failed to transform, and continues to face the fundamental challenge of providing effective, efficient, and accountable aid.

This report lends weight to these observations. Our findings, moreover, provide insight into the bureaucratic and political manoeuvring that enabled the humanitarian establishment to both listen to the calls for radical change, and remain unable or unwilling to enact the kinds of change demanded by the consultations, moving instead to preserve and strengthen the centralised coordination role of the humanitarian establishment.



Representatives of Affected Communities during their meeting with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.
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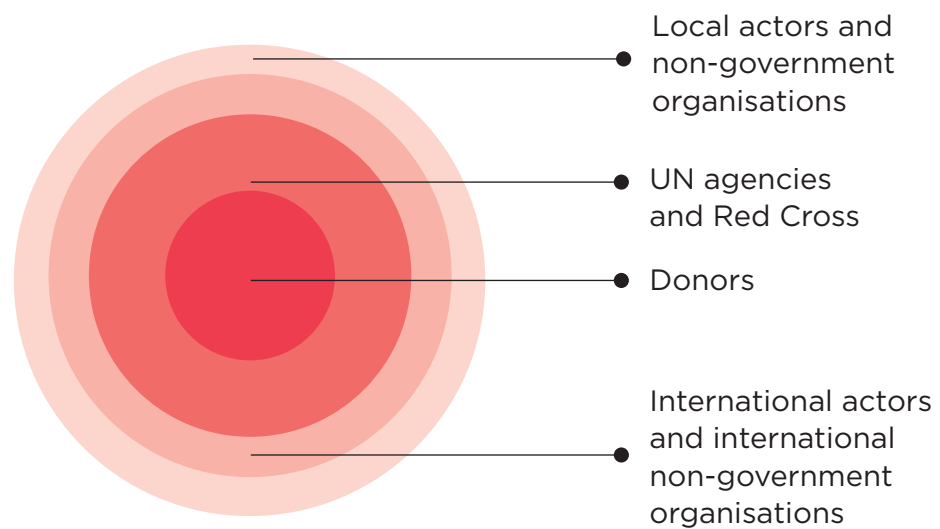
Why listening: Methodology, sample and methods

This study draws on Macnamara's (2015) 'architecture of listening' as a methodological and analytic framework to explore how the World Humanitarian Summit processes, from the consultations through to the summit itself, allowed for expressions of discontent and calls for change to surface. WHS messaging heralded the Grand Bargain as a major outcome of the process, which included an unexpected global commitment to localisation. This startling emphasis on localisation and the unforeseen commitment of 25 per cent funding to be directed locally, indicated that some profound listening had occurred.

This research asked therefore, what effected such listening on this occasion, how were effective listening spaces created throughout the process, and did the summit and its consultations, amount to a single listening 'event' or indicated an ontological shift in how international humanitarian institutions and actors will now engage with humanitarians from the Global South. L'Anson and Pfeifer have previously argued that there exists a "dialectical deafness" among humanitarians that renders them "unable" to hear any criticisms of their actions, ensuring a failure to address them, and, perhaps more importantly, making them deaf to "the call to accountability" (2013, p. 57). The WHS process, at least at first glance, appeared to counter these charges of deafness.

Macnamara's framework further sensitised our analysis to the political machinations that eventually replaced what was revealed as a somewhat remarkable architecture of

Figure 1:
Social actors
and agents
within the
social space of
humanitarianism



19 qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 insiders, identified through purposive expert sampling. They included organisers, decision makers and participants in the consultations who represent differential positions of power within the sector.

listening (the consultations) with a renovated architecture of speaking. Macnamara frames organisational listening as a means of addressing a “democratic deficit” (2015, p. 5) in government, corporations, and institutions, and a corresponding lack of trust among members and citizens. Performed effectively, constituents within a broader collective (e.g., the humanitarian system), can contribute and hold their representatives accountable through such architectures of listening. In turn, organisations can demonstrate that they have listened, building, and maintaining trust and legitimacy.

The focus on ‘listening’ in this research concerns the capacity of the humanitarian sector and its establishment to ‘listen’ to humanitarians more broadly, especially those based in areas where humanitarian assistance is provided. This encompasses national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and state actors. It includes those from the Global South, those directly affected by disasters or humanitarian crises, and those at the frontline of aid delivery who operate at the margins of a highly centralised humanitarian system.

In total, 19 qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 insiders, identified through purposive expert sampling. They included organisers, decision makers and participants in the consultations

Table 1: Participants and pseudonyms

Participant/Category details	No. Participants	Pseudonym
International institutional representatives from the Global North (i.e., UN and international institutions)	5	UN North 1-6
International institutional representatives from the Global South	2	UN South 1-2
International NGO representatives (INGOs) from the Global North	2	INGO North 1-2
Global South national NGO humanitarians	10	NGO South 1-10
Member state representative (from Global South, but neither UN official nor NGO representative)	1	Member 1

who represent differential positions of power within the sector.

The categories depicted in Table 1 identify participants by their locations within the humanitarian architecture. Concurring perspectives among those from the same category often occurred, but sometimes did not. Rather than merely reasserting these, we have named them to open them up for critical examination.

Those who were responsible for crafting and facilitating the consultations as listening spaces were humanitarians, many of whom hailed from the Global South with direct, first-hand experience of the structural and power relations between local and international actors. They are sometimes referred to as ‘allies’ within the humanitarian system.

Our analysis has been attentive to the contrasting perspectives within the field of humanitarianism and the persistent binary between the ‘international’ (rich nations

and organisations of the Global North), and the ‘local’ (workers and ‘beneficiaries’ from the Global South).

A note on terminology: ‘local’ versus ‘international’ actors

It is telling that throughout this report we deploy the binary language of local/international and the Global North and Global South. This language continues to structure the humanitarian system, its architecture, culture, and politics. It is notable and revealing that in domains outside humanitarianism the use of this language is by now largely untenable. The research participants all used this language to convey the enduring rigidity of the system and to demonstrate how they were positioned in and by it. We have followed these categories, as spoken, to highlight the oppositional positioning that continues to infuse the system; even calls for reform, such as localisation, are articulated through this binary.



Hack4Humanity Ice Breaker Challenge

Simple: Find other people who have done the following.

has published an app in an app store <i>Play Store</i>	speaks Turkish _____	speaks more than 2 languages <i>English</i>	has a first name that starts with the same letter as yours _____	can play 2 or more instruments <i>guitar</i>
has travelled to more than 8 countries <i>BLADE</i>	has worked with refugees before <i>Edith</i>	has been skydiving <i>Tobias</i>	lives in Istanbul _____	is younger than me _____
is a member of a club <i>WPT</i>	has developed both iOS and Android apps <i>WPT</i>	I have not met before today <i>WPT</i>	has a PhD _____	lives in London _____
is a participant in a hackathon <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>
is a member of a club <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>	has been in more than 2 continents <i>WPT</i>

Rather than opening the consultations in Brussels, Geneva, or New York, the first of the eight regional consultations was initiated in Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire. This choice signalled that priority would be given to listening to the Global South.

Participants in the World Humanitarian Summit Hackathon, a 24-hour challenge aiming at utilising technology in finding creative solutions to humanitarian issues. © OCHA / Salih Zeki Fazlolu

A time for listening

As noted above, the WHS Secretariat was established under the direction of Baroness Amos, head of OCHA, who appointed Dr Jemilah Mahmood to head the Secretariat, which she did throughout the consultation period, departing the post prior to the summit itself. The instigation of the broad consultation process was itself a departure from the norms ordinarily associated with international diplomacy and policymaking. This point of difference is reflected in the communications of the United Nations Office for the Coordination

of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which identified 19 June 2014 as the commencement of the regional consultations.

Rather than opening the consultations in Brussels, Geneva, or New York, the first of the eight regional consultations was initiated in Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire. This choice signalled that priority would be given to listening to the Global South. OCHA emphasised this on their website, outlining the “five things you need to know about the humanitarian summit”:



Humanitarian action needs to adapt to a changing world;



The WHS is about listening to people who have the most at stake;



Humanitarians need to be more innovative;



Everyone can be involved as each voice is important; and,



The extensive process of consultation is only just beginning.

These five statements further communicated a departure from established norms. UN summits are conventionally intergovernmental events, driven by state-centric agendas. Rather than top-down, closed door diplomatic meetings designed to determine summit outcomes in advance, the

coordinators of the consultations designed a multistakeholder process, that deliberately set out to listen to the concerns of humanitarians across the system, especially those from the Global South.

Sixteen months later, in October 2015, the findings from the global

consultations were published in a report titled *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action*. The report outlined the calls for action that surfaced during the consultations, dialogues, and written submissions, involving a total of 23,000 people across 151 countries. The findings were structured around the key action areas of dignity, safety, resilience, partnerships, and financing.

The *Restoring Humanity* report informed the Global Consultation meeting in Geneva held later that month, with the purpose of generating broader support for the findings of the consultations, to take to the summit proper in 2016. The report's Chief Editor and Chief of the WHS Secretariat, Dr Jemilah Mahmood, addressed those assembled on the first morning. She acknowledged that while the report was, "not perfect... it represents the best attempt to reflect the ideas gathered... [the] seeds for real transformational change... [and] the hunger for change" (WHS Global Consultation Report, p. 24).

Dr Mahmood reinforced the shared standards and principles of humanitarianism (humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence) and emphasised that the consultations called for radical change to ensure:

1. accountability for the protection of human dignity and safety;
2. affirmation of humanity, adherence to international humanitarian law and the cessation of using humanitarian assistance as a political tool;
3. the delivery of aid by local actors (and therefore the "recalibration of the roles and responsibilities of international actors");
4. the end of business as usual, renewed commitments to the protection of refugees, and the radical re-design of aid that transcends artificial distinctions between humanitarian assistance and development; and,
5. innovation and greater efficiency in humanitarian financing.

(WHS Global Consultation Report, p. 24.)

Both the report and the tenor of Dr Mahmood's address was clear: the consultations asked for nothing less than radical action from states, donors, the UN, and the humanitarian sector. The outgoing Chief of the WHS secretariat concluded her address by noting that "over the coming days, participants would discuss, improve and define those ideas they will take to Istanbul and beyond". She advised that a "radical recalibration is required" and called on participants to strive to "overcome differences, as success relies on participation and... commitment at the highest level".

Establishing an ‘architecture of listening’

The multi-stakeholder process was enabled by a series of actors. As discussed in the above section, OCHA’s public communications about the consultations preceding the WHS reflected a departure from business as usual and an intention to hear from the Global South. The participants explained this in terms of “marching orders” that had been received from the top, and a “mandate to identify the pain points” (UN North 2).

The Secretary General requested a critical appraisal of the way the sector worked, how it was regarded, funded, and how it could be more efficient and effective. This was implemented by Baroness Valerie Amos (as USG), who identified and empowered the WHS Secretariat and gave them a mandate to “force the space that wasn’t naturally there and to force an interaction that was deliberate and meaningful” (UN South 1).

Various people were identified as critical to the creation of this new space—including Baroness Valerie Amos, Head of OCHA, and the Chief of the WHS Secretariat, Dr Jemilah Mahmood.

“This was seen as the last act of Ban Ki-moon”—Member 1.

“Valerie... she was the architect of this whole listening process and of the eight consultations and, et cetera”—Member 1.

The Secretary General requested a critical appraisal of the way the sector worked, how it was regarded, funded, and how it could be more efficient and effective.

“I think it was the combination of three things. One, I think Valerie [Baroness Amos], recognising that the transformative agenda ... didn’t cut the mustard. Two, it was Ban Ki-moon thinking, ‘What’s my legacy here?’ And it was three, the savviness I think, of Jemilah...”—UN North 2

“[There were] ... a lot of people [who] were looking for someone to lead it ... Jemilah was a very good choice by OCHA ... she came from the South, she’d formed her own NGO, she’d worked for the UN... and she’s an amazing networker... So, she had already sort of legitimacy with a number of pools of humanitarianism”—UN North 2.

The WHS Secretariat had been given a remit to “get the ones who are not currently in charge to have more influence, to be basically listened [to] get them to be able to be co-designers of what meets their needs...” (UN North 1). This mandate

The WHS Secretariat had been given a remit to “get the ones who are not currently in charge to have more influence, to be basically listened [to] get them to be able to be co-designers of what meets their needs...” — UN North 1



Fatimetou Mint Abdel Malick attends a Special Session of the World Humanitarian Summit, which formally launched the 'Global Alliance for Urban Crises'. © OCHA / Berk Ozkan

created a space for “Jemilah... [who had come]... from the South... formed her own NGO ... [and] worked for the UN”. The phrase, “sort of legitimacy”, describes Dr Jemilah Mahmood’s status as a woman and scholar from the Global South who had risen through the ranks of the humanitarian sector. Both insider and outsider to the humanitarian establishment, her appointment inspired other stakeholders from the Global South within the humanitarian sector. As described by a UN staff member from the Global South:

“...[we] had our feet in both worlds. So we are of the Global South, but we also speak the language of the Global North. And that’s a unique place to be because you can be that liaison or this interface between North and South”—UN South 1.

The Secretary General’s mandate and the appointment of a skilled woman from the Global South instilled a confidence in the WHS secretariat to set about establishing inventive processes of humanitarian consultation. These processes conveyed the clear message that the consultations were to be occasions for listening, a departure from conventional approaches of speechmaking and officiousness.

“The secretariat intentionally created spaces for the expression of challenging and disruptive ideas, particularly by those who are usually excluded from such consultations. This break with normal structure was evidenced, for example, in the decision to locate the WHS Secretariat outside of the OCHA offices”—UN South 1.

“We had to shift the power dynamics quite significantly and really start from the bottom... we said, ‘We’re not going to follow usual protocol. We’re going to do some something very,

The Secretary General’s mandate and the appointment of a skilled woman from the Global South instilled a confidence in the WHS secretariat to set about establishing inventive processes of humanitarian consultation.

very different’. So, for an SG initiative... of that nature to [be] defined by the needs of people on the ground, for them to determine and to tell the top of the pyramid what the needs are and how they want to see things is very, very unique. Very, very, very, very unique”—UN South 1.

The metaphor of the “bottom” speaking to the “top of the pyramid” demonstrates the hierarchical nature of the humanitarian sector and the “very, very... unique” opportunity initiated by the Secretary General. The definition of success for the initial set up of this summit was also unique, insofar as it was as much about the process as the outcomes themselves. UN South 2 explained:

“I said to [Baroness Amos, USG and Head of OCHA], ‘What would you define as success?’ And [she] said, ‘If you can get people into the room with a lot of different stakeholders, not just governments, a mixed bag and really challenge them and have bust-ups’”—UN South 2.

“Affected people, affected communities, were able to join the discussions. Lots of different channels... A lot of local organisations like myself, but also a lot of affected people directly. And not just through social media, but we would see them in every event. They would actually be there, and they would talk...”
— NGO South 5



Representatives of Affected Communities during their meeting with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Oktay Çilesiz

In addition to engaging practitioners from the Global South, the consultations included those on the receiving end of humanitarian assistance. As described by NGO South 5:

“Affected people, affected communities, were able to join the discussions. Lots of different channels... A lot of local organisations like myself, but also a lot of affected people directly. And not just through social media, but we would see them in every event. They would actually be there, and they would talk...”— NGO South 5.

Macnamara (2014, 2016) observes that many contemporary organisations maintain elaborate architectures of organisational speaking (dedicated to marketing and public relations), while dedicating only limited resources, to listening poorly or sporadically. The pre-summit consultations offered the potential for something different. The mandate from the top and the investment in consultation tends towards the architecture of listening advanced by Macnamara.

This emphasis on listening was confirmed by NGO South 5, who explained that Jemilah was “passionate about bringing in as many of those voices as possible”. The WHS Secretariat prioritised inclusion and empowerment, especially of “the ones who are not currently in charge to have more influence, to be basically listened [to]... [to] get them to be able to be co-designers of what meets their needs” (UN North 1).

Participant UN South 2 explained that inclusion was ensured through pre-defining the categories of people and organisations to be included within consultations. Additionally, UN North 2 explained that the regional steering groups appointed representatives from national NGOs who had “real teeth, in terms of trying to define... the agenda” (UN North 2).

Through these and related measures, the power dynamics were carefully managed in terms of the “talkers and the listeners” (NGO South 8). The preparations for each of the consultations aimed to rein in the tendency of the powerful to dominate, while encouraging the excluded to stand up and participate. UN South 2 and UN South 1 explained their respective strategies:

“[We would tell them]... ‘No, you can’t’. You can’t send two people from WHO, or... WFP, the big ones... you can’t have five UN agencies... organise among yourselves and represent the UN”—UN South 2.

**“... we sat with them, and we told them we hear you, the power dynamics are now shifted. You are in charge, now tell us how we can do better because we need to do things better”
—UN South 1**

Over 18 months, eight regional consultations were undertaken with the aim of synthesising these voices into key areas for action. The next section focuses on the tenor of the voices that filled the listening spaces and their calls for urgent, radical and transformative change.

The call for transformation

The intentional listening spaces created through the consultations sparked a sense of anticipation at the possibility of change in the sector, by enabling a focus on power imbalances, and a sense of solidarity amongst those from the Global South.

“The more we spoke about it, the more we thought, wow, this is quite a big issue. For some of us, we were voicing those for the first time”—NGO South 5.

“The exciting thing about those interactions... [is that] everyone would kind of share something. Like, ‘wow, I have that too’... We were all pretty much on the same wave-length”—NGO South 5.

“... all this frustration that’s been with local national actors for years and years and years, suddenly it got a credible platform... [and it] created a momentum”—INGO North 1.



President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, signs a painting made for the summit during the closing ceremony of the World Humanitarian Summit.
© OCHA / Metin Pala

Despite the potential for conflict around the need for changed relations of power between ‘locals’ and ‘internationals’, solidarity emerged across shared commitments to humanitarianism and the aim of making the humanitarian sector more effective, efficient, and accountable. UN South 1 explained:

“I thought... that there would be such a huge clash between local NGOs and governments in these consultations. It was not the case. It was interesting because they were all united on the need to localise”—UN South 1.

The consultations created space for effective multi-stakeholder dialogue and active listening. People were able to put words to their experiences and share their frustrations. They spoke of the challenges faced in adapting to increasing need and complexity; the lack of accountability and emphasis on impact (UN North 5); the exorbitant costs of aid delivery and lack of aid effectiveness; the need for more proactive prevention of crises (UN North 5); and a growing pushback against the “oligarchy” (INGO North 1). Domination by Northern decision makers was raised as a consistent issue (NGO South 6), as well as the reality that:

“... 80 per cent, 90 per cent of the money... basically runs through six or seven big international agencies... tell me of any industry where that structure is healthy...”—INGO North 1.

Other flashpoint issues included: the sector’s reticence to accept evidence in support of cash based programming (NGO South 3); the lack of intentionality in giving people a say in how aid was used (INGO North 1); the systematic donor emphasis on risk and risk transfer (NGO South 5); the perpetuation of ideas about the “lack of capacity” among local actors; and, the near impossibility of “graduating” to meet the capacities and capabilities

“... 80 per cent, 90 per cent of the money... basically runs through six or seven big international agencies... tell me of any industry where that structure is healthy...”
— INGO North 1

of the “‘modern’, ‘large’, ‘international’” organisations with well-established largesse (NGO South 6).

Persistent concerns were also raised about the limitations of a system that undermines the development of local NGOs, especially through UN and INGO recruitment of national staff (UN North 2), and more pointed charges of institutionalised colonialism, racism, and subjugation of the South through the dismissal of local knowledge (NGO South 3). The term ‘localisation’ became the container to hold the many critiques of the marginalisation of the Global South within the international humanitarian response. Localisation attained an increasingly prominent role through the consultations and into the summit, gaining a progressive strength and coalescence around several themes, with the reassertion of the critical role of local people, local knowledge, and local expertise in the efficient, effective, and accountable delivery of aid.

Importantly, the consultations also provided opportunities to celebrate positive examples of resistance and change. Such examples came from Indonesia and the Philippines,

where one participant identified perceptions of humanitarians blundering in, who were subsequently put in their place by local authorities. UN North 2 recalled of a national Minister of Social Welfare who came in and pointed out to the international system:

“Thanks very much indeed for coming. You did three things which you need to think about very carefully. One, you... didn’t check with us that it was okay to mount this massive international response. Two, you replaced everybody on the other side of the table that we were used to talking to. And thirdly, you didn’t tell us where the money was going. And those three things aren’t going to happen again...”—UN North 2.

As the momentum for change gathered force, there were murmurings about who was talking, who was willing and able to listen, and who was becoming discomforted. Through the deeply entrenched issues raised it was possible, according to NGO South 5, to identify the prevailing perspectives of powerful stakeholders with regard to the radical change required to reconstitute the humanitarian system to embrace local actors:


“The greatest diversity was between INGOs, as the Christian faith-based organisations were strongly in favour [of localisation] as this is their business model, whereas those [INGOs] that do direct implementation were not keen”—NGO South 5.

“... the donors were a bit hard to reach... they were high up there and they’re like, ‘We’re having these discussions, but things are not going to change the way that you guys are hoping for’”—NGO South 5.


“UN agencies felt secure, and that the multilateral system was not going to change, so a tweak here or there is enough...”—NGO South 5.

Despite the apparent sense of security and rigidity of some, the consultations had a way of challenging people’s preconceptions. One of the senior staff interviewed described a





**“... the donors were a bit hard to reach... they were high up there and they’re like, ‘We’re having these discussions, but things are not going to change the way that you guys are hoping for’”
—NGO South 5**



**“Oh my God... We’ve got it wrong. I thought, ‘I’m a humanitarian. I believe in what I do. And I know I’m there, I’m trying to save lives’. But we’re so focused on that, that sometimes we just don’t create the space to really stop and listen to ‘Is this really what you need or not?’... We’ve got it wrong”
—UN South 1**

Performers get ready for the World Humanitarian Summit opening ceremony. © OCHA / Berk Ozkan

“turning point” when a UN colleague had received the results of the consultations. A participant (UN South 1) explained that their colleague had called them at three o’clock in the morning. They recalled their colleague saying:

“Oh my God... We’ve got it wrong. I thought, ‘I’m a humanitarian. I believe in what I do. And I know I’m there, I’m trying to save lives’. But we’re so focused on that, that sometimes we just don’t create the space to really stop and listen to ‘Is this really what you need or not?’... We’ve got it wrong”—UN South 1.

Participants described the consultations as intensive, exhausting, and expensive, but also effective for enabling dialogue, identifying challenges, and creating solidarity around the key priorities for change. Accordingly, in October 2015, the summary report from the eight regional consultations was presented at the Global Summit in Geneva, seven months prior to the WHS event.

From Dr Jemilah Mahmood’s perspective, these achievements were made possible through the dedication of a team who shared the same vision. Somehow, the extensive, fast-moving

“I think that harmony and goodwill just became like a moss that was gathering and was getting bigger and bigger and getting people on this thing, and the momentum was very high, and then it peaked at the global consultation...”

—Dr Jemilah Mahmood

consultations seemed to be achieving the impossible:

“I think that harmony and goodwill just became like a moss that was gathering and was getting bigger and bigger and getting people on this thing, and the momentum was very high, and then it peaked at the global consultation...”—Dr Jemilah Mahmood.



A performer prepares for the World Humanitarian Summit opening ceremony. © OCHA / Berk Ozkan

Winds of change

The research identified a crucial ‘shift’ six months out from the summit, towards an increasingly political space, one where UN member states assumed a much more significant status. At face value, the WHS Global Consultations in Geneva (14–16 October 2015) appeared effective, and on message from a multi-stakeholder perspective, gathering 1,194 humanitarian stakeholders from 153 countries to consider the consultation findings (p. 116). Following the keynote addresses, the meeting’s plenary sessions were organised around the key action areas of dignity, safety, resilience, partnerships, and financing, consistent with the final synthesis report, *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action*.

Dr Mahmood’s address on the first morning of the event in Geneva emphasised the radical changes required of the humanitarian sector in the way it prepares for and responds to crisis and how the sector collaborates to deliver humanitarian assistance. Dr Mahmood explained to the participants that it was now their role to, “discuss, improve, and define those ideas they will take to Istanbul and beyond” (p. 25).

Notably, this was Dr Mahmood’s last official address as Chief of the World Humanitarian Summit. Around this point in time, there were many sudden and momentous changes. Baroness Amos was succeeded by Sir Stephen O’Brien in May 2015. Dr Jemilah Mahmood stepped away as head of the WHS Secretariat, as the role shifted from convener and enabler of global voices to events coordinator, responding to political

imperatives challenged by the calls for radical systemic transformation. Immediately after the Geneva Global Consultation event a new Secretariat Chief, Mr Antoine Gerard, assumed the position. Therefore, the main personnel driving the process changed in the critical final months of the multi-year process. The location and role of the WHS secretariat was changed to sit more directly within OCHA, physically and relationally. All of these significant shifts in a very short span of time were noted by one respondent as a “breakdown”, which generated “a lot of trust issues” at a senior level (UN South 2).

Dr Mahmood’s final speech, therefore, seems to mark an unofficial end to the consultation period and its corresponding architecture of listening. In its place, a new set of skills and activities, that focused on delivering the Summit, and a deliverable (or acceptable) result from the summit, appeared. The format of a UN summit seems to have required the voice of member states to assume a greater prominence than what had been occurring. This shift, or transition to a new phase, is articulated in the *WHS Global Consultations Report* which described the Geneva meeting as an opportunity for:

“... different stakeholders to discuss and refine the proposals outlined in the *Synthesis Report* and capture additional ideas. It marked the next phase of preparation and served as a springboard for the Summit. The goal was to contribute to an emerging vision for the Summit and build common understanding on the process leading to Istanbul”—WHS Global Consultations Report (p. 116).

Additional indications of this shift can be discerned from the changing discourse around the preparations. For instance, the following statement within the *WHS Global Consultation Report* asserts that the Global Consultation in Geneva, "... broadly validated the findings of the *Synthesis Report*, while also identifying some gaps and further opportunities" (p. 117).

The word "validated" suggests "the action of checking or proving the validity or accuracy of something". Within the natural and social sciences, the validation of a hypothesis may be achieved through application of a scientific method or experimentation, such as a controlled trial. In this political context, however, this construction suggests that those assembled at the WHS Global Consultations assumed the authority to validate (or not) the consultations' findings.

It may also be noted that the *Global Consultation Final Report*, which describes the Global Consultation in Geneva, established the precedent of renaming the report derived from the consultations. Indeed, any reference to the provocative title *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action* is absent from the *Global Consultation Final Report*. Instead, the *Restoring Humanity: Global voices calling for action* report is renamed the *Synthesis Report*, shifting the emphasis away from the calls from the Global South for transformative action. The *Final Report* from the Geneva meetings concluded on a disconcerting note, with "The Way Forward" ending with an exhortation to:

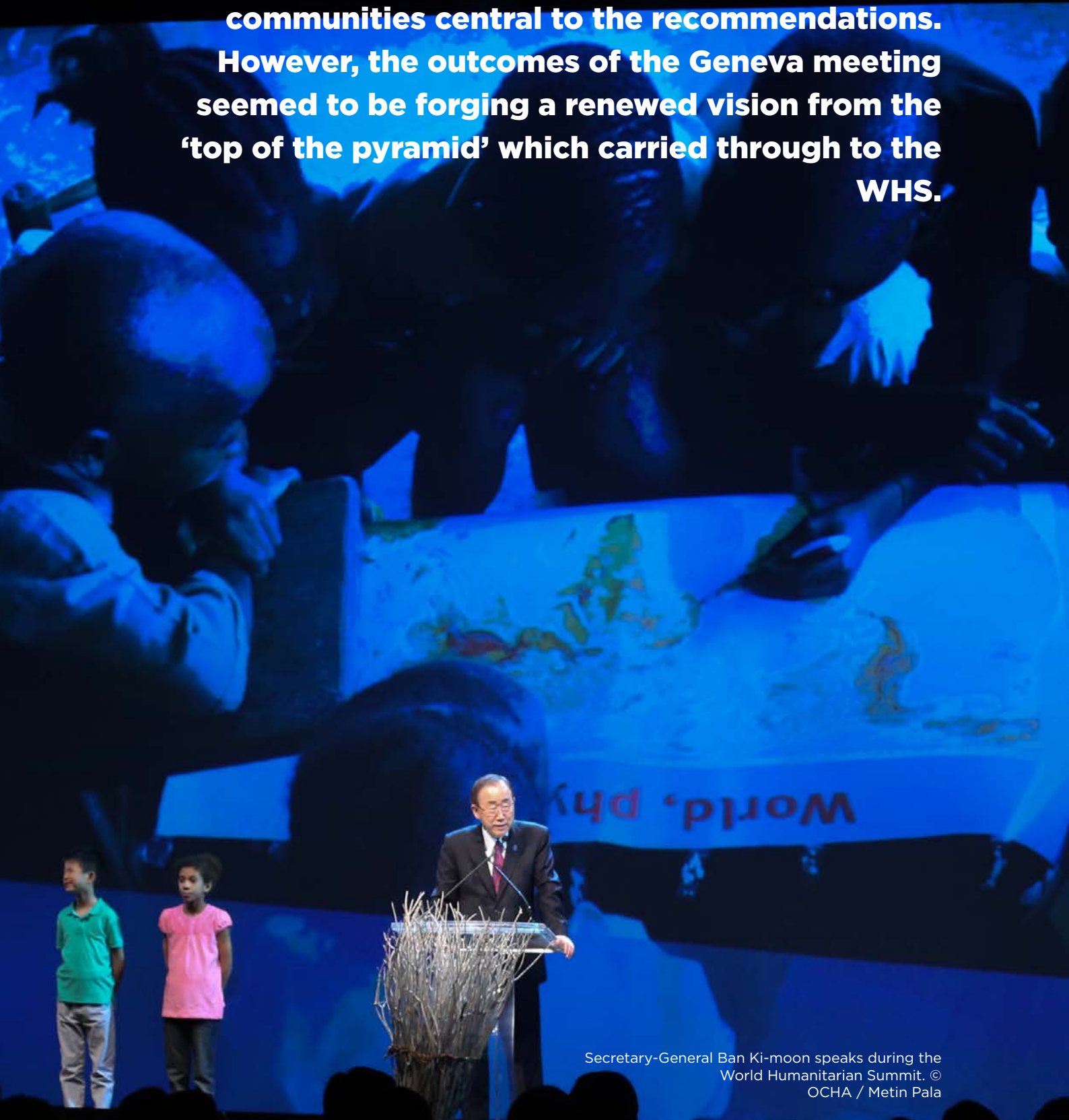
"forge a clear perspective for the next generation on how to address and end, collectively, the suffering of millions of people..."—*Global Consultation Final Report* (p. 121).

One participant described a "balancing act" that happened when the *Restoring Humanity* report was released, and some Member States threatened to pull out from the WHS altogether.

"In addition to this [Global Voices Synthesis] report... there was supposed to be a roadmap as to what would happen from October till May... and I was pleading with the Secretariat to work on it, and Jemilah was trying as well, and nothing happened. ... no roadmap came out until we reached May in the summit. Why? Because they had to rebalance the focus because they felt that it may fail as a result of Member States not showing. So this is the balancing act that they were trying to do at the time—to try to indicate to some of these countries that, 'No, it is not that you are not in control, but we have to listen... But at the end of the day, you are sovereign, you are the deciders, you are the donors...' We can't do anything without you."—Member 1.

This is troubling because the perspectives had already been gathered and the key action areas clearly identified. The 'architecture of listening' created throughout the consultations identified a clear set of priorities, with localisation and shifting power to local communities central to the recommendations. However, the outcomes of the Geneva meeting seemed to be forging a renewed vision from the 'top of the pyramid' which carried through to the WHS.

The ‘architecture of listening’ created throughout the consultations identified a clear set of priorities, with localisation and shifting power to local communities central to the recommendations. However, the outcomes of the Geneva meeting seemed to be forging a renewed vision from the ‘top of the pyramid’ which carried through to the WHS.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon speaks during the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Metin Pala

Disruption disrupted: Listening or silencing at the World Humanitarian Summit

The disruption demanded by the consultations and required of the humanitarian sector became the centre of a much more political and institutional phase of the WHS process: the translation of consultations into a final Summit product. Macnamara (2015) identified the importance of articulating listening into action. Such action was curtailed, however, by the shift from listening to politicking.

For some at OCHA, there was concern that Dr Mahmood's strategy had caused:

"Massive disruption within the whole of the OCHA team in New York in particular, but also in Geneva ... [some were asking] what the hell is she doing, spending all our money, which we need to rescue people with"—UN North 1.

**"This summit process, it's perhaps too consultative. We're listening to too many voices. We're not going to get a clean outcome. The member states are very, very nervous..."
—UN North 2**

Another participant suggested that senior figures in OCHA were: "...influenced by others in OCHA who were saying: 'This summit process, it's perhaps too consultative. We're listening to too many voices. We're not going to get a clean outcome. The member states are very, very nervous...'"—UN North 2.

Setting personalities and political appointments aside, there were genuine concerns about the challenge of landing the consultations and achieving clarity in terms of real outcomes:

"[There was a] ... consensus in the Global South and to a certain extent even in the Global North on the need for localisation ... But even we were, to a certain extent, not very sure what that meant in terms of structures and systems"—NGO South 4.

"Jemilah's departure... was a kind of big bump in the road... she left, and OCHA's senior leadership was basically thinking, '... how do we deal with this? What does this look like in terms of a successful summit outcome?'"—UN North 2.

Politically there was a clear message that various member states were not supportive of the process, as it was not aligned with normal UN Protocols, thus reducing their control of the situation. The strong flavour of member state discontent, resulting in very limited attendance by Heads of State at the Summit, and threats of boycotting the summit, was perceived by respondents as impacting OCHA's

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Performers prepare for the World Humanitarian Summit opening ceremony. © OCHA / Salih Zeki Fazlioğlu

commitment to an increasingly controversial path, a summit that foregrounded the calls for radical change. The threat of failure, where member states did not agree to anything, was too high.

Politically there was a clear message that various member states were not supportive of the process, as it was not aligned with normal UN Protocols, thus reducing their control of the situation. The strong flavour of member state discontent, resulting in very limited attendance by Heads of State at the Summit, and threats of boycotting the summit, was perceived by respondents as impacting OCHA's commitment to an increasingly controversial path, a summit that foregrounded the calls for radical change. The threat of failure, where member states did not agree to anything, was too high.

There was thus a change in the definitions of success, and the desired outcomes of the new phase, the summit. This included new messaging. Whereas the active consultation period had been 'field based' and focused on affected peoples (UN South 1), the new challenge was how to "translate all of these nice conversations to meaningful change..." (UN North 2). This shift was justified by the imperative of ensuring that "all of those two years of energy and momentum landed somewhere" (UN North 2).

The changes underway were augmented by the reinstatement of OCHA's established institutional mechanisms, which placed conference preparations firmly under the remit of the Department for General Assembly Conference Management. Despite the efforts to retain the flavour of the inclusiveness of the consultations, the shift in the process and reassertion of institutional power was made clear to all. This was physically evidenced by the relocation of the Secretariat offices back within OCHA's buildings.

Significantly, these changes also signalled a shift away from the multi-stakeholder listening process that characterised the consultations, to a more traditional form of intergovernmental negotiation.

The transition from listening to high-level negotiating for a political outcome removed the opportunity for dialogue, which is, of course, a well-established precondition for democratic participation and effective policy making (see Dobson 2014; McNamara 2015; Saunders 2009). The effects of this shift alienated those whose experiences of the consultations had been largely positive. Their deliberate exclusion from key negotiating and decision-making meetings at the WHS was especially vexing.

On the one hand, the design of the WHS appeared inclusive, insofar as there were over 9,000 participants in attendance. However, the processes of negotiating outcomes was restricted to a small cadre of powerful actors from within the humanitarian sector.

Events where Southern actors were presenting were neither contributing to the overall negotiations, nor attended in any meaningful way by the decision makers. The politics and the formal protocols precluded the possibility of any effective participation, listening, or dialogue. This was highlighted by participants



Managing Director of Global Partnerships Swiss Reinsurance Company Ivo Menzinger and Executive Director of Research Group For Study and Training Mali Fatima Toure attend the Special Session on 'Risk and Vulnerability Analysis' held at the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Oktay Çilesiz

**“[I recall]... that moment when I wanted to deliver my talk and then everyone left and no one listened to a Syrian. I think I’m traumatised because of that, because I felt like, ‘I’m really humiliated now’”
—NGO South 7**

from the Global South, the ‘local’ humanitarians whose role was so heavily contested:

“As a group, as a collective [from the Global South], we were completely on the periphery”—NGO South 3.

“[I recall]... that moment when I wanted to deliver my talk and then everyone left and no one listened to a Syrian. I think I’m traumatised because of that, because I felt like, ‘I’m really humiliated now’”—NGO South 7.

“[the organisers failed to ensure that] what happened at the summit [was] actually captured... [and more than just] an opportunity for people to come together and talk...”
—UN North 2.

“I think, for most of us, it was more of an exposure experience, rather than a participatory experience... I saw many people from the Gulf, from the West, holding meetings on the side and really just Syrians [got] lost inside that big sphere”—NGO South 9.

**“I’m not sure the people who organised the conference really wore the hat of, ‘Okay, fine, let’s do something closer to people’. Or it was just like a PR event”
—NGO South 6**

There was a sense of theatre to the WHS, with the central show being behind closed doors and lots of sideshows, and no space left for listening. The listening had concluded.

“I’m not sure the people who organised the conference really wore the hat of, ‘Okay, fine, let’s do something closer to people’. Or it was just like a PR event”—NGO South 6.

The exclusion of Southern participants from the closed-door meetings at

**“... there were strong messages that were coming out of these regional consultations... [the] ... global consultation that took place in Geneva ... was supposed to consolidate [the consultations findings]. And then ... the Grand Bargain came out of nowhere”
—NGO South 4**

the WHS was exemplified by the negotiations that led to the Grand Bargain itself, the introduction of which was a surprise to many.

“... there were strong messages that were coming out of these regional consultations... [the] ... global consultation that took place in Geneva ... was supposed to consolidate [the consultations findings]. And then ... the Grand Bargain came out of nowhere”—NGO South 4.

Responding to our questions about whether the Grand Bargain emerged spontaneously, and who was in the room during the negotiations, UN North 2 responded:

“Not me. It was the governments, the big UN agencies, and the big NGOs... so no, it wasn't spontaneous... It [the original Grand Bargain idea] didn't start off as part of the World Humanitarian Summit process. It ran as a separate consultative process [within the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing], but the outcome was signed off in the World Humanitarian Summit”—UN North 2.

There were more than 30 signatories to the original Grand Bargain, all Global North, or humanitarian sector insiders, and no representation from the Global South.

“No governments from the Global South, nothing from the Global

South, no NGOs, no governments, no nothing”—NGO South 3.

“The Americans, the Europeans, the Norwegians, the Danish, and so on... there were elements that [were] discussed that they did not have the right to discuss it and take decisions on them among themselves, without including others, because they were not the only [relevant actors]. And two of these that I recall today... One of them is localisation, and I told them, how can you discuss localisation without the presence of those that are dealing with this issue?”—Member 1.

Several participants noted that the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), a global network of humanitarian NGOs, was put forward as representing the Global South within the negotiations but that this was considered problematic by some for several reasons:

“So anytime Global South is supposed to be represented, everybody says ‘ICVA is representing you’ because they're the only network that has both Global North and South. Of course, the North is the majority, of course the secretariat is all white and based in Geneva”—NGO South 3.

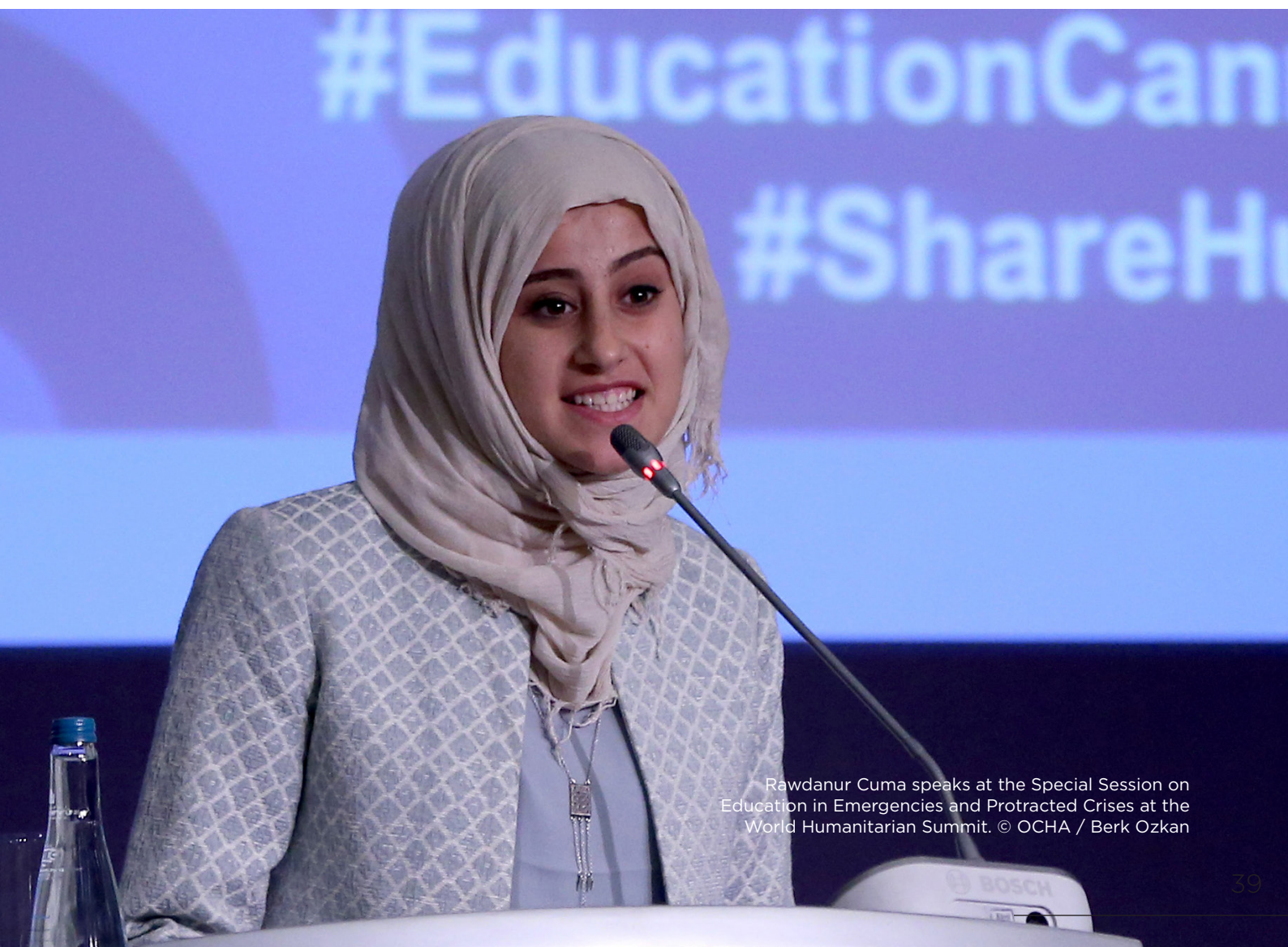
“So, there was an attempt to get some representation from non-Northern, non-Western entities, but I think what happened in the end, as the final text was negotiated, for the Grand

Bargain, it basically ended up being the cast of characters that we usually see”—UN North 2.

Senior UN staff members (UN South 2; UN North 1) argued that the Grand Bargain was a combination of the financing report and the consultations for the WHS. A widely celebrated win, the target of 25 per cent of humanitarian financing to local actors was undermined by a reframing of localisation to be “as local as possible, as international as necessary”. This was, from the perspective of Global South participants (NGO South 3) and allies, as much a Grand Silencing or Grand Refusal to articulate the listening (from the consultations) into action (systemic change). There was some sense that, in fact, the Grand Bargain was positive step, or at least “a good step forward rhetorically”

(INGO North 2). Despite perceived shortcomings, it was more than what was anticipated in a system that routinely silences voices from the Global South.

In addition to the Grand Bargain—with its unanticipated funding commitments—the *Agenda for Humanity* was developed, incorporating 32 Commitments, which aimed to “alleviate suffering, reduce risk, and lessen vulnerability ... [and place] humanity ... at the heart of global decision making”. The administrative burden associated with documenting progress toward the commitments was significant, and a lack of accountability or follow up on commitments and a three-year time frame for reporting with no impact assessment rendered the *Agenda for Humanity* a topic for significant



Rawdanur Cuma speaks at the Special Session on Education in Emergencies and Protracted Crises at the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Berk Ozkan

critique (NGO South 8). The *Agenda for Humanity* website was marked as inactive, and archived for posterity, from February 2020.

There was a clear shift from the multi-stakeholder participation which defined the consultation period to the high-level political negotiation which framed the WHS and its associated official outcomes. Listening, as a complex and multifaceted process, was left behind, and negotiations as a closed, state-centric series of events prevailed. This is ultimately explained as a function of the power that states and donors wield in the humanitarian sector, paired with a pragmatic understanding that key donors have structural and political barriers to enacting localisation in the way it was conceived through the global consultation.

“Deep down there was an intense concern and anxiety that if the South is allowed off its leash, how will we keep funding ourselves? And, anyway, we know damn well, DFID and the USA and DFAT, they’re not going to do this because they can’t account for it and their politicians in their democracy are not going to let it happen” —UN North 1.

“One or two aspects pertaining to the summit that... I think of as crucial. And part of that is in the relation to what happened as a result or as a reaction from a number of countries... [stating] that they do not want to see a precedent in the UN system in relation to giving this prominence to civil society and voices outside the system, affected communities... this is how the system works... these are UN organisations and INGOs that rely, for the most part, on these countries in relation to their finance. So, you can’t anger this group of donors” —Member 1.

The indications are, however, that such justifications are becoming overly familiar:

“[It is such a]... bullshit political excuse, ‘the donors don’t like it, the donors are not going to accept it’... This is not about the donors, this is about what we wanted as a Global South and what we felt was fair and what we thought was supposed to be a process where we were genuinely having a seat at the table, but it was clear that we were just there as window dressing that the decision-making was happening behind closed doors by them”—NGO South 3.

“The issue of reform was not an issue that was welcomed by the UN system at the very senior level...we identified 12 priority areas... [from consultations] ... they removed the issue of reform altogether”—Member 1.

“Deep down there was an intense concern and anxiety that if the South is allowed off its leash, how will we keep funding ourselves? And, anyway, we know damn well, DFID and the USA and DFAT, they’re not going to do this because they can’t account for it and their politicians in their democracy are not going to let it happen” —UN North 1.

The humanitarian establishment deployed a number of strategies to hinder, stonewall and silence political demands from the Global South. Indeed, WHS outputs that were rhetorically packaged as grand and transformative evolved into technical and bureaucratic alterations that ultimately sustained the status quo. The primary ‘win’ of the WHS was the Grand Bargain—a win thus far unrealised.

Yet the momentum crafted by the global consultations and captured by Global South humanitarians did not disappear. During the closed-door events at the WHS, shadow meetings were held which built and further established coalitions and allies. For example, around the WHS there were two key initiatives, the launch of the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and the development of the Charter for Change (C4C) which, by some interviewees, was considered far more representative of the real, un-sanitised demands of the two-year consultation (NGO South 3).

The calls for change remain to this day, and the Grand Bargain continues to be an extremely important marker in humanitarian discourse, despite many, many critiques. The key tenets of localisation, however framed, remain. The success of the WHS from the analytical lens employed in this research is in the evolving discourse around power, representation, and the centrality of people on the ground in humanitarian contexts, as captured through the consultations.



Representatives of Affected Communities during their meeting with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. © OCHA / Oktay Çilesiz

Conclusion



The objective of the High-Level Leaders' Roundtable on 'Investing in Humanity' is to commit to actions which will guarantee the minimum resources necessary to preserve life and dignity for people affected by conflict and disasters and will maximise the impact of available resources. © OCHA

This report provides important context to the World Humanitarian Summit. The organisers of the pre-summit consultations were given wide latitude over 18 months to gather the perspectives of humanitarians across the globe, especially those from the Global South. The consultations were designed, from the outset, to listen to a diverse spectrum of voices across the humanitarian system and create buy-in to the WHS and its outcomes. These structured spaces of listening catalysed a significant groundswell for change demanding a shift of power from the centre to the margins of the humanitarian system.

Nevertheless, at a critical moment, six months prior to the WHS, there

was a clear shift in the process and a redirection of institutional efforts away from the listening that had taken place during the consultations. Aims and outcomes were recalibrated, key personnel were replaced, and offices were moved, as the WHS Secretariat was reincorporated into OCHA.

After receiving the Global Voices report, the Geneva Global Consultation pronounced its own status and role in validating the consultation findings and informing the Secretary General's vision for the Summit. This vision was condensed into one statement that was superimposed and published in the margins of the 'Introduction' section of the Global Voices Report:

“The rise of global humanitarian action is one of humanity’s greatest moral achievements. Today our goal is a world where every woman, man and child in need can receive ... assistance and protection from the impacts of disaster, conflict, displacement, hunger or disease. This world is now within our grasp. Together we can make this vision a reality”—Global Voices (p. 1).

This vision of global humanitarian action, and a world where “any woman, man and child in need can receive ... assistance and protection...” stands in contrast to the calls for radical change coming from the Global South. Rather than seeking to “receive ... assistance and protection from the impacts of disaster, conflict, displacement, hunger, or disease”, the consultations foregrounded the preservation of human dignity and the imperative of humanitarian action that was local, prepared, initiated and conducted in partnership with affected states and peoples.

This research concludes that effective listening spaces were created through the consultations. This was a listening moment, but one which did not signal an ontological shift in the power relations between international (Global North) humanitarian institutions and actors and humanitarians of the Global South. Nevertheless, aspirations and momentum for systemic change lingers, and despite the reassertion of control by the centre, calls for change and demands for a redistribution of power continue to ring out.

The WHS consultations provided a clear space for listening. The reports from each of the consultations, and the synthesis report, provide a comprehensive and coherent set of ideas for the kind of humanitarian system than Ban Ki-moon aspired to at the outset of the WHS process. And while extensive listening occurred, the outcomes were increasingly diluted, amounting in the end to a failure to act on any of the substantive demands from the Global South. This research concludes that the ‘deafness’ of the humanitarian sector is its greatest threat. The multi-stakeholder consultations and the architecture of listening that was created for the WHS were extraordinary achievements. They were necessary but insufficient measures for securing the sort of change required.

Substantive and transformative change requires a commitment to listening across all levels of the complex humanitarian architecture. Importantly, a willingness to consider how to articulate that listening into action is necessary. This willingness is political. The listening that occurred does not need to be repeated or reinvented. The principal task now is not to listen once more, but to reflect on why the listening that occurred was met with the incapacity or unwillingness to act meaningfully on all that was so eloquently expressed and so clearly heard. How change will happen, rather than what change is needed, is the continuing humanitarian imperative.



The listening that occurred does not need to be repeated or reinvented. The principal task now is not to listen once more, but to reflect on why the listening that occurred was met with the incapacity or unwillingness to act meaningfully on all that was so eloquently expressed and so clearly heard.

Habibou Bangré attends the Special Session on Protecting Journalist and Promoting Independent Reporting in Crisis Situations held at the World Humanitarian Summit. © OCHA / Berk Ozkan

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