



European Humanitarian Forum

Mitigating risks: an inherent part of humanitarian action

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Moderator: *Florence Ranson*

Panelists: *Marie-Pierre Caley (CEO of ACTED), Kelly Clements (UN Deputy High Commissioner For Refugees (UNHCR), Ugochi Daniels (Deputy Director General for Operations of IOM), Barbara Dätwyler Scheuer (Head of Multilateral Division, Humanitarian Aid and SHA, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC), David Gressly (UN Resident Coordinator /Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen), Paraskevi Michou (Director general for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations of the European Commission)*

Executive Summary: This panel focussed on the humanitarian imperative to act fast, in dangerous, unstable, instrumentalised and non-permissive environments. It provided insight on how to reconcile accountability with the necessity to take risks in order to save lives, which is the inherent added value of humanitarian work. It looked at duty of care and risk aversion, and how collective answers can help addressing and mitigating these risks. This session put forward a reality check on the difficult balance between essential concerns, in particular the imperative to act in the short term vs the imperative to safeguard the system to act in the long term.

Humanitarian actors, need to take swift lifesaving decisions in stressful environments, under often conflicting political pressure and in very aggressive and dangerous places with sometimes very little secured information. They often face the moral dilemma whether to go or not, and the question of how far they are ready to go to get access.

One key red line stressed by the panellists is the duty of care to maintain staff and partners safe. It is necessary to protect humanitarian workers and therefore the delivery of humanitarian assistance in a context where 5 to 8 humanitarian workers are killed, kidnapped or abducted worldwide every month on average.

There are more crises, more conflicts and more wars. They last longer and are more complex. There are also more funds, more operations in more countries with more actors, more interactions and nexus. There is no choice but to be more structured which can imply to be less fast. But complex administrations can be fast. They just need time to put in place the right framework allowing to act fast.

When a crisis occurs, time is of the essence and the most expensive of the commodities. However, when risk management expands, the administrative burden can become disconnected from local realities, over-rely on data and ultimately slow action. Swift, urgent action requires adequate preparation. Risk management is an institutional practice to be integrated within all organizations. Donor organizations must set up mechanisms to ensure an

open dialogue with their partners on risk. Already, donors increasingly adopt anticipatory strategies and dialogues that allow to act fast in emergencies

The extent to which risk management is effective depends on the flexibility of institutional mechanisms to support the field. A too technical approach increases risk adversity, whereas coordination with the field and better understanding of the local context can decrease perception of risks and enhance mitigation. People delivering assistance should be given the primary responsibility to assess the risk, both for effectiveness and accountability purposes. Collective efforts done by donors, UN agencies and NGOs to work at a more technical level have proved more effective for advocacy activities.

Co-chairing and co-owning risk analysis is important to anticipate risks together. There is a difference between risk transfer and risk sharing for effective partnerships and the opportunities to make risk management easier by adopting a supportive – as opposed to defensive – approach. There is a responsibility for donors to contribute to reducing risks for local organizations by making available un-earmarked funding to cover unforeseen costs. Country-based pooled funds could also help gaining a comprehensive understanding and management of risks through coordination, common risk assessment and information sharing.

Cyber risks were highlighted as a new risk against which all humanitarian actors need to better prepare and anticipate. Misinformation for instance, is increasingly present and can hamper the effective delivery of aid if not correctly assessed and managed. Sanctions and restrictive measures without humanitarian exemptions can also hamper humanitarian action. Humanitarians must work together with development actors to prevent aid dependence.

As a political and international actor, the EU has a moral duty to lead on several sensitive issues not necessarily shared by all: International Humanitarian Law, gender, multilateralism or climate for example. It needs to be extra sensitive on these sectors as un-liked minded propaganda is on the look-out.

In this context, DG ECHO faces two challenges: to safeguard the sector from politically motivated attacks and to ensure accountability to taxpayers. The flexibility of ECHO, whose presence in protracted and forgotten crises on the ground – including in areas where others are not – is its added value, was underlined. More can be done together to balance the responsible management of tax payers' money with compliance requirements.