Summary

Key messages:

- Humanitarian organisations must demonstrate their relevance and adapt to an increasingly complex, turbulent humanitarian landscape – or lose their legitimacy. Leaders will need to be increasingly innovative, and take courageous and sometimes uncomfortable decisions in order to balance risks differently in favour of crisis-affected people and communities. Risks may relate to safety and security, protection issues, funding, trust and reputation, among others.

- Connecting and collaborating with increasingly varied stakeholders will be key to remaining relevant. These will include the private sector, civil society, academia, development actors and a wide range of "local" actors who contribute to a broad and diverse ecosystem of humanitarian action. To be sustainable, partnerships need to be strategic and share at least some common values or goals. Risks of not collaborating outweigh any risks of doing so.

- Empowering people at the centre of humanitarian response – and bringing them into leadership roles – will be critical to legitimacy. Crisis-affected individuals will increasingly determine which services they require and who is best placed to provide them, depending on their own assessments of quality and relevance to the particular context.

- Transformational change requires leaders who have the courage and flexibility to make mistakes (and to create learning environments); who invest wisely in staff and are ready to make necessary structural and organisational changes; who can anticipate change and invest in smart research and development; and who can articulate a shared vision, incentivise ethical behaviour and inspire collaboration around it.

Framework

Yves Daccord, Chair of SCHR and Director General of ICRC, hailed the meeting as a “special moment,” coming at a peak time of intense challenges facing humanitarian action. The relevance and adaptability of international humanitarian response is being severely tested by a fast-changing, turbulent global environment – and response itself is often more reactive than strategic as a result.

In preparing their organisations for an uncertain future – and to ensure that humanitarian response is fit for purpose – it is increasingly important for humanitarian leaders to be able to better balance
risk and opportunity in favour of crisis-affected people. They need to better understand what risks should be taken (or avoided) in order to remain relevant; what kind of leadership is required; and be able to devise wise strategies to pursue this.

To this end, bringing together select leaders from the humanitarian, corporate, academic and military sectors – in a “safe” and “friendly” space - aimed to encourage frank discussion, to provide valuable insights and different perspectives on balancing and redressing risks, challenge our assumptions, and foster a collaborative sense of purpose.

**Corporate philanthropy: a disconnect between expectations and reality**

Ms Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of The Women’s Foundation Ltd, shared her insights into the limitations of traditional models of corporate social responsibility (and performance measurement) and how these might be improved and their relevance increased.

While corporate philanthropic efforts may in many cases be justifiably viewed as mere “window dressing,” expectations (and scrutiny) of companies to “do good” (by governments, NGOs and the general public) are higher than ever. Shortcomings of corporate social responsibility programmes include poor internal coordination and a disconnect with the particular commercial activity of the company; lack of long-term vision; a lack of funding for NGO research or overheads; and as a result, poor sustainability, negligible social impact and failure to boost firms’ long-term competitiveness. At the same time, NGOs tend to compete rather than collaborate in their pursuit of corporate support, leading to duplication of efforts, wasted resources and myopic evaluations of performance and impact.

Yet there is “massive opportunity” to bridge this disconnect and ultimately to enhance the impact of corporate social responsibility efforts. Steps towards this end are to link philanthropic efforts more with the daily business of the company rather than disconnected programmes of questionable relevance (a positive example being IBM’s technology education programmes); focusing on realistic, relevant, real-time impact assessments; for companies to encourage and reward collective rather than individual efforts by NGOs; to be less conservative by funding more relevant, transformational initiatives; and generally to have more honest dialogue between the two sides. Some positive examples are already emerging (of better monitoring and learning systems, improved evaluation and performance methodologies, and increased collaboration), creating reason for optimism for the future.

The ensuing discussion, however, deflated any sense of idealism with a heavy dose of scepticism – most particularly in relation to what motivates, or drives, people to collaborate (and ultimately share) more with others. While there is widespread recognition that unless humanitarian organisations work better together and with others – from the private sector and elsewhere - they will most likely be totally irrelevant in 10 years’ time, there appears to be “less incentive, skills and capacity” to do so, with a generally constrained ability to “figure out how to move forward together.” NGOs seldom come together to collaborate when they have to give something up.

With profit and business continuity of prime importance to corporations, the assumption that philanthropy and helping others is a realistic rallying point to bring people together was questioned, as was the idea that the humanitarian sector is any less “competitive” than others. “Cultural differences” between the corporate and humanitarian sectors also include language and jargon, highlighting the need to “take the risk of getting to know each other better.”
Identifying the intersection of “common threats” was said to be the absolute minimum foundation for corporate and humanitarian (or human rights) collaboration (e.g. De Beers, Global Witness and others around Sierra Leone’s “blood diamonds”), but meaningful partnership requires common values too. Clearly, smart partnerships are not (or should not be) simply about money, but lie somewhere between pure philanthropy and business.

The pressing challenge is to engage in more honest dialogue and then be selective, choosing to collaborate with the right entities for the right reasons.

**The cost of ethical failure – and how to prevent it**

The need for incentives to “do the right thing” was a theme continued by Dr David Rodin (Principal and Founder, Principia Advisory & Senior Fellow, University of Oxford) in his presentation on how to manage internal risks related to ethics and conduct.

In many cases, ethical failure in a corporation or institution is due to systemic problems rather than the behaviour of a “few bad apples.” Crises usually develop slowly, but emerge rapidly, and can come at massive financial and reputational cost. The risks are highest when there is an obvious disconnect between the purported ethics of an institution and its actual practices.

To remedy specific cases of this (and prevent recurrences) a model of “drivers of organisational ethics” had been developed, balancing responsibility, capability and motivation to form a “virtuous circle.” A key feature of this was an “ethical value proposition” – in other words, the articulation of an authentic purpose around which the organisation (in this particular case, a bank) needs to be aligned. A culture based on clearly articulated, shared values – and the right incentives and motivation to adhere to such values – enables better decision-making at all levels. There is clearly a difference between ethical and transactional motivation (the former being purely virtuous and the latter for gain of some kind); while no-one is usually entirely motivated by one or the other, there needs to be a healthy balance between the two.

Parallels were drawn in the humanitarian sector. In order to achieve collaboration, the benefits and importance of doing so need to be at the heart of an organisation’s “common ethical purpose” or vision. Leaders must align their organisations around these clearly articulated messages and ensure the drivers are in place to motivate people in the right direction and counter the prevailing trend of fragmentation. The benefits of collaboration must be well understood and tangible. Once they are, positive change can be relatively easily effected (e.g. the global MOU between the Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief).

Collaboration can also increase efficiency. The idea was mooted of bringing together the various “non-proprietary” parts or services of humanitarian organisations under a new “social enterprise” umbrella (rather than working through individual country offices). “Global corporate services” was said to be a feature of the future humanitarian landscape.

On the other hand, setting a common ethical purpose or agenda can be more difficult when you’re part of a network of quasi-autonomous members, often with different approaches, cultural practices and values (even within a single institution, the “permafrost in the middle” can be particularly stubborn).

In general, it is wise to “talk internally and act externally.” Leaders should create a “safe” environment where people are comfortable to discuss, and question, what “ethics” really means and requires, as well as to make mistakes and learn from them.
Humanitarian and military imperatives – space for common ground?

Commodore Mike Wainhouse (Head of Futures & Strategy, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), speaking about managing a paradigm shift in the application of military force, identified four global trends that would increasingly affect planning and programming in both the military and humanitarian sectors: namely demographics, urbanisation, resources and climate change. He sought to identify common challenges facing the two sectors, as well as opportunities for civil-military cooperation in humanitarian crises (particularly in natural disasters and pandemics such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa).

Numerous thorny questions and comments ensued. Surely military priorities are security, trade, development, and humanitarian assistance only comes into play when it boosts these priorities (as in the Ebola outbreak)? Since there is no obvious “common ethical purpose” or framework bringing the two together, the incentives and potential benefits of collaborating are often skewed. While humanitarian organisations may want the use of military assets, they usually want them on their terms, and are unlikely to give information or anything else in return that would put their impartiality at risk. Even during the Ebola crisis, the inflexibility of military assets, once deployed, and the risk aversion of military trainers, raised serious questions about the benefits. Humanitarian organisations worry about lack of transparency on the part of military actors, particularly with Special Forces in the context of counter-terrorism. How can humanitarians decide which military force or actor is acceptable to collaborate with, and which is not? The risks involved are very difficult to balance.

The importance of perceptions was emphasised, particularly in situations of armed conflict, where the political, military and humanitarian agendas of key international actors may be hard to distinguish, and where humanitarian organisations working in such contexts also risk being viewed as having political agendas (in turn, making it very difficult – and dangerous – for them to deliver impartial humanitarian assistance). The challenge is to clearly distinguish between military and civilian actors and separate principled humanitarian action from pure relief assistance. And ultimately the burden of this challenge – and of the risk in deciding whether or not to collaborate with the military – falls upon humanitarian actors.

Leaders or followers?

Prof Funmi Olonisakin (Prof of Security, Leadership and Development, King’s College African Leadership Centre & School of Global Affairs), asserted that leadership generally continues to be too “leader-centric,” while the central role of followers has been largely neglected. “Followers” in a humanitarian context can be understood as people and communities affected by crisis. Decisions are often taken by leaders on their behalf, in their absence. While needs and capacities may evolve enormously in any given context, and transcend borders (as in the Sahel region, to give one example), organisations with rigid structures (or superstructures, in the case of the UN) are generally poor at adapting to change.

A sense of “mutuality,” or “common good” is essential – and a genuine belief of equality between “leaders” and “followers.” This requires a transformation not just of skills and activities, but of attitudes and values. Bringing followers directly into leadership roles – in other words, genuinely empowering people and communities affected by crisis in terms of identifying needs and the most appropriate humanitarian response – is an integral part of this.

Participants generally agreed that while “putting people at the heart of humanitarian action” should be a given, and that countless policies, resolutions and processes encapsulate this concept, overall it
is still more rhetoric than reality. While effective collaboration must take place at grass-roots level, in many cases it remains an academic exercise at headquarters level. The general increase in remote management and “bunkerisation” by many international humanitarian organisations means that proximity with conflict-affected people remains wishful thinking in many cases.

At the same time, while the “localisation” agenda is a pressing concern in the humanitarian sector, the reality remains one of unequal power relations between international and local actors. And while in situations of armed conflict, “localisation” may give rise to certain concerns about risks to protection activities and principles, there are however lots of assumptions made about the transparency, accountability and professionalism of local actors. While the question should not be about local replacing international, since both have important roles to play, a fairer balance must be struck. Attitudes and values based on equality and mutuality are essential to underpin this.

Academia – the power of “collaborative competition”?

According to Dr Patrick Aebischer (President of the Ecole Polytechnique of Lausanne), universities are one of the most stable types of institution, relatively resilient to political and other external changes, inherently quite conservative, often populated by brilliant, innovative people who are ultimately more competitive than collaborative and who are motivated more by peer recognition than by material gain.

Leading such an institution requires striking the right balance of “top down” and “bottom up” management (comparable more to a musical jam session, characterised by improvisation that nevertheless needs to be coherent, than to an orchestra directed by a conductor). It also requires being able to recognise significant “inflections” amid lots of “background noise” – e.g. the significant scientific and technological advances that will shape the future – invest in researching and developing them further, and being able to anticipate as far as possible what’s coming next. Creating an environment which motivates people to be creative; where they feel they are among equals; where they can make mistakes and are recognised for their achievements, is very important.

The importance of recognising such “inflections” – and of “choosing the right moments” – was applied to the humanitarian sector in terms of recognising where and when to collaborate, with whom, and how much. A downside of collaboration per se can be a lack of a multiplicity of actors trying different things, whereas “collaborative competition” can be very healthy. Not everything has to be done “joined up”; collaboration should rather be smartly focused. While in some cases the potential benefits of collaboration are clear to both sides (e.g. between MSF and Cape Town University on an HIV/AIDS project), the challenge for many humanitarian actors is that they have still not been able to “choose the right spots.”

Groupwork

Participants divided into three groups to discuss: 1) Which incentives will drive us to manage risks together? 2) Which risks do we need to take and why? 3) What kind of leadership do we need in order to build a humanitarian system fit for 2025?

Some of the key points that emerged were the following:

- The overriding aim for humanitarian actors must be to meet the needs of crisis-affected people. There is a collective interest to do better. Some of the measures towards this end (that would “incentivise” positive change) include smart investment in human resources (ensuring that the
right people are deployed in the right place); funding that rewards efficiency and collaboration; being able to shape the global agenda (breaking out of silos and collaboration are essential for this); and understanding and accepting the idea of a humanitarian “ecosystem” of which international organisations are just one part and engaging with the diverse actors in it (which may mean accepting a reduced role).

- Pressures for compliance and demands for accountability tend to increase risk aversion (to avoid e.g. diversion of funds; inadequate monitoring and verification; risks to staff safety and security). Public and political opinion can be major deterrents (“if you stick your neck out, you are likely to get your head chopped off” – either for acting or not acting). Fear of making mistakes can lead to paralysis. Yet risk aversion is ultimately harmful to the people we are trying to serve, and the risks of not acting (and not collaborating, where appropriate) outweigh the risks of acting. Following the “80/20” rule may be a reasonable compromise in accepting an inevitable margin of error as long as the biggest part of the job is done well.

- Humanitarian organisations and their leaders need to better understand risks in their environment – which include those relating to safety and security, protection issues, funding, trust and reputation, among others – and make courageous decisions in balancing them differently in favour of crisis-affected people. Particularly in difficult and dangerous situations of armed conflict this means taking the risks to achieve access, proximity and acceptance. Failure to do so will mean humanitarian actors losing relevance and legitimacy. The ultimate risk is that people in need of humanitarian protection and assistance do not receive it.

- Strong, collaborative leaders will be those who put more emphasis on roles than on hierarchies; have the courage to take risks and make mistakes; create learning environments where mistakes are built upon to do better; recognise the importance of principles but also that these may evolve and thus be revisited; anticipate change; can articulate a shared vision and mobilise people around it; achieve “collaborative diplomacy” to influence key stakeholders; and push for more participative governance structures that better reflect the communities we serve, both in terms of leaders and staff.

Some key “takeaways” by speakers and participants

- While international humanitarian organisations in particular have no choice but to adapt if they want to stay relevant, and taking at least some risks is inevitable, which ones to take and the potential benefits remain unclear. There is also some scepticism about the willingness of large international NGOs to really change, especially in terms of changing the power balance with “local” actors. Are organisations really ready to collaborate with and for crisis-affected people and not care who gets the credit?

- “Partnerships” between international and local actors remain largely asymmetric. This needs to change, and models need to be developed to better support and increase local capacity. At the same time, it is important to understand the roles (and limitations) of the vast array of “local” actors in any given context (which may include civil society groups, charities, faith-based organizations, volunteer groups, private sector actors, diaspora bodies, as well as individuals, activists, etc). The increasing empowerment of individuals in the future will see a corresponding decline in the authority and legitimacy of formal structures.
• Increased collaboration between the humanitarian and private sectors in particular is certain – not least for financial reasons. However, honest and genuine partnerships should be built on shared core values and a desire to improve the lives of the world’s most needy people. Joining forces to develop innovative approaches to humanitarian action will benefit all sides (e.g. with Google on health care technologies). Increased research and development in the humanitarian sector is also essential.

• The challenges and constraints of the global humanitarian landscape are so overwhelming – and many organisational structures so inflexible - that it would be unrealistic to expect even the most talented and visionary leaders to be able to “fix” humanitarian response in anything other than small, incremental steps. Humanitarian action is not “failing” (we should not underestimate our achievements) – although it must continue to evolve and adapt as the environment changes. “Doing the right thing” for the people we serve must be the driving force and ultimate incentive behind effecting change.

• Humanitarian organisations need to recognise – and be honest about – their limits. Prioritising and making the right choices is a constant challenge. It is important to reiterate the primary responsibilities of States vis-à-vis humanitarian response.

• Increasing decentralisation and ensuring more autonomy in the field are key factors for risk management particularly by humanitarian organisations working in “off grid” situations of armed conflict, where proximity with affected people is vital. This means radically changing people management strategies, the way in which people are employed and deployed, the types of skills required, and the diversity of staff (including better streamlining local and expatriate staff). It also means continuing to strengthen responsible leadership while devolving planning, decision-making and reporting responsibilities to the level closest to implementation. At the same time, it means NOT outsourcing risk to local staff and local partners, which would make legitimacy impossible.

• The World Humanitarian Summit, to be held in Istanbul in May 2016, which aims to engage States in commitments to a new range of humanitarian policies and financing, should be a golden opportunity to advance the agenda of partnerships and innovation. Since it is not, however, a pledging conference, it risks being a “multi-polar talking shop” that does not produce any concrete outcomes. It is important for humanitarian leaders to create a compelling narrative – building on the ethos of the SDGs through which world leaders “have pledged to leave no-one behind” - building political will and inspiring engagement by different stakeholders, including States and the private sector. This requires not only having clear, strong messages, but also knowing who your “champions” are in order to carry these messages forward to the relevant stakeholders.