

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Episode 6

Multilateral reform

António Guterres

Someone recently asked what keeps me up at night? And my answer was simple bureaucracy, fragmented structures, Byzantine procedures, and endless red tape. Someone out to undermine the UN could not have come up with a better way to do it. Then by imposing some of the rules we have created ourselves, I even sometimes ask myself where there was this conspiracy to make our rules exactly what they need to be for us not to be effective.

Konyndyk

One of the first things UN secretary general António Guterres did after taking office in 2017, was to watch an overhaul of the UN's aid system.

Guterres

The resolution you adopt today, ushers in the most ambitious and comprehensive transformation of UN development system in decades. The aims of reform are clear: to focus more on people and less on process, to become more nimble and effective, and to build a workplace of equality, diversity, and integrity.

Aly

And he's even put back on the table issues that were long considered untouchable, like reform of the UN Security Council.

Guterres

The nations that came out on top more than seven decades ago, have refused to contemplate the necessary reforms. The composition and voting rights in the United Nations Security Council or the boards of the Bretton Woods system are a case in point.

Konyndyk

So does the secretary general's agenda create openings for reform of the multilateral system? And given the complicated politics of how the UN is run, can his vision or really any reform agenda, realistically deliver?

Aly

As the UN marks its 75th anniversary this year? We're asking if reform of multilateral agencies has a chance.

Konyndyk

In Washington, DC I'm Konyndyk, Senior Policy fellow at the Center for Global Development

Aly

And in Geneva, Switzerland. I'm Aly, Director of The New Humanitarian. We are your co hosts for Rethinking Humanitarianism, a podcast series exploring the future of aid.

Konyndyk

Before we dive into today's episode, we want to share a few thoughts from listeners.

Aly

Last episode, Tara Nathan of Mastercard argued that the UN should leave cash programming to the experts as she put it by leveraging digital infrastructure that already exists in the private sector.

Konyndyk

In response, Mark Laichena, and apologies if I'm mispronouncing that Mark, the director of Acacia Innovations, a social enterprise that delivers eco-friendly cooking and fuel solutions, contacted us from Kenya with this thought :

Mark Laichena

I wonder if you see a good examples where similar tech disruption has avoided domination by a few actors globally. I'm a big fan of digital cash, but like with ride sharing, and social media platforms, it does seem ripe for monopolisation and other things counter to localisation and humanitarian values, since it's easier to roll out cash programmes at scale without engaging with local networks and to avoid local accountability to communities even if cash gives an individual more choice. And so I wonder what lessons the aid sector can take on this from elsewhere?

Aly

I think he makes a really valid point. If you look at what we've seen Google and Facebook do in terms of monopolising the markets and creating an unfair landscape for any healthy competition. But I also think, and Tara alluded to this during the episode, that too often the fear that the private sector doesn't abide by humanitarian values is used as an excuse not to engage with the private sector whatsoever. And I think that needs a bit more nuancing. And just like Google and Facebook,

the private sector needs regulation, certainly, but it doesn't necessarily always lead to a worse outcome, I think, than the monopolisation and lack of accountability that we currently see within the UN.

Konyndyk

Yeah, and I think I think Mark points to a very real risk. We haven't seen monopolisation of cash programming yet. Because there are so many different actors doing it. Every NGO, every UN agency, it seems, has their own attempt to the cash platform. But the donors are clearly pushing for more consolidation in the name of efficiency. And I think there's a lot of merit to that. But it does then raise the risk of what he's talking about here of domination. So perhaps what we need to look towards is moving in the direction of social protection, which tends to be a government-run function. And looking at how humanitarian cash ultimately feeds into building the platform for that kind of government social protection network.

Aly

We also heard from Sophie Tholstrup, policy coordinator at the Cash Learning Partnership, who agreed that cash programming in aid has failed to be transformative because it has grown on terms that suit humanitarian agencies. But she also had this to say:

Sophie Tholstrup

I'd argue that there's another bigger problem out there over who cash programmes are designed for. And as long as we have competition between agencies over who gets to deliver cash, and what it's for, we're going to keep designing programmes, which work well for humanitarian agencies, not programmes which work for recipients. At CaLP, we hear so many examples of this, for example, individuals receiving two identical mobile phones from different agencies and being told that they'll receive cash on each one, but that cash is intended for a different purpose. I'd love to hear your thoughts on how we can incentivise programme design based on what aid recipients need and prefer, rather than programme design based on how humanitarian agencies prefer to work.

Konyndyk

So I think Sophie makes a really important point here. And there are so many of these really bonkers stories about competing cash programmes that make no sense from an aid recipient point of view, but make a lot of sense from an aid provider point of view. And this is why, as I mentioned a moment ago in response to Mark's point, there are donors pushing for greater consolidation of cash programming, because this just doesn't make sense. I think we have to get towards a future where we are somewhat de-linking the delivery of the cash from the mandates and programme priorities of the agencies that are providing it. And a few years ago, the big three UN agencies and OCHA all agreed to do this. They agreed to begin moving towards a common cash platform. But from what I understand it's been a real struggle to put that into practice.

Aly

I think the other point to take away from this is that it's not just cash that is being driven by the mandate of the agency rather than the needs of the people on the ground. And I think that points to a much broader rethink that is needed on how aid is delivered and on agency mandates. And it's one of the things we're going to talk about today.

Konyndyk

So we've been talking a lot on this podcast about the need for reform and the power dynamics of the humanitarian sector and especially within the shape of UN structures.

Aly

So we're spending this episode looking at how UN agencies are governed and whether so called multilateral reform will ever be possible.

Konyndyk

So joining us today we have two people with extensive backgrounds in multilateral diplomacy. We have senior UN official Fabrizio Hochschild Drummond of Chile, who is the UN Undersecretary general and special adviser to the secretary general on the UN's 75th anniversary. That is a mouthful. But he is a longtime humanitarian and UN expert. And he previously led strategic coordination and Executive Office of the secretary general, trying to push more coherence across different portfolios like peacekeeping, political affairs, development, humanitarian, human rights, rule of law. There's a lot there, and it's not easy to keep it all together. So we're really happy to have him on the podcast. Welcome, Fabrizio.

Hochschild-Drummond

Thank you. It's great to be with you.

Aly

We also have with us Ambassador Hesham Youssef, a career diplomat with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who's now a senior fellow at the US Institute of Peace. Hesham previously led the humanitarian portfolio at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and was the chief of staff to Arab League secretary general Amr Moussa . He also worked at the Egyptian mission to the UN in Geneva, where he had the great pleasure of dealing with thorny economic and trade issues. Welcome to the podcast.

Youssef

It's a pleasure to be with all of you.

Aly

I should note that lucky for us, they will both be speaking in their personal capacity.

Konyndyk

Before we dive into this, you know, light and breezy topic of UN and multilateral reform, we wanted to ask both of you a question that we put to every guest on the programme. So what is one strange quirk in the humanitarian sector, that just makes absolutely no sense to you? Fabrizio, let's start with you.

Hochschild-Drummond

I would argue the gender and geographical composition of its leadership, arguably, the first international humanitarian entity was started 160 years ago with the Red Cross, the first UN envoy, then for the League of Nations, was named about 100 years ago, Nansen, after after the Versailles Treaty to look after people displaced and refugees. And yet, despite the many decades that have passed, despite that we're now in 2020, the leadership of humanitarian entities, international humanitarian entities still tends to be predominantly from Europe and from North America. And while I think it's come a long way, in terms of gender balance, I think it still has some way to go. So it doesn't adequately reflect those it serves.

Konyndyk

And I think that that dovetails nicely with something we're going to be talking about today, which is which voices count and whose perspectives are incorporated into these power structures.

Aly

And interestingly, Foreign Policy published a piece a while back, looking at diversity and representation among senior levels of the UN and the humanitarian agency OCHA, the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, fared the worst in that analysis. Hesham, curious to hear your quirk.

Youssef

I saw countries sending planes full of tents made out of cloth in areas that were facing monsoon time, and rainy seasons where they couldn't just use the tents, or countries sending plane loads of blankets in areas that were over 50 degrees. And, you know, extremely hot, and people just didn't need blankets. So it's the behaviour of sometimes countries that want to appear that they were the first to provide assistance or take one step or another, and the end the political connotations of some of these issues that are really sometimes odd, rather than in the system as a whole.

Konyndyk

I think those are both great segues into the topic that we want to explore with both of you today, which is what are some of those incentives and power structures that shape the way the system works, and what the system chooses to deliver, and how it chooses to deliver it?

Aly

I think one of the main challenges when it comes to the governance of UN agencies is that they're each independently governed. And so there's a lot of push to have coherent solutions and a real push around a common approach and yet the governance of each UN agency is very siloed and independent, and that doesn't incentivise collaboration. It incentivises competition. And so when he came into his role, the UN SG really prioritised a UN reform agenda aimed at addressing some of those challenges around the incentives, the competition, and the governance. And I'd love to hear from you Fabrizio how much progress has been made. And I suppose also how much resistance has been faced along the way.

Hochschild-Drummond

As strange as it might sound, the UN when the secretary general came in, did not really have a proper cabinet-like structure. It had meetings, occasional meetings that were really for information exchange of senior managers. It had some sort of attempt to the policy formulation body that was relatively short lived, but the secretary general and that was my role to implement his vision in that regard, put in place for the first time, weekly meetings that brought together both the Secretariat and UN agencies, and UN agencies had always be kept a sort of arm's length from the Secretariat brought them all together in a room to discuss a very tight agenda around thematic issues, and country specific issues. And it brought the operational entities in the humanitarian field together with the development agencies, together with the political actors, together with the Human Rights actors to come up with a common strategy on Syria, or to come up with a common strategy on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. And that was the first time, as surprising as this may sound to listeners, that there was that very formalised, weekly, disciplined structure that generated decisions that then became policy for all. And it was quite a bottom up process. First of all, it was also the first time we brought in voices from the field. So in every one of those meetings, when country-specific issues were discussed, we had the UN leaders on the ground in the meeting as well. And for them to talk directly to the secretary general was almost unheard of before. So they were in the room via video conference, decisions were prepared by pre-meetings at a lower level than they went through a so-called deputies meeting which I chaired. So by the time they came to the secretary general, lots of voices had been listened to. But I think that formulation of a common vision, sanctioned by the secretary general, endorsed by the secretary general, brought greater cohesion to the system. In terms of the constraints, different governance bodies are certainly a factor, I fully agree. But the governance bodies are made up from the same member states. So when there's coherence within the member state representatives, it can work quite well. Sometimes different delegates speak with different voices even if they represent the same member state. So that can lead to some difficulty. But there's also competition for funding. I mean, that is a real issue. So people are fighting for visibility, they're fighting for impact. And I think that the

funding factor, and the competitiveness around it, can sometimes mitigate coherence. But I do have to say, I mean, I started in the humanitarian sector in the mid 80s, in the UN before any entity to coordinate Humanitarian Affairs. And I think the humanitarian sector, in particular, has come a very long way in terms of coordination. And I do think the humanitarian sector has been quite self-critical, continuously, in asking itself, whether it's doing enough, what more I can do, and how I can improve. And I think this podcast is an example of that. If I can be very frank, there are other parts of UN activity, where I don't see the same constant process of self examination and self assessment, and the need for improvement. So I'm all for that self-appraisal. But let's not overdo the self-flagellation.

Konyndyk

Yeah, I think overdoing the self-criticism is a core part of what it means to be a humanitarian. Hashem, I'm intrigued by this, this idea that Fabrizio has introduced that the UN agencies are ultimately governed by member states, they're governed by the same sets of member states, and they can only be as cohesive as the member states that govern them. You've represented one of those member states, you've sat in some of these governance bodies. Do you think that fragmentation amongst the member states creates some of the problems? Is that something we can ever hope to get past?

Youssef

I think we have a number of issues that we need to agree on. We need to agree first, are we going to address reform in the humanitarian system as a whole? Or are we talking about an approach that deals with agency by agency, and this is a critical issue that will require a lot of work. And then we need to talk about the philosophy, the issue is an issue of shifting the power dynamics. So it's a question of power. Why in many discussions that we have in the UN system, we're talking about a narrow angle of reform, about efficiency improvement, structural changes and things of that nature. And then there is even something that becomes more complicated, are we going to address only the humanitarian situation, or, like we have done in our discussions in the World of Humanitarian Summit, for example, talk about the nexus between humanitarian and other issues. So that complicates things even further, are we going to talk about humanitarian and development, humanitarian and conflict, humanitarian and the environment. And so on. And then comes the issue of political will, is there a political will for change and reform. And unfortunately, Fabrizio saying that we are always self critical in the system, and so on. But unfortunately, I didn't see political will. I didn't see political will in either in the member states, and not even in the UN organisations that resisted calls coming for change from different quarters. Whether it's from someone like me when I was representing the OIC at the time, or a number of developing countries, or local NGOs, or whatever it is. So they were saying no, reform is a negative word. Let's not talk about reform. And I think also you and Heba at the time, listen to all kinds of remarks saying that the system is not broke the system – the system is not broken, it is broke. And I personally took issue with that statement. It may not be broken. It's not. It is functional. And as a matter of fact, it's doing some good work in many aspects. But at the end of the day, the issue is not an issue of money. The issue is much, much deeper and includes something that was also mentioned by all of you in these few minutes: those that we are supposed to serve. So, and in the context of the UN, who is Mr or who is

Mrs Reform in the humanitarian system in the United Nations? No one. Who's responsible for the thinking about the reform of the system in the UN system? There is no one.

Aly

Well wouldn't you argue that it's the secretary general who has made this his agenda?

Youssef

No, the second General has the whole system to worry about. He can't be focused on fixing the humanitarian system. And as a matter of fact, initially when he first first started, the reform of the humanitarian system wasn't part of his reform agenda. When he started his reform agenda included three items. One of them was in relation to conflict resolution. The second was in relation to sustainable development goals. And the third was in relation to the functioning of the system. While I hoped at the outset that this would be one of the things that he would be focusing on. So I don't think that there is someone who's responsible for this issue at a high enough level, to be able to achieve this objective. We do not have a platform in the UN to discuss this issue. If I want to discuss the form of the humanitarian system in the UN system.

Aly

You come to The New Humanitarian.

Konyndyk

You'd write an op-ed. I think it's such an important point, I think it ties back to something Fabrizio was saying, which was how unusual it was to have these meetings, these sort of huddles that he was describing, with the secretary general, between the SG, the agency leaders, and the field leaders. That everyone is kind of getting pulled out of their own little kingdoms. And that's something we see a lot in the system is, as you say, we don't have one place where this all comes together, you have a piece of it come together here, you have another piece of it come together here, you have another piece of it come together here. And that does make it difficult. Certainly when I was previously at USAID, it was hard to have a single unified conversation on reform, because there was no single unified conversation. There was no place to have that.

Aly

But is there any scope then to have a more collective humanitarian governance, for both of you who've been in the trenches on this stuff? Would that ever fly?

Hochschild-Drummond

I think, in the current climate, which is one where resource constraints are likely to grow more acute, due to the traditional supporters of humanitarian action, inevitably having to direct much of their resources towards national post-COVID recovery plans. I think in that constraint, which is also

one of growing needs – we're seeing increased threats in terms of hunger and famine, getting that context of resource constraints and growing needs – I think it will be very difficult to get a single governance structure, I think all will be doing their utmost to assert their relevance, their effectiveness. And I think that pressure to show greater performance is not necessarily a bad thing. There will, I think, be greater pressure to work better together. And I must say, and I say this having worked in many emergencies, that the system does tend to come better together in emergencies. As someone once said, we're much better at dealing with heart attacks and slow onset cancers. So where there's a real emergency, the system does come together and surprisingly good ways. When things are peaceful, we sort of bicker around one another. I have to say, I mean, I agree with what a lot of Hesham said, I'm not sure I would frame it quite as negatively. I mean, the UN is a large amorphous system between member states, UN entities, other stakeholders. So of course, entry points for anything are not really very clear, including reform. Arguably, OCHA would be the place to discuss broader humanitarian reform. Coming back to the secretary general and responding to Hesham's point, one of the big outcomes of the World Humanitarian conference was the call for more prevention. I mean, you know, that humanitarian action is most successful, where it's redundant, and it's most redundant, where you have political settlements of dispute. So there was a lot of emphasis on that. Hence, the secretary general's emphasis on prevention and peace and security reform. Because nothing serves obviating the need for humanitarian support better than having them resolving conflict, or preventing it at the outset. And the other area where there's been a lot of emphasis in the Humanitarian World Summit was on post-conflict recovery, and making sure that the development system was better geared up to interface more effectively with the humanitarian sector. And that's also where the secretary general has put a lot of emphasis. So I would agree with Hesham that the secretary general did not immediately focus on humanitarian as one of his main reform strands. But I would argue that humanitarian understood in the broader context of making itself redundant, both by preventing conflict at the outset and ensuring development in the aftermath has had a lot of emphasis, even though there's still a long way to go. We need to get to a point where we stop looking at the world – and those who suffer from the biggest deficits in peace and security, the biggest deficit in respect for their human rights, the biggest deficits and access to development – looking at them through our respective goggles of our mandates. And we need to try to see the world and understand the world as they see it and see their resources as well as their needs as they see it.

Hochschild-Drummond

A displaced person camping out almost on the strip in Bangui, does not think of her problems. Oh, these are my food problems, I go to WFP. These are my human rights problems, I go to OHCHR. These are my development problems, I call up UNDP. It's a complicated interface of everything. And we need to get much more refined, I mean, we're not going to change the system. We're not going to get rid of mandates. But we have to under-privilege the mandates and over-privilege those who are serving and learn to think and understand the world and then needs more from their viewpoint. And then see how we can respectively contribute to the sort of solutions they have, building on their resources. I think that's another big weakness of the humanitarian sector, that we look at the whole world through a needs analysis, with a sort of underlying assumption there's nothing there before we come, rather than looking equally at resources. And I think that's where

the humanitarians can learn a lot from development actors, as development actors can learn a lot from humanitarians in terms of speed and impact.

Konyndyk

So back in 2015, Hesham and I both took part in a conference in New York preparing for the World Humanitarian Summit trying to generate some different ideas on how the system might change. And the biggest vote-getter in that conference was to do a thorough and systematic review of UN agency mandates that a lot of people in that conference saw those mandates just as you've just been describing, Fabrizio, as part of the part of the problem as an obstacle to the kind of coherent, people-centred approach that we wanted to achieve as a humanitarian sector, for all the reasons that you've just described. Ultimately, that recommendation to do a fresh look at all the mandates went nowhere. I was in the US government at the time, we reviewed that we decided that it was not feasible, and that reopening the mandates probably would leave us in a worse position than where we started. Just given the state of world politics. So is the problem the mandates themselves? Is the problem how the member states approach the mandates? Is the problem the implementation of the mandates? How should we think about that? Hesham, you've seen this from the member state side, and what's your perspective on how we understand that nexus between the mandates and how things are delivered on the ground.

Youssef

Of course, mandates can be improved. But I think we have followed also a situation whereby we have two of the biggest UN agencies in one of the major conflicts, fighting with each other over who gets the highest say in one of these conflicts. And this is not a question of mandate. This was a question of a clash of personalities, lack of, you know, lack of firm leadership, to bring these people together and tell them this is unacceptable. And this didn't happen. So yes, mandates are problematic. But I think leadership is lacking, unfortunately, in all kinds of quarters, whether it's in member states, unfortunately, or sometimes within these organisations that keep fighting for their narrow interest, rather than looking at what needs to be done from the perspective that we have been talking about, since the beginning, those that are affected by this crisis and do not care whether this help comes from WFP or UNHCR or IOM or whatever it is. We were supposed to be saving lives. And this is supposed to be the priority. And the priority should be to get the response and the evaluation of those that we are supposed to serve. And this is one of the things that we are not doing. A final point in relation to the World Humanitarian Summit: In the World Humanitarian Summit, there were hundreds of ideas. Why? Because it was a good process for preparation, because it was multi-stakeholder. We had governments, we had NGOs, international, local. We had UN agencies, we had the private sector. We had everybody on board. So what happened with all the ideas that were generated in this summit? I know all the problems that faced with summit, I know why it didn't succeed. I know all these things. But then okay, you shouldn't throw the baby with the bathwater. So what have we done? Only a few days ago, I went back to the website of the World Humanitarian Summit and it said that it was inactive as of February of this year. And it is only kept for research purposes. I think that's a pity. And that is a huge waste of an effort that was done by 1000s and 1000s of people to try to see how we can improve the system. And I think that this is extremely unfortunate, we should not have left this to just wither away.

Aly

But isn't that then the perfect example of why multilateral reform is so difficult, even in a process that was not binding, that didn't try to touch on the big, difficult political questions. It had a moment in the sun, and then we moved on. So how do you sustain a kind of change process like that?

Youssef

I think the resistance came because it was a multi stakeholder approach and member states felt that they were dealt with equally alongside NGOs and others, and they wanted to take control. So they wanted a process that was similar to the process that is generally used by the United Nations, like climate change, where you have the governments agree in Paris on what they want to, where the governments agree in a human rights summit on what they intend to do, and so on. And all the conferences of the UN, it was government led. And they didn't like that it was not government led in that case. And they decided that it should not be accepted. And this is one of the main reasons why, not because it's not binding. All the UN outcomes of all the summits are not binding, even the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, they're not binding, but still they carry an authority. Why? Because they are adopted by member states. In that case, the UN tried to do something different. And unfortunately, they weren't able to persuade member states that this was the best way to approach this issue. And I think this is the main reason why we have not succeeded in the World Humanitarian Summit.

Konyndyk

And I think that gets to such an important point that goes back to the issue that Fabrizio was talking about earlier, which is: who gets to define what success looks like in the system, who gets to define what the system is set up to do? You know, as you're saying, Hesham, that is traditionally that is member states. And when you try to go beyond that, where as the World Humanitarian Summit did, when you try to go beyond that – to hear from the voices of affected people, hear from communities, and not just governments – there is sometimes a strong reaction from member state governments, a negative reaction to that. And that makes it difficult to then move structurally towards what Fabrizio was talking about, a system that takes as its starting point, the perspective of affected people. Because those people and their perspectives don't have a place, they don't have a foothold in the system, unless they have a government speaking for them. And, you know, what I struggle with a lot is how much can we really hope to change if we can't get past that somehow? I know, Fabrizio, within the UN 75 process, one of the things that you're doing is consultation, again, consultation with a lot of people around the world about what the UN system should do. How do you kind of reconcile that? How do you reconcile what you hear from populations versus what you hear from governments and kind of how, how different is that sometimes?

Hochschild-Drummond

In terms of what we heard, the secretary general did feel and and Hesham alluded to this, that the international cooperation is stuck. We're in a strange situation of a surplus in the words of the

secretary general of global challenges and a deficit in international cooperation. So from inequality, to climate change, to the pandemic, to population movements, migration, IDP numbers, we have so many problems that can not be solved by any single government on its own, that require international cooperation. While there's also a retreat from the mechanisms that were set up to handle such challenges. Also, because there's a perception they don't work very well. It's not just because of nationalism or isolationism. So against that backdrop, the secretary general wanted to go back to "we the peoples" the first three words of our charter to people across the world, to hear what they saw as their priorities and fears and what they wanted from international cooperation, and what their demands of the UN were. And we did this on a global scale. It's never been done before. We did it through multiple data streams, which I won't bore you with. But basically, we heard from millions across the world and cross referenced ourselves with independent surveys. And what we heard first is that the world is remarkably united. And that might seem like a trivial finding, except for if you sit here in New York and follow the G8 and follow the Security Council, you'd never know it. And people in terms of the visions for the future in terms of what they want in the priorities post-COVID, in terms of the longer term priorities are saying much the same things across age groups, across regions, across income levels. And those things would surprise you in the immediate term, it's better access to water and sanitation, it's better access to healthcare, it's better access to education, that is the most important priority. The next most important priority is greater solidarity, and adjustment of our economic model so that it's more inclusive and doesn't continue to boost inequality. And in terms of longer term priorities, it's climate change. And then better is resolution of conflict, better respect of human rights, and dealing with corruption. And I think what is most striking – those priorities you could argue self evident – is just how broadly they're shared. And people do want more international cooperation. I mean, there's often a narrative out there that were either nationalists, were either patriots or what globalists. That internationalism belongs to a certain liberal elite. And I don't think people see the world that way, suddenly, not young people that intensely aware of the interconnectivity of the world, that you cannot be a real Patriot, unless you also care about what's happening on your planet, you cannot be a true nationalist, unless you also worry about what's happening beyond your borders, because whether we like it or not, we are very interconnected. And if we needed a horrible, painful reminder, we've got it through COVID. So people are looking for more international cooperation, but they are not looking for more of the same, they want to see a UN that much better reflects the sort of multi-stakeholder nature of today, the sort of distribution of the levers of power today, that is very different from the early days of the UN, the 50s. But still, our structures are more reconciled with those who had their hands on the levers of power 50 years ago than the realities of today. So they want to see a more inclusive view. And they want to see a UN with much more voices of civil society with much more voices of youth, with much more voices to business. And the secretary general will be working very much in that direction, and there are many efforts in that direction. But as Hesham said in his term, he also emphasised, not everybody agrees to that. So we'll see how far we get. But I do think COVID is an opportunity. And I think if we cannot undertake a reset now, if we can't upgrade and reimagine international cooperation now, across the board, we will be missing the perhaps the last historic opportunity, and the consequences will be grave.

Aly

So how - this is gonna be just another simple question. How do you do that? Because if even on the the more simple, I guess, you could argue question of how UN agencies are governed and run, where member states have the full power, where member states are frustrated by the way UN agencies are run and have the full power to change it because they run the governance boards and still don't. How on earth could they ever agree to the kinds of things you've talked about around greater civil society voices, or, as you alluded to, I think just there and the secretary general has even dared to say the need for reform of representation on the Security Council, even the stuff where a member states have have full control and probably aligned interests, were not able to see reform on, how could we ever see reform on the trickier stuff? How do you corral member states around a reform agenda?

Hochschild-Drummond

I think there's plenty of grounds for seeing things rather rather bleakly. But on the other hand, you know, if you'd asked me 10 years ago, could something like the SDGs come into being I would have said, No, I mean, that member states will never get their act together and be able to agree on something like the 2030 agenda. An agenda that is about development, but also talks about behaviour in the global north, that talks about the need for sustainable consumption practices. A development agenda, that puts stress not just on the environment, but on growing inequalities across the board. A development agenda that includes stuff about good governance, you must be crazy, but it happened. Now, of course, the test is in the implementation. But the implementation gets a little easier when you have a framework that has a certain degree of authority, the Paris Climate Accords, you know, the recent marking of the fifth anniversary. I mean, again, I think most people would have been very sceptical that the Paris Climate Accords could ever have happened, they did happen. Of course, we have not gone far enough in their implementation. But they represent something to build on. So I think there is, and I've spent the last year talking about this intensely with member states and other stakeholders, I think there's a real common recognition of that if we don't renew now, we're lost. And that's reflected in the UN 75 Declaration where there is a common vision set out and that common vision has a paragraph on including more youth in decision making processes. It has a paragraph on expanding the reach of the UN to deal with digital issues. It reiterates and this was, you know, pre some elections, it reiterated the importance of the Paris Climate Accord, so that the twelve priorities set out in that declaration, again, I don't think a year ago, anybody thought member states would come together around. I think there are certain areas like Security Council reform that are just not going to happen. But I do think there are other areas where progress is possible. And I do think part of it will be making the UN more inclusive, because quite frankly, and the secretary general has said this, if we don't grow more inclusive, we will rapidly become irrelevant.

Konyndyk

And so Hesham, you have been in these rooms many times as a member state representative. What does it take to deliver these kinds of changes? How feasible is it? And when you and I talked about a year ago, about the state of the humanitarian sector, you were quite pessimistic at that point

about the prospects for deeper change, at least in the current political environment. I'm curious how you're feeling today.

Youssef

So do you think I was right a year ago?

Konyndyk

I think we've seen a mix on COVID, I think we have seen, you know, this mixture of solidarity in some corners and a lot of nationalism and other corners. And going back to something Fabrizio said, I think that and how we handle the rest of this pandemic over the next couple of years, is going to have an enduring impact potentially, on how the world does crisis response well into the future.

Aly

I'll give a more critical answer Hesham. I think the opportunity that COVID presented for dramatic change within the UN system has not been taken up. If you look at all the areas in which COVID could have been transformative, for instance, because of the pressure on budgets moving away from the business model of kind of just waiting for government handouts towards UN agencies, moving away from the centrality of the humanitarian system and its own ethos and recognising how many other players actually are much more important in humanitarian response, moving towards agencies that are much more agile, and can adapt in a situation like COVID, localisation, etc. If there was ever a crisis that should have forced these changes, it was COVID. And they didn't happen. And that's even within the realm of the UN agencies, leaving aside all of the politics around member states. So I don't think we've seen the evidence for you to be much more optimistic today than you were a year ago. But let's hear from you.

Youssef

Yes, I agree. I didn't see evidence to indicate that things would be much more serious, because it requires leadership. It requires political will. And it requires champions. And we've seen some of that, as a matter of fact, in the preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit, despite all our misgivings about the Grand Bargain. Where is it now? It's dead. And this is sad, for example, they decided that 25% of humanitarian assistance would go to local NGOs by 2020. Now we are in 2020. Do we have political leadership, either in member states or in the UN governing institutions regarding humanitarian assistance, those who are really willing to work hard on fundamental reform? I think not. And I think that we keep always saying, talking about the glass half full message that, you know, things are not that bad, there are some improvements and so on, but is their willingness to do something fundamental? And the pandemic, I think is important and crucial. And we will see how countries, you know, behave in the next few years, because in 2021, you will have 150 million people more pushed into extreme poverty. In 2021, you will have \$25 billion less in official development assistance. This requires us to have new thinking. Why? Because there is no going back to normal. So it's not going back to the pre-COVID era. So, in the context of this

fundamental change that face the world, how are we going to deal with some of these difficulties? Now, we are still benefiting from the period where the government handouts and stimulus packages are having an effect. But this will no longer be possible for an extended period of time. So, what will happen next, that would be up to how governments would deal with these issues and have international organisations would deal with these issues in the years to come.

Aly

But so if you're suggesting that there's no leadership, there's no political will, etc, should Shouldn't we just abandon this business of multilateral reform?

Of course not.

Aly

But where does it happen? I haven't yet heard how this actually ever comes to be.

Youssef

Well, we have to prepare, and we have to provide ideas. Did you stop working? Because there is no political will? No. Will I stop working, will Jeremy stop working, will Fabrizio stop working, because he doesn't see enough political will? No. We will continue to try. But does this mean that we will succeed? The possibility of success in my view is not that high because the engagement from the different stakeholders and the different players are not up to the standard that would allow us to succeed.

Hochschild-Drummond

Look, I have many dark nights where my thinking is very similar to Hesham's. So, you know, I don't want to contradict, because I think there is an issue there. Having said that, I'm not entirely convinced I see Filippo Grandi, struggling with how he can turn around UNHCR and make it more effective through decentralisation, how it can expand what it's doing, and what it hesitated for decades on doing with internally displaced persons. I see new resolve and improvement there. I see Henrietta Fore and UNICEF, putting much greater emphasis on what was a neglected population of young people, I mean, of, you know, I mean, teenagers, and people who are just beyond the formal definition of children, I see her looking at the digital divide, looking at connectivity for schools. So I mean, really trying to understand the new world and how that means. I see David Beasley bringing a completely different spirit to the World Food Programme, just not accepting that there should be a funding deficit, just not accepting that famine should be allowed to happen, and talking to leaders in that spirit. And I see my own secretary general who is my boss, but I'm but I'm not saying that just for this reason, I see him very earnestly trying to make the system work around the problems of those who need the system most and not just impose their respective vision and respective institutional interests, or that of a minority of member states on them. So I think there is leadership. Having said that, what does it take to change? I mean, I think it takes a crisis to change. I think every big change, every big improvement has always happened

against the backdrop of a crisis, the first big wave of humanitarian reform happened against the backdrop of the response to the humanitarian needs set off by the first Gulf War in the early 90s. And the very lamentable response of the humanitarian community. So we have a crisis now we need to make the most of it and I think there will be very serious rethinking especially on the public health side, and I think we will see ambition, I would also argue that you know, that this old idea that basically change happens by strong leaders, and it's usually a question of a few strong men. – and it usually is men – coming together in a room and agreeing on what should be done. I think that's slightly outmoded.

Aly

Usually white men I might add as well Fabrizio.

Hochschild-Drummond

Fabrizio, I agree with many of the things you said. But my problem is that this is not enough to address the magnitude of the problem. I agree. There are improvements, and there are steps that are being taken, I'm not denying that there are steps, and there are efforts by Filippo Grandi. Or by all those that you mentioned, of course, they are working and they're working hard. My problem is that this is not good enough for the kind of challenges and magnitude of the problems that the world is facing today. That's all I'm saying.

Hochschild-Drummond

Yeah. But I mean, I think you know, that's how the UN came into being it was Roosevelt, Churchill, the foreign secretaries of China and USSR, who came together in 1942, January in Washington and decided there should be a model for a post war peace, which, in fact, was an incredible exercise of vision and foresight, they at the height of the crisis, when half of them didn't know if they were going to win or lose the war. We're worrying about succeeding generations and what needed to be done to secure peace and progress with them. I think that sort of long term vision is sorely lacking today. But having said that, I think the way change happens today is by movements. I mean, if we do something about climate change, you know, as much as I would like to think the leadership of the secretary general is critical, I have to acknowledge that Friday's for the Future is probably more critical. If we see something against exclusion, and racism, I'm sure it will have to do with one or two or three extraordinary individuals. But I suspect it will have much more to do with the sort of mobilisation we've seen. So if you ask how change happens, I think it's a crisis without a recognition that the system is broken, it's very difficult to bring about change. And secondly, you need this, I think evermore, you do need leadership, I don't want to discount that. But you also need this groundswell of opinion that change is now urgent.

Hochschild-Drummond

I wish I wish I could disagree with you. But I think Napoleon said, leaders are managers of hope. So I think, okay, we have to be aware of self fulfilling prophecies.

Aly

Yes, we have seen past reforms emerge out of crises, but they've been largely technical reforms, they haven't been reforms of power and of structure, and multilateral reform is all about power and structure. And yes, you know, today the world is inspired by these movements, but those movements are not in power either. And that power remains in the hands of states, which are going to be very reluctant to give it up. And so if, we always ask our guests on the show this question, and maybe it's the only way to answer this challenge of how you actually make this kind of change happen when it does touch on power, if you had a magic wand, and you could introduce any multimillion dollar idea that would help address some of these challenges, the most radical or unimaginable idea out there, what would it be?

Hochschild-Drummond

I would look at the whole issue of how we understand what's going on in any given humanitarian situation. And I would make obligatory, a resource assessment next to any needs assessment. And I would evaluate programmes on the basis of their ability to build on those resources, as opposed to ignoring them. And thus, often de facto, undermining them

Aly

Resources, meaning in this case, the capacity that already exists on the ground.

Hochschild-Drummond

Yes, the capacities have been what people are doing for themselves, how communities are helping themselves, how what local support structures exist, be they state or be they non-state.

Hochschild-Drummond

I would make local language training obligatory for humanitarian workers, I would constitute diverse groups of local leaders, who would do some sort of regular performance evaluation of the humanitarian response. I would systematically have polling instruments of the type we did globally to assess response, both among key stakeholders but also among beneficiaries, or survivors or victims, whatever we wish to call them. And I would put a premium on, and this is particularly controversial among humanitarians, on cooperation and mutual coherence and mutual support between political, humanitarian, human rights, and development actors to ensure that problems are looked at, not through the narrow confines of mandate, but through the real needs in a joined up and cohesive manner.

Konyndyk

Hashem, how about you? If you had a magic wand, what would you want to change?

Youssef

Three things. The first one is building on what you were just saying about the affected communities, to have a more robust system to get the feedback of affected communities as to what needs to be done and how and so on. And I think this is still lacking to a great degree. And I think the second is to see how the world can empower these local communities to be able to respond to crises that hit home on their own, whether you call it resilience, call it localisation, call it whatever you wish, but people have to be strengthened to be able to deal with the problems on their own. And in relation to the humanitarian system. I think I think we need to follow up on hundreds and hundreds of ideas that were presented in the World Humanitarian Summit, you know, including ideas that I thought were not that controversial. They were difficult, but they could be done. We were discussing, for example, the need for having a coordinated system for needs assessment, that you can't have needs assessment done by every single organisation on its own. I know now that there are some organisations that are getting together to have, you know, collaborated forms of needs assessment, we need to do more of that. And for them to feel that working together is a win-win game rather than a zero sum game, which is currently the case whether it's on mandate, or on role or on fighting each other for money or competing for financial resources, as we see happening amongst the defence institutions, so we have a long way to go. But I think, I hope, that the pandemic would make us much more serious in dealing with the challenges that are still yet to come.

Hochschild-Drummond

Hesham, I felt for the sake of the podcast, I had to disagree with you.

Youssef

I have no problem whatsoever. That's what makes it interesting. Yeah.

Aly

Say it Fabrizio, you're just as pessimistic in the end.

Hochschild-Drummond

Well, yeah what does Gramsci say? The pessimism of the mind, the optimism of the will or something. I mean, anyway, but Jeremy, good to see you and Heba wonderful to see you again. And thank you for inviting us and stay safe.

Aly

Thank you both very much.

Konyndyk

Thank you.

Konyndyk

If you have thoughts on whether multilateral reform is possible, tweet your comments or questions to us via @CGDev and @newhumanitarian, with the hashtag #rethinkinghumanitarianism, or send a voice recording to rhpodcast@thenewhumanitarian.org.

Aly

In our next episode, we'll be looking at increasing calls to decolonise agencies, what does decolonization even mean? What dilemmas does it pose and how do you go about doing it?

Konyndyk

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Aly

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