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Katja Creutz & Marco Siddi
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Committing to humanity? The World Humanitarian Summit offered a glimmer of hope among all the crises

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The world is currently witnessing levels of human suffering unseen since the Second World War. With 60 million displaced people, and 125 million in need of humanitarian assistance, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon convened the first ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey, 23–24 May 2016. The Summit aimed to build on the positive momentum of recent months concerning the renewal of global frameworks, including the adoption of the UN Global Goals on Sustainable Development and the conclusion of a climate agreement.

The question of how to manage humanitarian aid remains controversial, however, and goes far beyond the persistent shortage of funding. The complexity of current conflicts and demands for more integrated approaches to humanitarian efforts have pushed aid organizations towards broader missions that involve deeper interaction with state development agencies. However,

the need to address the root causes of conflicts has made humanitarian aid organizations question their identity as they increasingly work beyond their core task, which is that of providing relief. Nonetheless, the Summit strove for a united vision for change and to review the structure of the international humanitarian aid system.

In order to pursue these objectives, five core responsibilities were identified: 1) provide political leadership to prevent and end conflict; 2) respect the rules of war; 3) ensure that no one is left behind through reaching everyone at risk; 4) work differently in delivering aid and ending need; and 5) invest politically, institutionally and financially in humanity. These goals were the result of a consultation process that had taken place over a period of three years, during which thousands of people from all over the world were able to state their views.

The unique Summit brought together over 9,000 participants from 173 states including state leaders, humanitarian organizations and private sector representatives. While new solutions to humanitarian problems were presented at the Summit's Innovative Marketplace, high-level leaders discussed the political dimensions at numerous

round tables. The Summit resulted in a number of new initiatives and commitments.

Among the most visible commitments were, for example, the creation of the Education Cannot Wait Fund, whose task is to promote and ensure quality education for children and young people in crisis; the decision to increase the effectiveness of money invested in emergency response through the Grand Bargain initiative; the establishment of the Global Preparedness Partnership between the 20 states that are most vulnerable to crisis together with the UN and the World Bank; and the launch of the One Billion Coalition for Resilience, which aims to activate a billion people to build safer and more stable communities worldwide over the next ten years.

Irrespective of some progress and visible results, the Summit can hardly be described as an unequivocal success. Only one of the G7 leaders attended, German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Ban Ki-Moon stressed that the absence of the other leaders was disappointing. Indeed, much more commitment would have been desirable from the G7, which includes some of the world's wealthiest countries: their political and financial contribution is essential for present and future hu-

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

POB 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

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humanitarian endeavours. The absence of key heads of state was not only a symbolic drawback: most importantly, it undermined the pursuit of the Summit's first core commitment, which stressed the role of political leadership in preventing and ending conflicts.

In contrast, the European Union declared its support for the commitments of the Summit. European Commission Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva co-chaired the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing. The EU welcomed the launch of the Grand Bargain and stated that it would contribute to closing the funding gap in humanitarian action, which was estimated at US\$15 billion per year by the High-Level Panel.

Besides the lack of adequate participation by the world's leading powers, the Summit faced the criticism of some non-state actors, too. The most prominent came from Doctors Without Borders, which called the event a "fig leaf of good intentions". The organization criticized the state-centric approach of the Summit and the linking of humanitarian and political issues, while arguing that countries in conflict are ignoring systemic violations of international humanitarian law. The position of Doctors Without Borders

reflected the tension between states and many NGOs regarding the politicization of humanitarian aid, which was not overcome at the Summit.

Nonetheless, the Summit offered a glimmer of hope at a time when, despite the rapid rise in the number of crises and emergencies, many states have back-pedalled on their humanitarian and development aid. The Summit can be seen as a starting point and not the end of the process. It is desirable that all stakeholders participate in follow-up endeavours that strive to complement and reinforce its outcomes. The next opportunity to address humanitarian emergencies is in September 2016, at the High-Level Meeting on Migration and Refugees.