

# Global Forum for Improving Humanitarian Action

New York, 4–5 June 2015



## Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Opening remarks to the Global Forum for Improving Humanitarian Action  
4 June 2015, New York

*As delivered*

I am most delighted that the United States is a sponsor of this conference and most grateful to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, and the World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat for co-sponsoring this crucial conversation. I also want to thank the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, ALNAP, for the hard work that went into organizing and hosting this conference. And I thank you, participants, for all that you do. Beyond the physical risks and the personal sacrifices humanitarian work requires, you often endure something much harder – not always being able to meet the expectations of those in desperate need who look to you as their “last best hope.”

We can't meet all the needs that exist out in the world right now. Natural disasters are more frequent and more intense; conflicts are spreading; and four countries are experiencing Level 3 emergencies. Over 50 million women, men, and children are displaced from their homes – the highest figure since 1945. The number of individuals in need of humanitarian assistance has topped 100 million. I am reminded of the Shakespeare line from *The Tempest* – “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.” Sometimes that's how it feels.

Given the enormity of the suffering in the world and the inadequacy of our tools to ease it all – it is easy to feel despair. One of my humanitarian inspirations, Sergio Vieira de Mello, the famed UN envoy who was killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq in 2003, used to say: “Experience is what allows us to repeat our mistakes, only with more finesse.” Sometimes, as one travels from one complex emergency to another, it is tempting to believe that we are running to stand still.

But the energy in this room – and the determination of each of you – is what convinces me that members of the humanitarian community are going to outmaneuver and prevail against the devils who inflict suffering and fuel displacement and conflict. When Sergio Vieira de Mello spoke of the international system, for all of its flaws, he would say, “The future is to be invented.” This is crucial, because it is becoming increasingly clear, as others have said, that the patchwork humanitarian system that has evolved over the past 70 years is struggling to handle the burden of today's crises. We need to think hard about how to reform – and yes, how to invent. That is what you are here to do today. That is the task we must urgently put our minds to in advance of the Global Humanitarian Summit: inventing the future.

Some of this reform and invention has already happened, of course. Aid agencies are far more professional than they were two decades ago when I got my first exposure in the field. They are staffed by experts with rigorous thinking and years of fieldwork. Donors are insisting on greater transparency and efficiency in how their money is being used. And the beneficiaries of humanitarian programs have far more agency than they used to. And let's be real: even if we didn't fix a thing this year, the work you do collectively would still keep millions on millions of people alive.

Consider South Sudan where, in 2014, WFP and UNICEF predicted that 50,000 kids were at risk of death by famine. Although this is but one of the many serious and persistent problems afflicting South Sudan, the international humanitarian community heard the warnings and mounted a large-scale response, which ultimately helped prevent the large-scale famine predicted. We are not out of the woods yet, of course. Or look at the response to Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the Philippines in 2013; efficient coordination between civil and military actors and swift cash dispersal allowed local communities to purchase what they needed.

I have the easy part this morning, just posing questions to get you going. But my questions fall roughly into four buckets – security, modernity, dignity, and money.

On security I would like again to quote Sergio, who used to say, “Security is the first priority, the second priority, and the third priority, and the fourth priority.” Humanitarians are understandably determined to “preserve humanitarian space,” but that space often gets gobbled up by warlords, militia, or obstructionist governments. And as we saw in South Sudan and the UNMISS Protection of Civilians sites, peacekeepers and humanitarians can together deliver critical aid and protection to tens of thousands of people. Peacekeepers and humanitarians each have a role to play in protecting civilians and the strengths and weaknesses of the collective peace and security architecture matter greatly to those that you are trying to help. President Obama has launched a major initiative aimed at strengthening UN peacekeeping by enlisting more advanced militaries in the enterprise, so more countries pick up a larger share of the collective security burden. And the results of this effort will matter to you – if we, collectively, do better at providing security in post-conflict or conflict environments, you will be better able to undertake your humanitarian work, women and girls will be less vulnerable to sexual violence that plagues insecure environments, more families will be able to return to their homes, and as communities begin to plant and harvest, more global resources will be freed up to tackle other major challenges. We need to invent that future. And I urge you to invest yourselves in the conversation that sometimes exists in another sphere, in another community, in individuals; because the success of that conversation, again, can have a profound bearing on the overall success of protecting civilians.

My second point relates to modernity, how do we modernize and innovate. The humanitarian community is surely getting more sophisticated. Many of you now even Tweet! But if you haven’t already, check out the World Bank Development Report of 2015, “Mind, Society, and Behavior” – the first in history to focus exclusively on harnessing the power of behavioral economics and behavioral science and troves of data on how people actually behave, how they actually respond to public policy interventions. And all of this data, how it can be brought to bear on strengthening development. It identifies, for example, which factors make it more likely that people living with HIV will take their anti-retrovirals on time, and thus make those medicines more effective. It describes the priming that can be done to give young girls the confidence to attend schools, and their parents the knowledge that sending their girls to school is a smart investment. This report is a major breakthrough and its applications extend well beyond development to humanitarian response. What would it mean to integrate this learning, learning about how people actually behave, into a reformed humanitarian system? Separately, what would it take to develop an information management mechanism that captures a comprehensive picture of needs and gaps in major emergencies?

On this score I would like to make a personal pitch: as you find ways to take advantage of the data revolution, and ways to harness all of the information that’s out there, please try to avoid the tendency to report how many beneficiaries one has reached with a food basket, without simultaneously reporting on who one knows one is not reaching. I appeal to you always to include a denominator along with the numerator in your reporting; without it, and without a comprehensive picture of the gaps, you give those of us on the political and diplomatic side alibis, and we lack a true picture of the need that is out there.

Technology is part of modernity. It is no panacea, but it can clearly be a force multiplier, a data-aggregator, and an empowerment tool. We've all, I think, been blown away by innovations we have witnessed in the field. I was particularly impressed last year by WFP's efforts in southern Turkey to shift from delivering to Syrian refugees a bulky monthly food ration – the old way of doing things – to supplying a monthly stipend for food on a debit card. This lessened the stigma associated with being an aid recipient, and it empowered families to allocate their own resources.

This brings me naturally to dignity, my third theme. How can we ensure that humanitarian responses empower people affected by crises to have greater voice and greater choice? This is all the more important in a world where the average duration a refugee spends outside his or her country is twenty years. The venues in which the aid community needs to move hastily from relief to development are increasingly complex, but we can't afford a world in which kids in Lebanese, Turkish, and Jordanian refugee camps don't go to school. Emergency responders have to make investments in the long term, and you all know that. As Sergio used to say, "A wounded soul may hurt as much as a wounded body" – any reformed humanitarian system needs to look out for both.

And finally, a large elephant in every room these days is money. We are half-way through 2015 and the Syria humanitarian appeal is only 19 percent funded, and the Iraq appeal stands at only 14 percent. Inadequate funding has already forced WFP to cut both food vouchers and food rations in the region, leaving millions of children to go to bed hungry – not just tonight, but every night. And, while global leaders condemn the atrocities being carried out by the Syrian regime and by ISIL, many of these same governments are not stepping up sufficiently to finance the responses to the humanitarian crises emerging from these conflicts.

The recently announced High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing is certainly welcome. How can we get more countries to join us in funding humanitarian action? Where does the private sector fit in? And how do we lower the transaction costs and simplify the route by which generous individual citizens can quickly donate small amounts that could add up in a hurry? As we enter a presidential election cycle here in the United States – an election that promises to be the most expensive in the history of the world – I am struck that many of the Americans who give do so because they are trying to make a difference; we should be able to make the causes you all champion similarly appealing, and we should be able to dramatically expand the base of humanitarian donors.

There are so many more questions, those are just a few – they are big and they are small. We are counting on you to come up with the answers. So I thank you, and I wish you luck.