



New Perspectives for Humanitarian Action

A Cross-Sectoral Discussion on Listening, Efficiency, Outspokenness, and Innovation

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Imprint

GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY is the umbrella organization of 39 Austrian NGOs, active in the fields of international development, humanitarian assistance, and Global Citizenship Education. Each year, our member organizations implement 1,000 projects in more than 120 countries worldwide, contributing to a decent life for all on a healthy planet.

Editor

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Starting point

The newly appointed Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, **Tom Fletcher**, addressed the humanitarian community in November 2024 in an open letter pointing out listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation as the focus topics for the initial stage of his work.

In the time since, crisis has followed crisis, and financial support has been strained. Consequently, listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation became even more critical. The topics prompted questions not only related to humanitarian aid as such but invited consideration of other social disciplines and invited questions such as: How do we capture human cost versus economic cost? What are the distinguishing features of a really good listener? Is there a conscious, purposeful dialogue on innovation between industry, humanitarians and other actors in fragile regions? Where are the poets, authors, musicians and artists addressing humanitarian issues?

Listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation as topics were thus a unique opportunity to discuss humanitarian assistance in an inter-disciplinary fashion. Global Responsibility took up this challenge and invited outside experts to contribute their findings and reflections in writing and in-person.

At the wrap-up event on 28 November 2025, **Gemma Connell** from UN OCHA pointed particularly to two events at which USG Tom Fletcher operationalized outspokenness. The first time was on 13 May, when he called for an end to Israel's blockade of Gaza [←](#) and the second on 30 October in his briefing about the situation in Sudan, [←](#) both times at the UN Security Council. Mr. Fletcher ended his briefing on Gaza with the following statement:

» And for those who will not survive what we fear is coming—in plain sight—it will be no consolation to know that future generations will hold us in this chamber to account.
But they will.
And, if we have not seriously done 'all we could,' then we should fear that judgement.
TOM FLETCHER Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs

Listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation in humanitarian action invites us to be self-critical—and, following the invitation of Mr. Fletcher, ask: Where do we stand? Do we do all we can? Where do we need to develop? How will we be judged and by whom? Is the dignity of those we assist always at the core of our doing?

The following sections ...

- ... summarize the written outside view contributions,
- ... summarize the wrap-up event in November,
- ... provide conclusions and recommendations.



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"Global Voices for Humanitarian Assistance" outside view series

In a first phase in February 2025, Global Responsibility started *Global Voices for Humanitarian Assistance*, a series of outside views, in response to the concerns expressed by **Tom Fletcher** in November 2024. The following summarizes the outreach questions, outside view contributions, counterquestions and interim findings.



Scan me

Listening



On the issue of listening the early questions we had for external experts were:

- What type of questions do humanitarians need to ask and what stories or facts do they need to present to support active listening?
- Who, or which entities, should humanitarians take as an example?
- Are there tricks to be adopted for optimum listening and in a world of information overload, how can filtering best be done without losing the essence and the voice of the voiceless?

First exchanges led us to perhaps more fundamental questions like:

- What kinds of listening are there, and in which sense does listening differ from hearing?
- What are the consequences of listening versus hearing and how does listening relate to understanding and empathy?
- Is listening a virtue or a duty?

Norman Sieroka, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bremen, advocates for the importance and power of listening in a visual environment full of noise in his outside view *The value of listening in a world of images*.[←](#)

He explains that:

- Response-ability, the ability to respond meaningfully requires us to listen first.
- Listening is more than hearing someone speaking, it is always an active process—it is *inhearing*.
- Listening is not abstract or detached, it discloses personal histories and individual voices. Voices go beyond the words themselves and connect us to a speaker's life and world.
- Listening happens in time, but words can echo throughout our life.



Norman Sieroka

PHOTO MATEJ MEZA /
UNIVERSITY OF BREMEN

Professor Sieroka concludes that meeting the world and each other with openness, humility, and care demands from us the effort to cultivate the virtue of listening.



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Rez Gardi and **Marisa Leon Gomez Sonet**, both from Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT), pick up on the listening—hearing contradiction in their outside view *From passive hearing to transformative action*.²⁵ They argue that "true" listening "makes people uncomfortable. Listening requires those in power to act on what they hear—to shift resources, change course, and rethink power structures." The authors equate listening with participation and complain that in humanitarian decision-making and policy defining processes listening degraded to be nothing more than hearing. They deplore that the people impacted are considered consulting humanitarian stakeholders at the very best.

Rez Gardi's and Marisa Leon Gomez Sonet's conclusion is that listening is a political process, and that active listening requires the willingness to engage and confront.



Rezi Gardi

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Marisa
Leon Gomez Sonet

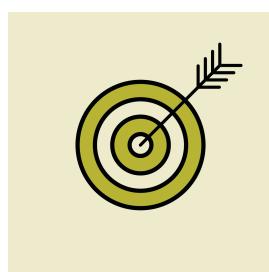
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Follow-up issues for the humanitarian community

Both outside views emphasize the importance of active hearing / inhearing. Responsibility and democracy demand active listening. Efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation need listening as a precursor.

- Listening requires effort, attention, and intent—do we invest sufficiently in those qualities, are we *inhearing*, are we prepared to get uncomfortable with what we hear or are we only listening to what we are prepared to hear?
- Are we prepared for the powershift that might follow from listening?
- What are words that echo through our lives and what words and voices do we choose that might echo in the life of the other?
- Do we have a moral obligation to listen to others, especially those with different or extreme perspectives?
- Can active listening support us in detecting new or necessary answers and thus contribute to the issue of efficiency and innovation?

Efficiency



Efficiency is a key result factor in private sector industries and scores target results against reality. In an era of budget cuts, it has become extremely fashionable to discuss efficiency in connection with humanitarian assistance—but without clear definitions of what efficiency means.



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This widespread use by humanitarian experts and non-experts triggered our first questions:

- Can efficiency be measured effectively in the humanitarian sector?
- Is there a global common standard to measure efficiency?
- How to capture human cost versus economic cost? Is it part of efficiency to protect the lives of the humanitarian actors, even if this will be much more expensive in the future?
- Do global south and global north evaluate efficiency against the same values—and can and will they apply the same measure?

Jamie Munn, Executive Director of International Council for Voluntary Action (ICVA), argues in his outside view ***No more tokenism: Local humanitarian actors are key to improving efficiency*** [←](#) that the need for reform has been known years before President Trump's cuts to US AID but United Nations' inaction and global bureaucracy remain an stumbling block for reforms. According to Jamie Munn, local humanitarian actors are central for an efficient humanitarian architecture and thus he invites the NGOs to stop the empty talk on localisation and take the chance to push forward reforms and implement the already existing recommendations on local leadership. Jamie Munn concludes that there will be no efficiency without efficient change.



Jamie Munn

PHOTO PRIVATE

» *True efficiency isn't about spending less. It's about delivering better. It must serve not only the expectations of donors and taxpayers, but most importantly, the needs of the communities we aim to support.*

FATI HASSANE *Oxfam's in Africa Director*

With this statement, **Fati Hassane** opens her contribution ***The humanitarian challenge: How to do more with less*** [←](#) in which the active and purposive integration of local actors is decisive for more efficient humanitarian assistance.

Fati Hassane makes it clear that the parameter for efficiency and efficient humanitarian aid is to provide to the right people the right help at the right time at the right place. She advocates therefore to limit international humanitarian response to acute, time-bound crises and accompany it with a clear plan from the starting point to the time to hand over to local actors. International humanitarian assistance must no longer be a mid- or long-term service. She shares from her experience that "Communities consistently tell us they want more than just lifesaving aid. They want safety, dignity, and the ability to rebuild."

Furthermore, Fati Hassane argues that efficiency is strengthened by diversity but needs the acceptance of collective action by all actors. On financial bureaucracy she proposes that grant systems



Fati Hassane

PHOTO OXFAM IN AFRICA



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can be streamlined and led by NGO Consortia and the UN. Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) should be standardized, expanded and made more transparent.

Fati Hassane concludes that efficiency in humanitarian assistance is not "a trimming exercise but transforming."

Follow-up issues for the humanitarian community

- The tenor of both outside views is that efficiency of humanitarian aid means an active transformation of power from donors and NGO's from the Global North to local actors. Both views make clear that efficiency comes with equity.
- Are the stakeholders of the Global North really prepared to 'walk the talk' of localisation with all its consequences (budgets, staff, control, decision process ...)?

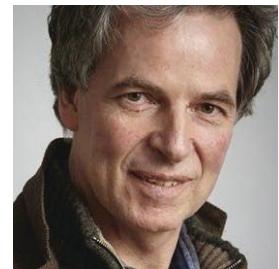
Outspokenness



When considering outspokenness, we on purpose did not reach out to marketing agencies or other fundraising experts because it was clear to us from the beginning that outspokenness is a political and cultural dimension and not about fundraising.

We contacted the British journalist, author and poet **Harry Eyres** with the following initial questions:

- Where are the poets, writers, painters, musicians who seek to defend humanitarian principles?
- Where is the opera on drowning in the Mediterranean Sea?
- Is human despair only for photographers?
- Are artists and their audiences numb? Or are we all becoming cowards?



Harry Eyres

PHOTO JONATHAN RING

In his outside view *The old Greeks lived something we can learn from: Parrhesia*, Harry Eyres introduced us to the Greek term 'parrhesia': to speak everything. "A democracy without parrhesia would not be a democracy at all" and "parrhesia occurs both when individuals speak to each other privately and when citizens address the democratic assembly." To the old Greeks, parrhesia meant the choice between "a free moral life or a secure existence without honor."

Harry Eyres reminded us that this choice has accompanied us throughout history and different challenges like fascist Spain or Nazi-Germany showed that parrhesia is applied differently by different genres, artists can choose metaphors whereas spokespeople or journalist have to go for a more direct language. Living again in times where outspokenness comes with the threat of losing a job, visa or an existence, the choice of the ancient Greek is very present and painful again.

Harry Eyres sees a particularly important responsibility with governments and politicians. They need the personal and political courage to create an environment to address problems honestly, enable enlightened discussions and courageous and informed discourse.



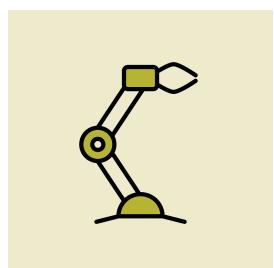
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Follow-up questions for the humanitarian community

- Overall, Harry Eyres concludes that outspokenness is about personal freedom and democratic stability.
- What are the concrete risks and challenges of outspokenness for the humanitarian sector and other civil society sectors?
- How do Humanitarians support the democratic culture of an honest addressing of problems, and discussing enlightened, courages and informed?
- Marketing or fundraising narratives are not parrhesia—what is needed to separate those more clearly for us and our counterparts?

Innovation



Humanitarian crises are getting more complex. The gap between funding and need is getting wider. These are only two of several root causes for an increased demand for innovation in humanitarian action.

First, we reached out to the World Food Programme's (WFP) Innovation Accelerator with the following initial questions:

- What does the WFP Innovation Accelerator regard as the innovation with the largest impact on the 'zero-hunger' goal in recent times?
- What are the prejudices or hurdles your team must overcome on the way from identification to implementation of an innovation?
- What can humanitarian innovation entities learn from the (failures and successes) of localization attempts of international companies?

Bernhard Kowatsch, Director General Innovation Accelerator, WFP, introduced the reader in his outside view ***How to innovate for a more efficient humanitarian assistance*** [→](#) to four examples of innovative initiatives (Building Blocks: financial innovation; Farm to Market Alliance: resilient food systems; SCOUT: AI driven programme; Hunger Map LIVE: data monitoring)—four programs always striving to assist the zero-hunger goal.

Bernhard Kowatsch especially warns of the misconception of the role of start-ups. Innovation needs time, partnerships and a broader knowledge and acceptance of its full life cycle. The two outstanding lessons learned by WFP Innovation Accelerator are human-centered design and that context matters.



Bernhard Kowatsch

PHOTO WFP /
SLAVA BLAZER PHOTOGRAPHY

Nick Appleyard from European Space Agency (ESA), received from us the following questions:

- What concrete, recent examples are there to illustrate European space industry's innovative contributions in the field of humanitarian aid?
- Is there a conscious, purposeful dialogue on innovation opportunities between European space industry, European humanitarian actors and local authorities in fragile regions?



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- What are some of the challenges, technological and otherwise, you see for the near future?
- Can the expectations and prejudices relate to innovation be actively managed?
- What are your counterquestions for the humanitarian community?



Nick Appleyard

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In *I imagine it as a bank of gauges* [too](#), Nick Appleyard provides different examples for the reader and reminds us on the importance of the *International Charter on Space and Major Disasters* [of 2000](#) which is "activated almost weekly now." He further points to ESA's Space Solutions programme [which has fostered over five hundred new digital services](#). The title of this outside view underlines that innovation enables imagination.

But Nick Appleyard has some concrete questions for the humanitarian community, as well:

» *If you could wish for any information to support your work or directly to empower vulnerable people, if you could conjure any insights or forecasts, any coordination of effort, any timely alert, what do you imagine?*

If your wishes can be so easily engineered, what is the hard part?

NICK APPLEYARD *Head of Applications and Solutions at the European Space Agency*

Follow-up questions for the humanitarian community

Besides the questions provided by Nick Appleyard, both outside views outline that the relation between humanitarian assistance and innovation is characterized by expectation management, efficiency, partnership and localization.

- Is the humanitarian community fully aware of the scope and consequences of innovation?
- And again: What is the hard part with innovation? Trust in partnership? Fear of powershift? Humanitarian action being tainted by business?

FINDINGS

"Global Voices for Humanitarian Assistance" outside view series

- Listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation—these focus points cannot stand on their own, they are inter-dependent.
- Localization and local orientation, democracy, reform and transformation are recurring terms in the outside views.
- Terminology and perspectives are not unambiguous (donor, human concerned, humanitarian actor, etc.).
- There is a much broader awareness about the humanitarian dire straits outside the humanitarian silo than humanitarians perceive.



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- Cross-sectoral discussions mean question and counter-question, but humanitarians bring valuable expertise to the table which challenges allies and new partners.
- There is a broad understanding of the threats to democracy and security and a common will to work for a fairer world because, across sectors, we know that this is not only about the most vulnerable people today, but also about our common life tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.

"New Perspectives for Humanitarian Action" wrap-up event



f. l. t. r.: Fati Hassane, Anna Hirsch-Holland, moderator Thomas Seifert, Nick Appleyard, Marisa Leon Gomez Sonet, and Harry Eyes

PHOTO GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

With the in-person event on 28 November 2025 in Vienna, which took place under the motto *New Perspectives for Humanitarian Action: A Cross-Sectoral Dialogue on Listening, Efficiency, Outspokenness, and Innovation*, the written ideas were explored in greater depth and enriched with additional perspectives. Respecting Chatham House Rule and based on outside views and interim conclusions as well as presentations and the panel discussions, the following can be stated about this day of dialogue and discussion:

1. The common thread running through **Tom Fletcher's** commitment in November 2024 and his four focus points is to put "those we serve at the heart of what we do."
2. This corresponds to the beautiful quote "I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was" by Toni Morrison, which was brought up in the discussion and addresses exactly the overarching theme: what can we / humanitarian actors do to support those at the edge to claim the centre?



Listening

Listening is for sure a key factor for the shift from edge to centre. As elaborated in the outside views listening needs to develop from hearing to active listening and to *inhearing*. Listening needs to enable active participation in decision making. During the discussions it was emphasized that progress had been made but new, deliberate steps are needed to bring the voices of those affected into the decision-making process.

Key findings

- Listening must be active.
- Listening must be equitable.
- The issue of listening requires a restructuring of dialogues.

Efficiency

Whereas **Tom Fletcher's** efficiency focused on administrative efficiency within the UN OCHA system, the outside view contributions and in-person discussion addressed the efficiency of the humanitarian architecture as such.

What humanitarians must keep in mind is that a discussion about efficiency does not mean that past work has been ineffective per se. But the call for "the right help at the right time at the right place" invites rethinking and Western NGOs, donors, administration, intergovernmental organisations must not shy away from moving affected people, moving local humanitarian actors to the centre because in the long run, humanitarian activities are only efficient if they have strong underpinnings in the local environment.

Key findings

- One argument agreed on across the sectors was that the most efficient humanitarian action is the action done before disaster hits.
- The remaining open question is which efficiency is in the focus (administrative, economic, logistics...) and which standards are to be applied (those of donors, recipients, locals, humanitarian actors ...)?

Outspokenness

The statements made clear that outspokenness must not only be discussed in abstract but actively exercised. Historical parallels as introduced in the outside view are important food for thought. However, the intellectual exercise of outspokenness is easy. In real life, it demands courage both in the Global South and the Global North.

With outspokenness topics become present and immediate. Emotion in the face of disaster is not a breach of objectivity; it is elevating compassion. But, there too, it is important to primarily give a voice to the ones affected by disaster and not only to the Western observer.

The discussions on outspokenness stressed the need for a strong media mandate. Media requires to move from the first-person perspective of journalists to the first-person perspective of those affected.



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Key findings

- We in the Global North must be outspoken, but above all, we must support those affected to speak out.
- For humanitarians, outspokenness is always more than an intellectual exercise, it is an ethical obligation demanding courage, and we should never yield in the face of the powerful even when short-term support may be imperilled.

Innovation

An important conclusion was that both efficiency and innovation are limited by our professional silos. Ultimately, efficiency and innovation require both cross-sectoral and local collaboration and trust. In this respect, it is again a question of whether all actors will collectively accept that those who are currently at the edge will be enabled to move to the centre.

Key findings

As already pointed out by **Bernhard Kowatsch** in his outside view and confirmed in discussion, all actors must collectively understand that innovation is a transitional process from developing a prototype over a structured process to a long-term life cycle solution.

New factor: Language matters

Throughout the discussions of the day the power and role of language was repeatedly highlighted for all four factors by all sector representatives.

It was emphasized that each silo (humanitarians, innovators, administrations, journalists, ...) has its own language. A jargon might serve efficiency within the silo itself but at the same time marginalizes outsiders.

Key findings

- It is important that we understand the language of the 'other' and build cross-sectoral languages and perspectives.
- However, when we adapt the language of counterparts, get accustomed with other mindsets, humanitarians must be careful to guard their principles, their own mindset and goals in the process, and seek the adoption also of its language in the cacophony of voices.
- For humanitarians: As regards language, it is critical that ...
 - ... humanitarians, like members of any other silo, must be careful not to use cliches and the same old soundbites over and over again.
 - ... humanitarians must find answers to the question; how do we boost humanitarian messaging through new language and new approaches?
 - ... humanitarians ask themselves how do we get those in power to also accept the humanitarian vocabulary?



Conclusions and recommendations

With the outside view series and the in-person event on 28 November 2025 we wanted to open new horizons through open discussions, characterized by argumentation, explanation, communication and shared reflection. We hoped to nurture ideas and provide motivation across sectors to show that *leaving no one behind* is a universal duty of humanity, that the humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) are cornerstones of society and to use the assembled expertise to provide practical, innovative advice.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Outside view series and wrap-up event

- Putting those standing at the edge to the centre can be defined as the central principle for the reform of humanitarian architecture and for listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation in humanitarian action
- Humanitarian action is not a static picture full of absolute truths — humanitarian action requires constant dialogue to strengthen it beyond its current confines.
- Listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation are more than polite exercises. They foster collective action and learning across sectors
- With the humanitarian principles and IHL, humanitarian stakeholders have strong, universal, ethical North Stars, on which to base any reform process on.
- We need progress on listening, efficiency, outspokenness, and innovation so as to support those standing at the edge moving to the centre. But how, and by whom, can progress be measured?



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Focus point	Finding	Conclusion	Recommendation (ac-
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Listening must be active.○ Listening must be equitable.○ The issue of listening becomes an issue of restructuring dialogues.	Listening seems collectively undervalued and is lacking translation into actual impact on responsibility.	
Efficiency	<p>The most efficient humanitarian action is the action done before disaster hits.</p> <p>To be clarified: which efficiency is in focus (administrative, economic, logistics...) and which measurement standards are to be applied (those of donors, recipients, locals, humanitarian actors ...)?</p>	<p>On the surface the factor of efficiency seems a tempting one for purposeful transformation of the humanitarian architecture. But efficiency is multi-dimensional.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Simply asked: Is cheap humanitarian action the most efficient one?○ The ownership and measurement of standards is central.○ An efficiency standard defined without input of humanitarian actors (local and/or international ones) means that the life of the operative humanitarian actor can become irrelevant.	<p>Clarification on efficiency is needed urgently.</p> <p>What needs to be accepted is that economical and ethical standards of efficiency in humanitarian action must be collectively defined. If not, the opportunity of improving the already existing efficiency is wasted.</p>



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Outspokenness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ We must enable those affected speaking out.○ Outspokenness is always more than an intellectual exercise; it is an ethical obligation.○ We should never yield in the face of the powerful even when short-term support may be imperilled.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Distinguish more strictly the ethical/ democratic outspokenness from fundraising/marketing narratives.○ Identify who needs to be or must be outspoken.	Secure democratic framework for outspokenness and parrhesia
Innovation	Innovation is a collective transitional process from developing a prototype through a structured process to a long-term life cycle solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Fostering cross-sectoral collective action and leaving silos and competition behind is key.○ Much funding for prototyping available, but ultimate, long-term use must be made credible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Improvement of collective action (vs competition)○ Active expectation management with technology agencies and politics.
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Do not use cliches and the same old soundbites over and over.○ Finding answers to the question how to boost humanitarian messaging through new language and new approaches.○ To get those in power to also accept humanitarian vocabulary.	Silos are language comfort zones but marginalizing the 'other'	Promote dialogue. 'Colliding language' study