



Launch of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia

Opening Remarks by Amb. Valentin Zellweger

13 June 2017, 18.30, Palais Eynard

Monsieur le Maire,

Mesdames et Messieurs,

It's a great pleasure to be here with you today on the occasion of the launch the Humanitarian Encyclopedia — a project which responds to an urgent need of the humanitarian sector.

We are all painfully aware that the humanitarian sector is under enormous pressure. In the last years, we have seen a dramatic shift in frequency, scale and magnitude of humanitarian crises. These crises are of an increasingly protracted nature and require multidimensional responses.

At the same time, the financing gap continues to rise. This is all the more worrying, given that the UN estimates that in 2017, humanitarian partners will require 22.2 billion USD to meet the needs of roughly 93 million people. This is a new record high. Never in recent memory have so many people needed support and solidarity to survive and live in safety and dignity.

As a result of these challenges, the humanitarian sector has had to evolve. Traditional international actors have increasingly expanded their activities and many new actors started to engage in crises. There are thousands of local and national NGOs that have started to play a critical role in humanitarian response, but for whom humanitarian action is not always their core function. And there are also tens of thousands of individuals and initiatives that increasingly try to come to the aid of those affected by war, displacement



and natural disasters. These new actors span from members of diasporas to those belonging to a new digital generation of humanitarians.

As the humanitarian sector transforms itself in these different ways, a process of systematization and professionalization of humanitarian action has tried to make the humanitarian sector more efficient, more effective, and more accountable to the affected populations.

Central ingredients of this process are innovative initiatives such as the Sphere Standards or the Core Humanitarian Standard, which Switzerland is proud to support. But they also include, on the one hand, organizations such as ACAPS or Ground Truth, which try to contribute to a better understanding of emergency situations and the needs of those most severely affected. And they include, on the other hand, organizations such as PHAP or CERAH, which aim at enhancing the skills and competencies of humanitarian professionals.

The goal of improving the effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action coincided with yet another recent development. In the lead-up to the World Humanitarian Summit, the concept of localization took center stage. The concept might still lack sufficient clarity, but a broad consensus emerged in Istanbul that a potential solution to the challenges and shortcomings of the humanitarian system could consist in greater ownership of humanitarian action by local actors.

But with the empowerment of local actors and the systematic involvement of affected populations comes the realization that each crisis has its own specificities—its own history and its own narrative. This implies that, depending on the context, key humanitarian concepts and approaches will be understood very differently.

Consider a term such as “resilience” or “protection.” These terms will elicit different associations and therefore mean different things to a refugee on the migrant trail as opposed to a person who was displaced a result of a natural disaster.



In other words: while humanitarian actors might all “speak humanitarian,” they might not all understand each other’s dialects. And this can be problematic: if there is no shared understanding of the divergent interpretations of a specific concept and what these interpretations imply in practice, confusion might arise—not only amongst those responding to crises, but also amongst donors.

It is thus of vital importance to engage in an in-depth analysis of core humanitarian concepts and provide a shared framework of reference. Doing so would support the various stakeholders in humanitarian action in collaborative decision-making in complex environments. And it would also accompany the impetus of professionalization.

This is precisely what the Humanitarian Encyclopedia has set out to achieve. Conceived as an interactive and inclusive online platform, accessible to anyone, it will provide the humanitarian community with tools to reflect on humanitarian concepts and practices.

It is thus a very timely and relevant project and we are convinced that it will be of great benefit to the humanitarian sector. It is a project that will support the reflective involvement of an expanding range of stakeholders in a collaborative manner. And it will build on the experiences in local and regional contexts, which is a necessity at a time of growing diversity in the humanitarian community and tremendous operational challenges.

In our view, the project therefore holds great potential to enhance the capacity and performance of the humanitarian system at large. And it will certainly also contribute to the emerging discipline of humanitarian studies.

We are therefore delighted to attend the launch of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia today, after an intensive preparatory phase, which we accompanied and supported with great interest.



And we are particularly pleased to see this important initiative being developed here in Geneva. It further emphasizes the important role Geneva plays in bringing together the manifold actors of the humanitarian system, allowing them to exchange knowledge and experiences, and thereby to create new synergies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying a few words about CERAH. Switzerland has enjoyed a fruitful and constructive partnership with CERAH, which has been strengthened in recent years—notably through the joint promotion of priority issues such as principled humanitarian action, respect for IHL, the centrality of protection and accountability to affected populations.

But CERAH is also insofar a crucial partner for us, as it has become a center of excellence for the professionalization of humanitarian practitioners. As I mentioned earlier, the humanitarian sector faces great pressures and challenges, which necessitates that humanitarian professionals improve their skills and understanding of the sector. This allows them to become the drivers of change that is so desperately needed.

We have no doubt that the Humanitarian Encyclopedia will further contribute to the improvement of the humanitarian response and provide a key ingredient in the empowerment of local actors. I would therefore like to congratulate CERAH for developing and successfully launching this ambitious research project. We look forward to seeing the Humanitarian Encyclopedia flourish and mobilize the humanitarian sector in a productive and constructive way.

Thank you for your attention.