



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

**“Setting the Scene” Remarks to
the World Humanitarian Summit Regional Consultation for the Pacific Region
Auckland, New Zealand, 30 June 2015**

As delivered

Distinguished guests and colleagues, welcome back.

I would like to take a few moments to set the stage for this regional consultation by taking a closer look at the changes in the global humanitarian landscape that are driving our need to reshape humanitarian action. I will also touch upon some of the issues and recommendations that have emerged from the other regional consultations. My colleague Sune Gudnitz, head of the OCHA regional office for the Pacific, will then speak in more detail about the findings of the consultations in this region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Humanitarian needs have doubled in just ten years. They are currently the highest in recent memory. In total, more than 114 million people around the world depend on humanitarian actors for life-saving assistance and protection. To put this in perspective, consider that the entire population of the Philippines is 98 million people.

During my recent visit to Iraq, I met families with the most heartbreaking stories of fear, flight, loss and grief. In Yemen, some twenty million people - 80 per cent of the population - are now in need of humanitarian aid. In Syria, 12.2 million people need urgent assistance. In South Sudan, 4.6 million people face severe food insecurity.

These headline figures are probably familiar to all of us. But we hear less about the 20 million people who are at risk of hunger in the Sahel, or the thousands who are affected by small-scale recurrent and natural disasters each year. These disasters may not make international headlines, but their impacts are no less devastating for the people who suffer as a result: from separation from home and community; missing out on an education; failure to plant the seeds for next year's harvest; a life of instability and uncertainty.

The scale of needs is staggering, but that alone is not the full picture.

First, the environment in which we operate is becoming increasingly complex. More than eighty per cent of our work is now in countries and regions affected by conflict. Protracted crises are the new normal: the average duration of a humanitarian appeal is

now seven years. In some places, humanitarians have become default providers of essential services, disempowering affected people and perpetuating dependency. We must search for better solutions to meet the long-term needs of people affected by crises, especially the nearly 60 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes.

The number and diversity of actors involved in humanitarian action is also growing. Global power dynamics are changing. Middle income countries, such as Turkey and Indonesia are emerging as important humanitarian actors and even donors. We are also working with an increasing number of non-government actors including diaspora communities, civil society groups and the private sector, who bring additional resources, knowledge and skills to our work.

Second, the factors that drive humanitarian need are converging to affect increasing numbers of people. Climate change, environmental degradation and resource scarcity are adding to the consequences of poverty, underdevelopment and inequality, leaving people more and more vulnerable to crisis. More than half the world's extremely poor people now live in fragile states. I have seen this for myself in the Sahel, where humanitarian emergencies used to strike every decade, then every few years, and are now almost an annual event.

Economic growth has contributed to progress in disaster risk reduction, but high levels of inequality render marginalized groups more vulnerable and less able to withstand and recover from shocks. Crises exacerbate these existing disparities, including gender inequality. Natural disasters kill more women than men; maternal mortality and morbidity is highest in crisis affected countries, and all forms of violence against women and girls rise during conflict.

Third, profound changes are also taking place outside the humanitarian sector, which have an impact on the ways in which we work.

Demographic shifts, particularly rapid, unplanned urbanization, are putting more people at risk from natural disasters, as we saw with the devastation wreaked by the recent Nepal earthquakes on the poorest parts of Kathmandu.

Technology and social media are giving people access to more information than ever before. This connectivity has provided an unprecedented opportunity for new partnerships to assist people in crisis including with mobile phone companies and networks. It has given people a much more powerful voice to demand what they need. It has also enabled new methods of humanitarian assistance, such as cash transfers, that put greater choice into the hands of people affected by crisis.

Colleagues,

These global trends form the backdrop for the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul next May. In preparation for this landmark event, the Secretary-General has asked us to conduct wide-ranging consultations to identify the building blocks of an agenda for change.

To date, we have consulted over 15,400 people in 135 countries around the world, through seven regional consultations, national and regional events, thematic discussions, and online dialogues.

Each of the regional consultations so far has reaffirmed the paramount importance of the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Each consultation has highlighted the urgency of placing people at the heart of humanitarian action. Year on year, we hear assessments and reports highlighting the gap between what humanitarian actors provide, and what people, particularly women and other vulnerable groups, say they need. The consultations have called for the World Humanitarian Summit to mark a paradigm shift away from a top-down, supply-driven system and towards a model that meaningfully engages with the people it intends to serve, and empowers them to have greater voice and choice. This includes recognizing the critical role of women and women's groups as first responders, and working with them to ensure that humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery works for women and girls.

The consultations are now converging around several critical areas. The Secretary-General has asked us to deliver on four of these in particular.

First, we must address the rising human cost of conflict, persecution and human rights violations, which are the main drivers of humanitarian need around the world. In Syria, in Iraq, in South Sudan, in the Central African Republic and in many other places, we see violations of international humanitarian law taking place in a climate of impunity. This trend, which is contributing tremendously to the huge human and financial costs of forced migration, must be reversed. We must generate greater political commitment to international humanitarian law and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

We must also renew our commitment to the fundamental tenets of humanitarian work in these difficult situations. The consultations have strongly called for the de-politicization of aid and reaffirmed the necessity of humanitarian actors being able to interact with all parties to a conflict. They have emphasized the importance of national and regional frameworks that protect people's rights to assistance and protection, in particular those who are internally displaced. And they have highlighted the centrality of protection and called for humanitarian actors to work with others to combat sexual violence against women and girls.

Second, we need a shift towards collective crisis management. In situations of protracted conflict and displacement, the consultations have called for stronger partnerships between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors and for longer-term planning to address people's needs. In countries that suffer from recurrent natural disasters, the consultations have emphasized the critical importance of strong governance on disaster risk reduction and building resilience. And we have heard time and time again that the only lasting solutions are ones that build on the capacity of local actors and empower them to take leadership roles.

Third, the consultations have underscored the need for global action to address the gap between humanitarian needs, and the resources available to meet them. The proposals and

recommendations of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing will guide our thinking here. It is not simply a matter of getting more resources. To meet humanitarian needs in the years to come, we must find more efficient ways of working, and leverage international, regional and domestic resources in a more coordinated way. And to meet needs in the next decades, a fundamental change in approach is required to share the burden among a more diverse set of actors, invest in preparedness and risk mitigation, and ensure that there are stable, predictable and reliable resources to meet humanitarian needs, so that no child goes hungry and no family is forced to live in fear and uncertainty year after year.

Finally, the consultations have echoed the Secretary-General's call for a global approach to humanitarian action that is more inclusive, diverse, and tailored to different contexts. The World Humanitarian Summit is a moment for us to re-examine the relative roles of international, national and local humanitarian actors, and determine where each adds the most value, and to broaden our relationships with new partners, including the private sector and the media. It is an opportunity to adapt to our changing world: to invest in innovation and embrace more efficient and effective ways of responding to people's needs, and to make sure that humanitarian action meets the needs and builds on the strengths of diverse demographic groups, including women, youth, older people, and people with disabilities.

The Secretary-General has challenged us all to generate strong global support for transformative change to humanitarian action.

The consultation process will provide the building blocks for progress. In addition, we will continue to make close links with and build on the post-2015 processes; the Sendai framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the climate change conference; the peacekeeping and peacebuilding reviews; the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement; and the High Level Panels on Humanitarian Financing and on the Global Response to Health Crises.

The World Humanitarian Summit is not an end in itself, but a starting point for progress. It will be platform for Heads of State and Government, and leaders from civil society, the private sector, crisis-affected communities and multilateral organizations to announce their commitments to change, launch new initiatives and partnerships, and showcase innovative practices and ideas.

Above all, the World Humanitarian Summit is about people. People like you and me, who want to take care of themselves, their families and their communities; who do not want to be dependent indefinitely on humanitarian assistance. People who want to be safe, to live in dignity, and to have the opportunity to live productive lives. People who themselves hold the key to reducing risks and to recovering from disasters.

I urge all of you to make the next three days count – because the millions of people around the world who are affected by crisis deserve our best.

Thank you.