

## WHS – Key Points for Academia

*Statement by Gilles Carbonnier,*

*The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 24 May 2016*

*Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,*

The academic community offers a vast – and largely untapped – potential to contribute to evidence-based, effective humanitarian action. A growing number of scholars and research institutions around the world are committed to shed light on what works and what doesn't – and why – based on sound research design and methods. As academics, our job is also to identify critical knowledge gaps, and seek to address them.

Obviously, no one can speak on behalf of THE academic community as a whole. Indeed, our community involves a hugely diverse range of researchers from various disciplines and backgrounds. I thus speak here in a personal capacity, as a scholar based at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, also teaching at the Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action.

Looking at the booming literature in the field of humanitarian studies, it is rejoicing that there are **more opportunities than ever before for innovative, rigorous research**. The 'big data' revolution, together with the availability of geo-spatial data and satellite imaging techniques offers new opportunities for complementing qualitative field research with quantitative evidence. Rigorous impact evaluations in humanitarian settings are becoming more frequent, even if there is still much room for improvement.

Researchers can also draw on an increasingly large pool of data generated by humanitarian organizations themselves. In addition, datasets on disaster and armed violence are expanding. We enjoy greater access to disaggregated data on the humanitarian marketplace, making it possible to study both demand and supply side dynamics. Against this background, a growing number of researchers are stepping up efforts to conduct cross-disciplinary research in partnership with local organizations and humanitarian agencies.

Against this background, **my first point is there are serious ethical issues involved**, which need to be addressed. Research can have a direct bearing on the security, integrity and wellbeing of people affected by humanitarian crises. Conducting research for the purpose of enhancing our understanding of complex emergencies and chronic crises is certainly welcome. However, a lack of sensitivity for humanitarian issues and principles can have grave consequences. As a priority, we shall commit to protect the integrity and dignity of the communities where we conduct research, including key informants and local research partners.

**My second point is that we shall strive to better localize research.** This means developing fair, transparent and equitable partnerships with national and local researchers in crisis-prone countries. Rather than contracting local researchers just as ‘enumerators’ to collect field data, we shall seek to develop truly collaborative partnerships, all the way from initial research design to disseminating findings and policy recommendations.

**My third point** is that scholarly work has long been biased by the Western, Christian heritage of modern humanitarianism. As you are aware, the interpretation of humanitarian principles is a contested issue. The definition of basic concepts such as vulnerability, needs, and resilience vary across disciplines, space and time. This calls for paying greater attention to humanitarian expressions under different religious and secular traditions. It is time to take into account the rich diversity of knowledge ecologies – including local knowledge production – through genuine research partnerships that involve academics and practitioners from the North and the South, from East and West. This is what we currently commit to do under a research proposal entitled ‘Encyclopaedia of Humanitarian Action’.

Last but not least, the mission of academia is to teach and train students and humanitarian practitioners. For example, we at the Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action, are committed to provide humanitarian practitioners from crisis-torn countries with skills and analytical tools that they can use to address acute dilemmas and challenges that they face in their fieldwork. We are firmly committed to training reflexive humanitarian practitioners. It is our hope and aspiration that, through cutting-edge programmes, we can effectively assist humanitarians in their daily struggle to alleviate suffering, save lives and protect the dignity of the (shamefully far too many) children, women and men caught in the midst of humanitarian crises.

*Thank you!*