

Statement to Announcement Plenary

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Good Afternoon. My name is Dan Maxwell; I come from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University in Boston, which hosts one of the longest-standing humanitarian research and graduate degree programs in North America. Humanitarian action is a relatively “young” subject of focus in research and graduate training. But the research community is now growing at a pace commensurate to the growth of humanitarian action itself. What commitments can a teacher and researcher make to the humanitarian world—and indeed to the 125 million people around the world in acute need?

First, good humanitarian decision-making needs to be based on evidence. Too often, we observe that a commitment to “evidence-based policy-making” ends up being something more like “policy-based evidence-making”—evidence is cherry-picked to fit the particular bias or perspective of the decision maker. Researchers are committed to generating evidence that is objective, verifiable, and—critically—*independent*. The humanitarian community has made great strides in the past ten years in improved assessments, better monitoring and evaluation, and even controlled trials of interventions, in an effort to improve impact. These gains are important. But evidence and knowledge go beyond these relatively obvious categories—and must include context, politics, and the stickiest questions of humanitarian action around access, partnership, remote management, the costs of failure to anticipate crises, of corruption, and violations of IHL and principles—to name only a few. In the absence of lessons learned from overall crisis response, simply improving evidence on needs and interventions won’t help us advance far enough quickly enough.

Second, much of research on humanitarian action has been housed in universities in the North. Alongside the commitment to localize humanitarian action, we commit to working in much closer collaboration with universities and research institutes in the countries in which this research is conducted. Tufts has strong and long-standing partnerships with universities, research groups, and in many cases, local humanitarian organizations, in all of the countries where we work. This is not some kind of paternalistic top-down capacity-building, it is about learning—for ALL the parties involved, ourselves included. These partnerships can and should be extended to government, private sector and community groups in humanitarian action.

Third, the research community should commit to following up this summit with both analysis of the dynamics of the summit itself, and to help in monitoring the follow-up. Whatever momentum has been created by this particular moment in Istanbul needs to be nurtured, and solid evidence will help that process.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, we are also committed to teaching, and imparting the cumulative knowledge of humanitarian action to a new generation of leaders. This is increasingly done collaboratively with agencies and governments, and increasingly through non-traditional educational means such as distance learning, specialized training, and even simulation exercises.

And I was asked to note that a more in-depth statement from the whole academic community at the World Humanitarian Summit will be issued later today building on many of these points.