

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Event

“Humanitarian Innovation in Action”

Opening Remarks and Keynote

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FEATURING

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International Development*

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Jacob Kurtzer: Good morning. My name is Jake Kurtzer. I'm director and senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Humanitarian Agenda. I would like on behalf of CSIS to welcome everyone joining us today in person and virtually for our conference, Humanitarian Innovation and Action.

I'd like to especially recognize USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance for making this conference possible through their generous support to CSIS. I also want to thank my colleagues on the Humanitarian Agenda team, Jude Larnerd, Hareem Abdullah, Fiona Joseph, and Sierra Ballard, along with all the colleagues at CSIS who enable us to produce important conversations and discussions, such as we're having today. Lastly, I want to extend gratitude to our panelists and keynote speakers who are joining us from Washington and elsewhere around the world.

Before we begin our program, I want to share with you some building safety precautions. We take safety seriously at CSIS and in the humanitarian sector. (Laughter.) In case of any sort of emergency follow my instructions and take note of the emergency exits – like a flight attendant – on my left, on my right, and out that way. (Laughter.)

Today's conference focuses on exploring the effective, innovative, and scalable solutions to respond to, and more importantly to hopefully prevent, the most urgent humanitarian crises. Innovation is baked into the humanitarian sector since its inception as a formal – as a formal sector. The concept of organized humanitarian assistance was, in and of itself, something of an innovation in thought. And humanitarian actors have always sought ways to improve the delivery of aid to affected communities long before innovation emerged as a central theme at the World Humanitarian Summit.

But innovation is now a key focus. And yet, there remains to some degree a lack of consensus about what innovation entails, who's doing it. There are misconceptions about who engages in innovation, how and where innovative ventures are lost. And for me, incredibly importantly, there is not really consensus about the ethical or principle frameworks that govern new vectors, new actors, new tools and techniques when they become engaged in the service of providing humanitarian assistance to at-risk populations.

So at a time when the global needs are increasing substantially, the humanitarian innovation agenda – the projects, stakeholders, visions of improvement – can play a central role and a sustainable role in addressing humanitarian needs. But it requires additional thought. So that thought needs to identify what exactly the actors in the humanitarian sector expect innovation to deliver, how they deliver it, and to talk through why it matters. It's equally also important to examine the gaps and limitations of innovation

and the potential challenges posed by the rapid institutionalization of this field.

Additionally, we know that stakeholders within affected communities within the humanitarian sector and beyond also are expressing a growing recognition that local, national actors should be at the forefront of humanitarian efforts writ large, and the innovation agenda more specifically. Local actors are the first to respond, have access to hard to reach areas in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, and their intimate access gives them unique insight into the most appropriate and needed innovative solutions.

So today we're very lucky to be joined by speakers from Washington and around the world, as far as Uganda, the United Kingdom and Pakistan, who will share their expertise and insights on advancing the humanitarian innovation agenda. Our first panel, Transformation Through Humanitarian Innovation and Through Private Sector Engagement, will provide a broad overview of where progress has been made thus far and ways to further the agenda.

The following panels will assess the role humanitarian innovation plays in concepts like elevating women's leadership in humanitarian response, enhancing transparency in data and information management – one of the key issues today – and finally in improving responses to forced displacement. And we'll have closing remarks by David Miliband, CEO of the International Rescue Committee, and Dr. Abdirizak from the Federal Ministry of Health in Somalia.

Today's panels will explore new concepts, ideas, and approaches. We do need to acknowledge the context that they're happening in. Humanitarian needs are rising rapidly because of protracted conflicts in Afghanistan, Yemen, the Sahel, and elsewhere. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a devastating crisis with knock-on effects for global food security. And of course, the food security and climate crisis in the Horn of Africa is top of mind for us. So I want to acknowledge also the announcement of an additional \$1.3 billion made by Administrator Power from this stage yesterday to respond to that food security crisis, but to connect the dots and say it's – the money at this point is not enough. We also need to think through the new, innovative, scalable solutions to that challenge.

Before I turn to our keynote speaker, I also want to acknowledge the support of some USAID colleagues that we've worked with to put on today's event. And specifically, I want to flag Lillie Rosen, in the back corner here, who is really interested for you all to take time to speak with her, reflect on the ideas shared at this conference and your own ideas, and use this opportunity to help build a network for innovation in Washington, D.C. And so our hope

today is to explore the ways in which we can channel the financial and brain resources we have.

And so without further ado, I'm very pleased to introduce our keynote speaker, Sarah Charles, assistant to the administrator at the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, to provide our opening remarks. Thank you, Sarah. (Applause.)

Sarah Charles: Good morning. (Coughs.) Excuse me. Good morning. It's an honor to join you to welcome up today's humanitarian innovations and action conference. Thank you to CSIS for hosting us for this timely event.

And just on a personal note, thank you, Jake. I know that you're moving out to Tanzania in the next few weeks, but just you've been a phenomenal partner to USAID, to the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, and an important voice in the humanitarian community. Certainly driving a conversation here in Washington and beyond around ways that we need to press the humanitarian system forward to be more accountable to affected populations and to innovation, which we'll be talking about today. So just on a personal note, all the best in your next phase. We've really, really valued the partnership here.

As Jake mentioned, this has been an incredibly challenging year globally. Just yesterday I was here at CSIS with Administrator Power as she laid out the severe and far-reaching effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, coming on the heels of the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Long-term complex emergencies, multi-season droughts, and other climatic shocks have pushed the world into a global food security crisis. The numbers are staggering. Up to 40 million people could be thrust into poverty and food insecurity in 2022 as a result of the war. And 75 to 95 million more people could be propelled into extreme poverty by the combined effects of the war, pandemic, inflation, and beyond.

The humanitarian crises we face today are protracted and complex. They live at the intersection of seemingly intractable political, social, economic, and environmental challenges. The global humanitarian system has incredible breadth and depth, but today's crises reveal the profound challenges that societies face and the limits and constraints of humanitarian assistance alone in meeting people's needs. There are no quick fixes to today's challenges. Innovation is not going to solve protracted crises, aid obstruction, or repeated climate shocks. But it can help us solve the dysfunctions in the system born of our own systems, processes, and mindsets.

So at USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, even as we respond to crises every day, we're seeking to help build the future of humanitarian aid. We're doing this through ambitious commitments and new approaches to

localization, climate adaptation, and disaster risk reduction, protection and, critically, our increasing focus as an agency to support progress not just programs. Innovation plays a critical role in this endeavor. It welcomes new thinking, approaches, and partners. It can enhance the effectiveness of assistance, enabling us to achieve greater outcomes and scale. We see innovation as a response to complex problems, problems that require us to learn and adapt so that we can deliver the most effective response possible for people living through crises.

While we embrace new technologies, we don't see innovation as synonymous with technology. In fact, sometimes the most powerful innovation is the simplest one. One only need to look at humanitarian context to see some of the most incredible examples of human ingenuity, resilience, and creativity. But it matters who defines and prioritizes humanitarian problems, and who's designing solutions. In our work with the MIT D-Lab local NGO, the Youth Social Advocacy Team in South Sudan, conflict-affected people set their priorities and design their solutions in Jonglei State. Results show that when people design their own solutions, adoption of those solutions significantly increase. Out of the 11 tools for economic resilience designed in the program, nine are actively now on the market.

When we design humanitarian services, how we listen and learn is also critical. Solutions have to be compatible with the material reality, preferences, and contextual challenges of conflict-affected populations. That's why BHA supports the development, testing, and adaptation of innovation so that they're well-suited to the environment. Through our work with accelerators, like Creating Hope in Conflict, a humanitarian grand challenge. When the White Helmets were funded to establish the first local manufacturing center for PPE equipment in Syria at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptive design resulted in facemasks and shields designed for health care workers who were the hijab.

Some of the most innovative, even simple, solutions in the humanitarian sector have come from listening and learning, multipurpose cash being king among them. We started supporting cash because people told us they wanted to be able to get what they need when and where they want it, and because they demonstrated that beneficiaries themselves can be the best stewards of aid dollars. Today cash is an essential tool in the humanitarian toolkit, and a key part of our response to the global food security crisis, including a key part of the 1.2 billion (dollars) in new funding for the Horn of Africa that Administrator Power announced today, and that Jake mentioned earlier.

Yesterday, Administrator Power also announced a new \$200 million contribution to UNICEF to supercharge the ready-to-use therapeutic food, or

RUTF, pipeline. Two decades ago, RUTF was an innovation that rocked the humanitarian world – a therapeutic paste made of simple and nutritious self-stable ingredients that, if delivered correctly, would save the lives of 90 percent of severely malnourished children that received treatment. The next innovation we need now is not necessarily new products, but rather new ways of reaching the one in four severely malnourished children that are currently not in treatment – approaches that respond to the lived experience and constraints of the parents and malnourished children and the community health workers that serve them.

Of course, it's not enough just to listen and learn. Conflict- and disaster-affected people must also see positive change from the innovations that we deploy. This is among the reasons we fund research to evaluate the effectiveness of new approaches in humanitarian work. With climate change increasing and intensifying natural disasters, we believe that the growing field of anticipatory action is critical for effective and cost-effective response. Moving from pilot to scale involves not just investment in data or new financial tools – although these are both critical – but also looking at how people experience these innovations.

Our partners at Tufts University are working with six universities around the world to undertake rigorous impact evaluations of anticipatory action which include hearing from the people that rely on early warning systems. This kind of research provides us with the empirical evidence about whether investment in a new way of working is actually improving lives. We also seek to innovate how we measure the progress of our efforts to improve the humanitarian system. In partnership with the World Food Program's Innovation Hub in East Africa, we've deployed new monitoring and evaluation measures to better support entrepreneurs who are part of WFP's IGNITE Food System Challenge.

Instead of measuring success as how well we move along a standard workplan, we measure how many changes were made to program design based on feedback from partners and how programs evolved to better serve the needs of local entrepreneurs and women-led innovation teams. Innovating requires us to view failures as opportunities to adapt and find new ways to measure and define success. Changing the way we work can also mean adopting tools and technologies that enable more effective operations and assistance.

The Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs Digital Strategy Action Plan is our roadmap for leveraging digital technology to help us transform humanitarian assistance. Digital technologies allow us to collect information, connect, and communicate at a scale and pace that was previously unimaginable. These technologies have transformed the experience of crisis for impacted communities, who increasingly rely on digital channels for lifesaving

information, much of it user-generated, to connect with family and friends, and to make decisions after displacement and disaster.

I saw this firsthand in the Philippines and Indonesia last month, where we've invested in digital platforms that crowdsource data and deliver real time information ahead of, during, and after typhoons, earthquakes, and flooding. Investment in real-time data analytics can inform rapid and flexible program design, allow us to listen to those we serve, and even provide a way to deliver assistance digitally. Meanwhile, we have to constantly adapt to enhanced data privacy protocols and safeguard effective populations. The complexity of challenges faced by crisis-affected people today cannot be overstated.

Russia's war in Ukraine has revealed the incredible power of nonstate actors, digital technologies, and cyber intervention in warfare and humanitarian relief. And as drought ravages East Africa and climate change affects communities and economies worldwide, we'll need to rethink agricultural patterns and practices, supply chains, and trade policy. To effectively meet the challenges of an uncertain and deeply interconnected world, we need to engage the whole system. We're exploring what it looks like to convene the whole system around solving some of these humanitarian challenges.

Take Bangladesh, for example, which is facing three overlapping challenges. The Rohingya crisis, climate-related vulnerability, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. A traditional humanitarian response to these challenges will never be sufficient. That's why our work with the Global Knowledge Initiative in Bangladesh looks not at specific innovators or innovations, but at an enabling environment for innovation to thrive. Rather than humanitarian actors alone devising more effective responses, GKI is convening humanitarian organizations, civil society, local, regional, and national governments, universities, and the private sector to determine how they can individually and collectively support and scale innovation locally. Each of these groups, civil actors, has their own skills and comparative advantages they bring to bear.

We're also working to make sure a diverse set of voices are embedded within local systems so that innovations are inclusive and holistic. We've co-designed a competitive prize with Creating Hope in Conflict that incentivizes and rewards women-led and locally led innovation teams who work to strengthen local systems and networks and amplify the voices and priorities of conflict-affected populations. Our vision for the future is to bring a new set of problem-solvers to the table, and to listen, learn and, perhaps hardest of all at times, be led by them to make the changes internally, often the most painful ones to make, that enable us to work differently, to engage the whole ecosystem in solutions and, most importantly, to put people with the lived

experience of crisis at the center of the structures and incentives in our system.

It's not a given that humanitarian innovation will fulfill its potential and address the challenges of the sector. Innovation necessarily involves risk, often magnified by rapidly changing technology. We need to leverage the opportunities of emerging technology without marginalizing those that don't have access to it, and without putting those who do have access to it at risk. We must learn from the private sector approaches and models for innovation but recognizes that these approaches will not be relevant for all people and in all of the places that we work.

And we must accept higher levels of risk as we try new ways of working, but not transfer that risk to the communities that we serve. I very much look forward to hearing from the panelists today what they see as the opportunities, risks, and challenges in our sector, and what might become possible if we create the space for people to imagine and build a more effective and more just humanitarian system. Thank you. (Applause.)

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you so much for the comprehensive remarks and for your kind comments. And, spoiler alert, I'm moving to Tanzania. (Laughter.)

Ms. Charles: Was that not public? (Laughter.)

Mr. Kurtzer: I'm very excited. I wanted to ask you, first and foremost, you talked about a lot of your partners that you're working with – the WFP Innovation Hub, MIT, who we'll hear from in the next panel, and others. But one of the things that I always think about is that sometimes the humanitarian sector seems like it sits alone within the U.S. government context. And innovation is something that the entirety of the U.S. government is thinking about, business sectors. You know, the whole world is trying to adapt to new technology. So can you talk a little bit about how BHA's efforts to innovate fit into the wider U.S. government's efforts to transform the way it works?

Ms. Charles: Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, there's certainly – we have – we have the great challenge and benefit of standing up as a new bureau in the midst of COVID, which, you know, in many ways radically transformed the way that we worked in the U.S. government. And I think not unlike, I'm sure, a lot of your organizations, that came with, of course, immense challenges, but also opportunities. And I think the biggest opportunity was the flattening we saw between Washington and our colleagues who work around the world.

And so, you know, this is something that I think is being felt across the U.S. government, is how do we – I think colloquially in the U.S. government we call it return to work – but really, how do we return to the office while maintaining some of the flexibility and, frankly, most critically I think, the

flattening that came with – came with being forced to take a lot of our work online. Which, again, created challenges that really built connectivity, I think, again, with a number of our colleagues that are working around the world, and between them and a number of their partners.

Which I think in the U.S. government was, you know, again, particularly critical at a time when we're coming off of about 10 to 15, even 20 years where the work of our colleagues has increasingly come behind embassy walls, in a way that I think is – it's really quite frustrating to many of our colleagues. But again, has created some opportunities in this time of online work to connect in a more meaningful way with a lot of our partners.

I also think, you know, there's just been a tremendous conversation inside of the U.S. government but really around the country and around the world about diversity, equity, and inclusion, coming out of these last few years. And while much of that discussion at USAID and in the U.S. government has been around our own workforce, our own practices. And I think within the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance we've also used this dialogue as a way to open up the conversation about accountability to affected populations, about localization, and about changing power dynamics around the table.

And maybe finally I would say, you know, I think we've watched a real rollercoaster around – over the last even five or six months in new financial tools. You know, we've seen the kind of bubble burst around crypto and other monetary tools that, you know, again, I think have shown some glimmers of promise in the humanitarian sphere but also come with real risks. And so, you know, our work at the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, looking at some of these new products, new technologies, is very much grounded in a wider effort at USAID and a wider effort across the U.S. government under an executive – an executive order around these tools.

Looking, again, at kind of the promise and the risk of these tools, what some of the new regulatory requirements could or should be, how to – how to potentially take advantage of the promise of these tools without, again, transferring risk into the populations that we work with.

Mr. Kurtzer: You talked about, again, these partners. And there's certainly always a push and pull between donors, pushing partners or partners pulling. And so I'm curious, how have partners responded to your efforts to push them towards innovation? And in terms of the private sector, not just as a resource for humanitarian actors but as an actor itself, what are some of the challenges bringing in these new actors? And are there any other successes you'd like to highlight?

Ms. Charles: Yeah. Maybe I'll start with the private sector piece. In the midst of everything going on in the world, I recently traveled to the Philippines and Indonesia,

really to focus on kind of the important, if not the urgent, of a lot of our work around localization, around disaster risk reduction, and around climate adaptation. And I think in a place like the Philippines, you have a real model of how the private sector can be very much integrated into both efforts to address disaster risk reduction, but also humanitarian response. Not as – not as alternative sources of funding, but as real partners in response that are looking at resilience of supply chains, that are looking at early warning systems, that are looking at climate adaptation.

I think there are models there that have – coming out of the World Humanitarian Summit, there have been efforts by OCHA and others to replicate that on a global scale. But I think we still do have a lot more work to do to take our relationship with the private sector from one of kind of seeking funding to one of partnership. And I do think the disaster risk reduction, the climate adaptation space, is a space that's really ripe for this, because there's very much shared interest between the humanitarian sector and the private sector around issues of market resilience, around issues of supply chain resilience, around issues of early warning.

Mr. Kurtzer: I certainly think it requires a cultural shift on the part of humanitarian actors. We saw on in a trip to Nigeria, looking at the crisis in the northeast, that electrification, which was a huge problem, there was – the private sector in Nigeria, which is incredibly vibrant, was looking into electrification for their own – you know, as a – as a commercial enterprise. And yet, the dialogue between what the humanitarian community needed for protection for basic quality of life and what the private sector was doing just wasn't advanced enough to incorporate them.

So I want to ask you, maybe pivoting off of that, when you think about innovations, bringing in the private sector, you talked about DEI, you talked about localization, you talked about accountability and people-centered thinking. But are there other unique sectoral challenges that we have in the humanitarian sector that you're thinking about? And I'm thinking maybe about protection concerns or principles. And how we can integrate, you know, the thinking of this community with the thinking of the new actors?

Ms. Charles: Yeah. I mean, I think what this – the protection concerns I think have to be central to any conversation that we're having about innovation. And I think it comes in in a few different places. One, I think there's been a pretty ripe conversation in recent years, but much more is needed, around data protection, data privacy, around kind of informed consent. These are populations that are – have a tremendous – on the one hand, have a tremendous amount of agency, are, of course, agents of their own – of their own lives. But in many cases, are highly dependent on the international community, which I think raises the bar for our work on norms, on best practice, and on communication to ensure that, again, we're not transferring

the risk of this technology onto population without that dialogue and consent.

And then, you know, I think the other protection dimension is there's disparate access to technology. So, you know, as we – again, we kind of touched on crypto. And I remember the very early days of the Ukraine crisis I was getting a lot of incoming and questions from people outside of the humanitarian, you know, are there ways that we can use crypto to get resources to populations inside of Ukraine. And, you know, really in conversation with our team, these issues beg the question about who has access to this kind of technology? Is there an ecosystem that can support this kind of technology? Are the most vulnerable going to be able to take advantage of this kind of technology? And of course, we've seen other risks associated with moving in that direction as well.

But, you know, even the cash conversation, I think we have a tendency – it's an incredible innovation in the sector. One that we're very supportive of. But when we look at the specific modalities of how to deliver cash, we're very conscious, and we work very closely with our partners on, in using various modalities, who's potentially left behind? And how do we ensure that it's not the most vulnerable.

Mr. Kurtzer: If I can trouble you for one more question. They say, you know, the best time to plant a tree was 50 years ago and the second-best time is today, right? So if you think about a vision of what a transformed BHA or a transformed sector looks like, do you have that vision? And if so, what should we be thinking about 10 years ago, and what should we be thinking about today and tomorrow to try to get there?

Ms. Charles: I mean, I think there are – there are two – kind of two big trains we're trying to drive at the same time. One is – one is around localization, and really thinking about that is a very holistic way. So it's not just about money transfer to local NGOs, that become, you know, local versions of big international NGOs. But really looking – although transferring the resources is a big – is a big part of it. But really looking at how to center local voices in decision making and leading of humanitarian response. And innovation certainly has a role to play in that.

The other piece, and I touched on a little bit is, you know, how do we move much more towards anticipatory action? And I think the role of climate change, but it's not just about climate impacts, has highlighted the import of moving early, responding early to save lives. And, you know, I think in our world one of the great innovations of, again, several decades ago, was the famine early warning system coming out of the drought and famine in the Horn nearly 35-40 years ago. But that – you know, that early warning has not

yet translated to the early release of resources in a consistent and predictable way.

And so I think one of the big innovations over the next – you know, next four or five years, will be certainly looking at how do we move resources early where they're needed. And how are those steered by the people that are closest to the challenges?

Mr. Kurtzer: Well, Sarah, thank you very much for being here today, for your support and partnership. And we look forward to continuing to work with you.

For the rest of us, we're going to take a 10-minute break. We'll come back here at 9:45 for our first panel. We'll hear from, among others, the MIT D-Lab, the response innovation lab. So please feel free to grab coffee and drinks and we'll meet back here at 9:45. Thank you so much, Sarah.

Ms. Charles: Thank you, (Applause.)