

2017 ROHAN Conference

Addis Ababa

Intro comments

Welcome to Addis Ababa and the 2017 Rohan Conference.

I am Barnaby Willitts-King Senior Research Fellow in the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute, an independent thinktank based in London. I am honoured to be joined by you all as distinguished representatives from regional organization secretariats and centres across the globe.

I'd like to offer my thanks to our hosts from the AU Commission, and also to our donors, OFDA, for making this event and indeed this crucial initiative possible.

Let me just offer some brief opening remarks on ROHAN's current progress and the aims of this gathering.

The 'Regional Humanitarianism in Action' conference, hosted by the International Humanitarian City in Dubai in February 2015, was the first to bring together major regional organisations from around the world to discuss how they can better learn from each other and more effectively complement international efforts to counter humanitarian crises.

Together, this group recognised that the role of regional organisations has been neglected, and yet is critical in order to address the complex, frequent, interconnected and, above all, transnational crises affecting countries as diverse as Syria, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar.

Such diverse contexts are reflected in the membership of this group. As participants reflected in Dubai, regional organisations that bridge similar cultures and shared languages certainly have the will to address the humanitarian crises that affect their member states and people.

Whether they have the means to do so is a more mixed picture, and whilst many have a long history of developing policies and institutional frameworks to aid humanitarian assistance, response preparedness and reduce vulnerability, others are new to this space.

In addition, the lack of clarity about what role Regional Organisations are best placed to fill has been a key question for this group. The challenge of how regional organisations can achieve complementarity with the existing humanitarian sector – comprising UN agencies, national governments, and humanitarian organisations of every shape and size – is something that I hope this group can play a key role in overcoming.

Building this shared understanding of Rohan's common purpose and the challenges ahead was a great success in Dubai.

Then came the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, where the diversity of the humanitarian community, and the scale of human needs in ongoing crises, were on display like never before.

The WHS' Special Session on Regional Action for Global Challenges provided the ideal opportunity on the world stage to state Rohan's goals as a group, with participants committing to deepen and broaden their partnerships with one another through sharing experiences – and examples of good practises and challenges – in order to capitalise on each other's strengths.

Among Rohan's key focus areas was the need to increase resilience to disasters and to build the capacity of national and local actors in humanitarian response.

Rohan members also expressed an interest in exploring new ways of upholding humanitarian principles together, and forging new roles for regional organisations in the global humanitarian architecture: rather than a proposal for a one-size-fits-all approach, such roles would be reflective of the unique histories and cultures that make this group so crucial in addressing the shared, global crises that we face today.

With those ambitious goals in mind, I am pleased to announce that our agenda for the next three days is reflective of these crucial issues that Rohan members recommended the group should focus on.

We'll start by familiarising ourselves with each others' activities – we reflect a range of different types of organisation with different challenges. Then I'll recap on the Jakarta meeting hosted by ASEAN's Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Action on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and update you on ROHAN's activities over the past year since we gathered in Jakarta.

After lunch we'll discuss what it means in practice for there to be a response which is 'nationally led, backed by regional organisations and supported by international organisations'.

We'll then break out into two groups – to look in more detail at how regional organisations can prevent, prepare for and respond respectively to conflicts and disasters

Tomorrow will be an opportunity to engage with external partnerships and share examples of good practice and challenge – with specific sessions on lessons from the private sector, engaging with global policy processes, and finally the role of civil society.

The aim of this gathering is to build on the commitments and pledges made by participants at the WHS and last year in Jakarta in order to make actionable outcomes. To that end, the final morning will centre around the collation of a 2017-18 Action Plan that can take forward the agenda that the regional organisations gathered here have built together over the previous three years.