All members of the Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing (HLP) participated in a face-to-face meeting that lasted a day and a half. The co-chairs, Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva and HRH Sultan Nazrin Shah, and members opened the meeting and articulated their reasons for participating, affirming their commitment to ensure those who are displaced or affected by crises are not forgotten. They resolved to find ambitious but workable ideas that ensure fewer people lose their lives, livelihoods, or dignity as a result of manmade or natural disasters.

Throughout the meeting, there was consensus on the absence of reliable and comprehensive data on humanitarian needs, humanitarian resource flows, and additional resources beyond the humanitarian sphere including government aid. Panelists resolved to explore options to ensure access to a broad range of resources and tools to ensure better humanitarian outcomes. They also proposed further exploration into building an open data platform that could reliably and consistently pull such data together.

A number of experts provided provocative presentations that both set out the history and current state of humanitarian action and financing while challenging the panelists to be bold in imagining a better future. Panelists considered a “new deal” for displacement that would provide longer term funding (5-10 years) in exchange for more conducive terms for local employment and a shift away from encampment. They heard the need to build a “new vision” for humanitarian and development financing in protracted crisis. They also considered a “social contract” building on best practice from risk financing and insurance that set out what would be expected from everyone, including finance when disasters occur. Lastly panelists discussed a “grand bargain” that could include more unearmarked funding for aid agencies in exchange for reduced overhead costs.

Panelists emphasized the importance of linking humanitarian results to other global efforts to cure diseases, eliminate hunger, build resilience, prevent crises, or reduce poverty. Experts presented the challenges and opportunities inherent in trying to bring coherence to this web of disparate actors working on interlinked problems, and proposed some avenues to explore going forward such as improving data harmonization, reviewing institutional architectures, and building incentives for joint fundraising.

Given the current global economic climate, panelists were made aware of the need to look beyond traditional sources of funding to meet humanitarian need—as a ceiling is forming on resources from OECD countries—and to explore, in particular, untapped funding potential from Muslim donor countries. In this regard, experts presented the potential of Islamic social finance, including zakat (mandatory alms-giving) and waqf (endowment) as possible innovative instruments to
increase humanitarian funding. There was agreement on proposing a pilot – with UNHCR or UNRWA – to explore the practicalities and judge the appetite for establishing a mechanism to channel such funds to international humanitarian activities.

Looking at the big picture, there was consensus on the high levels of global support for giving humanitarian aid, but also agreement that clearer new narratives – linked to results – were needed in order to increase them further. These narratives could be tailored to special actors – such as businesses, specific industries, faith based actors, and emerging economies – and should be centered not on financial requirements but on the substantive change these resources aimed to deliver in the lives of people and the specific roles these actors could play to effect those changes. Panelists attempted to put humanitarian resources into context, noting the massive size of global remittances, overall development assistance, local government spending and the military expenditure. There was agreement to look at the behavioral factors that underpinned and sustained global support for humanitarian aid, including through deeper engagement with social and behavioral scientists.

Panelists delved into specific ideas to increase humanitarian financing, noting that different financing instruments may be more appropriate for different types of crises. In this context there was agreement to explore utilizing matching funds, engaging markets more effectively, enlarging World Bank tools, utilizing insurance schemes, enhancing outreach to diaspora, improving partnerships with emerging economies, linking with climate financing tools, and working with foundations. Panel members stressed that building trust and demonstrating effectiveness or a business case for giving aid are key ingredients to bringing more partners to the table.

Panelists briefly reviewed the current standards for and quality of humanitarian data, the key repositories, and their specific objectives. Panel members suggested a more ambitious open data platform was needed, built on the principles of aid transparency and civic engagement, that tracked all resource flows and results achieved in an accessible manner. Members highlighted the role data and visual communications broadly play in reaching the youth of the world and empowering them to hold decision makers to account for delivering humanitarian results effectively. Panel members started a conversation on how to look for efficiencies in humanitarian action, including through harmonization of reporting and more effective use of technology. Panel members also explored the dynamics of power and resources in humanitarian aid, and agreed on the importance of ensuring front line responders were supported more directly during a crisis.

Participants reviewed potential working modalities, and agreed on key upcoming meetings or events they would attend or consider. The panel endorsed the secretariat’s proposal for work streams built around discrete issues to help drive the work of the panel and ensure consistent follow-up. Panel members agreed to informally consult their networks on their current level and nature of support for humanitarian action, why they give, and their thoughts on some of the bold ideas proposed during the meeting.