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Statement during the closing session of the Yemen Humanitarian Crisis Conference

Doha, 24 February 2016

Excellencies, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It’s an honour for me to be here and speak to you. It’s an honour and also a burden, as I’ve been asked to speak on behalf of NGOs which is a bit of an impossible task. I don’t have the luxury of representing a single entity like Qatar Charity, OCHA, a government or a donor. As you know there are dozens of national and international NGOs working in Yemen; and ICVA itself is a network of over 80 national and international NGOs (and I’m delighted that some of them have been here with us at this conference).

So if you permit, I will be speaking in my capacity as the Regional Representative for ICVA, based on my discussions with various stakeholders during this conference and over the last several months that I have been following the crisis in Yemen.

So while the number and range of NGOs happens to be a challenge for me on this occasion, it also speaks to the strength of civil society. It is a strength in that it speaks to the breadth and richness of NGOs—national Yemeni NGOs, charities from the Gulf region, and international NGOs from outside the region—that contribute to the humanitarian response in Yemen. And this is why I salute this initiative by Qatar Charity, I thank them for the hospitality they have shown us here in Doha, and I am grateful for the hard work they’ve done in bringing together a wide range of stakeholders to share experiences and exchange ideas for the goal of a better and more effective response to the crisis in Yemen.

So who are the different stakeholders involved in the response in Yemen?

The first-line responders, those we don’t often hear from, are neighbors, families, communities who immediately react by providing assistance, by taking in people fleeing conflict. Then there are local and national NGOs, the private sector, and sometimes INGOs with existing presence who respond. And of course the primary responsibility for protecting and assisting those in need lies with governments. But it is when these entities have reached their capacity, or when they are unable or unwilling to respond that international NGOs and UN agencies also have their role to play.

Each of these players has its role to play, in a complementary fashion, always working with the relevant line ministries of the government. Even when in times of crisis the political layer of the government may be in flux, we can continue to work with the civil service and governmental institutions like the High Relief Committee or the Ministry of Health.

And here is where the importance of partnerships and coordination comes in.
At ICVA we are continuously looking at the quality of partnerships between national and international NGOs, between NGOs and UN agencies, between funding agencies and implementers. While we recognize the generosity of humanitarian donors, some of whom have representatives here today, such as DFID, KSRelief, SDC and the European Commission, we know that a tiny fraction of humanitarian funding is given directly by donors to local and national NGOs and we at ICVA continue to advocate for an increase in this proportion. We also advocate for partnerships with NGOs to be in line with the Principles of Partnership, and for donors to respect Good Humanitarian Donorship principles, such as predictable and flexible funding. As Mr. Al Rwailly mentioned yesterday, good donorship is also about allocating funding in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessments.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

The needs in Yemen are so great, even overwhelming, that there is room and a need for all of these different stakeholders to respond but how to ensure their complementarity? How do we know who is best placed to assist and protect the conflict-affected people in Yemen in different sectors, in different geographic areas, each as a function of his expertise and specific added value?

Coordination

There are different levels of coordination for different purposes. For example, this conference is a sort of strategic coordination and information sharing at the regional level. Donors coordinate among each other (or at least we sincerely hope they do); NGOs have coordination fora; and UN agencies coordinate their efforts.

There is also inter-agency or operational coordination that occurs in-country, both at the national and sub-national levels. And if the complementarity we are seeking is to be achieved, then it must involve all the relevant actors’ active participation, and as proximate as possible to where the work is being done—and that means Sana’a, Aden, Hodeidah and so on. Because we will certainly not avoid gaps or duplication if only half of the organizations regularly attend cluster meetings, if only some share information about their needs assessment and activities, if not everybody contributes to strategic planning.

But, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the challenge that has come up time and time again this week:

Access

There is no point in having wonderful partnerships, great donors and efficient coordination if the Yemeni people in need cannot have safe, unfettered, reliable access to humanitarian assistance and protection. And for this, relief agencies need to have not only access to send their staff and supplies TO Yemen, but also be able to move them AROUND the country.
As we heard the other day, there is a legal framework during conflict that puts obligations on the parties to the conflict. Indeed within international humanitarian law, there are notions of distinction, precaution, proportionality, and protection, very much based on the humanitarian principle of humanity which is basis of all humanitarian work. These concepts are not only for the protection of civilians in times of conflict but also for the protection of relief workers. So how is it that civilians are being arbitrarily detained? Why are humanitarian workers being detained at checkpoints? Why is civilian infrastructure, like medical facilities and schools being targeted? These practices are unacceptable and must stop.

But IHL also puts responsibility on humanitarian organizations. An organization may only offer its relief services to the parties to the conflict if it is impartial, meaning its programs do not discriminate based on people's race, religion, political affiliation, gender and so on, but are based on need alone, and that assistance is provided in proportion to need.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We can only begin the help the people affected by this crisis if we work in good, equitable, transparent partnership.

If we honestly look to find the complementarity and the added value of each actor.

If every operational agency actively participates in the inter-agency coordination mechanisms in-country.

And we can continue to work together to engage with and raise the awareness of the parties to the conflict to have more predictable, unimpeded, and safer access to the whole country.

But as you and I know well, and as Minister Fath mentioned yesterday, there are no humanitarian solutions to conflict. The only solution must be a political one, so that we can start to help the Yemeni people rebuild their country.

Because Yemen deserves better. Because the people of Yemen deserve better.

I thank you.