Cooperation and Collaboration for Effective Humanitarian Action

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Collaboration should be an inherent and fundamental element of humanitarian action. As humanitarians, we have a responsibility to work together, because no single humanitarian organisation has the capability to respond to all the humanitarian needs in the world on its own. Therefore, it is our moral duty to continuously try and strengthen and improve the quality of our relationships.

In this presentation, I would like to briefly describe some of the recent history in collaboration and the thinking about it that is happening at the international level. Following that, I would like to highlight three essential aspects required to move forward on the practice of real collaboration in the humanitarian world.

Since 2006, collaboration and partnership in the humanitarian world has received much attention. In early 2005, the then UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, launched an effort to reform certain parts of the humanitarian system and to improve coordination. Although there was opportunity to address the vital issues related to coordination and partnership through the IASC, this was not exploited fully on both sides. As a result, when the clusters were introduced in the summer of 2005, there was little appetite outside the UN to join the so-called “cluster process” without further dialogue, causing some tensions in the relationship between the UN and non-UN actors.

To improve and enhance the spirit of partnership, it was decided to review the state of the relationship between UN and non-UN agencies. In July 2006, the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) was established, in an attempt to improve the dialogue and relationships between the main operational partners in humanitarian response. The overall goal of the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) is to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action. It is premised on the belief that no single humanitarian agency can cover all humanitarian needs and that collaboration is, therefore, not an option, but a necessity.

Underpinning the efforts to improve collaboration in the humanitarian world, are the five Principles of Partnership. These Principles, which were adopted by the GHP in July 2007, are meant to provide a measurement yardstick by which partnerships between NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and UN agencies, and also internally within each of those families, can be assessed or qualified. Although the five Principles reflect simple but fundamental ways of dealing with each other (through: equality, transparency, a result-oriented
approach, responsibility, and complementarity), there is still a long way to go before these Principles are really achieved.

In my view, there are three essential points that must be addressed if we are to move forward on collaboration in the humanitarian world.

Firstly, the concept of equality between partners implies that there is mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of individual size and power. While it is common for international NGOs to enter into partnerships with national NGOs, these relationships are mostly based on a contractual and financial relationship. In the practice of sub-contracting, one organisation tells the other one what to do in exchange for money. Such a relationship automatically implies that there is a power imbalance. Instead of undertaking a joint needs-assessment and situation analysis, the international NGO determined the job that needed doing, received funding from an international donor, and then went to the market to look for local capacity to implement the task. More often than not, the INGO that is looking for a local partner, often demonstrates a type of behaviour which is best characterised as arrogant and elitist. Ironically enough, this INGO is equally likely to accuse UN agencies of the same type of behaviour through the conditional, contractual relationships also placed on them. We must move away from purely contractual relationships if we are to become real partners.

Second, in humanitarian action, we are results-orientated. Alleviating human suffering in the aftermath of a natural disaster or in times of armed conflict is our immediate goal. The activities of humanitarian relief and for strengthening local organisations' capacities are often juxtaposed as having two different sets of objectives, with capacity-building being suppressed or overlooked during an emergency response. The view persists that emergency response is a humanitarian activity, while capacity-building belongs to long-term development aid. In the first place, I am personally opposed to the term capacity-building which implies a very low capacity in the national/local NGO to start with. It is a matter of context and perspective. What an NGO may lack in terms of resources or processes, may be compensated for by the wealth of knowledge and cultural nuances, which is often what makes programs successful or, rather a lack of such, can make programs fail, no matter how large or cash rich the NGO is. The obvious point to make here, is that this outdated thinking must be changed. If international organisations and local organisations work together from the start, which means beginning with a needs assessment and situation analysis, instead of starting from the contract, the chances for a process of dialogue and mutual learning to emerge are much higher.
MERCY Malaysia, the organisation I am from, had a unique experience in Bangladesh in the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr. Working with our local partner, the Dhaka Community Hospital, we were able to plan our joint assessments and, indeed, gained a wealth of knowledge and expertise in understanding the optimal provision of safe water from our partner who are renowned for their work with arsenic poisoning. Understanding local context and giving ownership to the affected communities resulted in a program that is not only successful but also sustainable. Yes, we funded the project through internationally acquired funds, but the learning we gained was beyond expectation. More importantly, the partnership is now so solid, they have come to our country to receive training on other areas of disaster management, humanitarian accountability and the like.

In this regard, we need to create incentives for these, better partnerships. One way for making partnerships with local organisations a part of standard humanitarian practice is to oblige international organisations (including INGOs) to allocate a portion of their operational budgets on strengthening of local organisations. This was also highlighted in the NGO Impact Initiative, initiated by President Clinton in his role as UN Special Envoy for the Tsunami, following the Indian Ocean Tsunami. A recommendation was made that INGOs must allocate a new or increased percentage of their global budgets to initiatives focused on increasing the ability of local communities, community-based organisations, and NGOs to prevent and respond to major disasters. One could even take this recommendation further and suggest that only those agencies that submit applications that include this budget line would be eligible for funding. In my opinion, this would be a reasonable requirement.

Another incentive would be through increasing support for regional networks. Clearly, regional networks formed by local and national organisations in a particular region have many advantages. The Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) formed in 2002 and made up of more than 30 national NGOs from Asia is an excellent example of a network in action. The partners have over the past six years kept the network vibrant through a spirit of ownership, self sacrifice and sharing of resources. Project funding is applied for using the network and joint projects, mutual learning, monitoring and reporting are carried out. Trust is high among partners and capacity enhancement is an active and on-going process.

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In addition, there is much potential for southern-based networks when it comes to collaboration between them. Donors should not only encourage international organisations (including INGOs) to support these regional networks but also look at ways of directly supporting nationally-based organisations and, again, prioritise those applications that include such network activities and, in my opinion, learn about the true meaning of partnership and collaboration through them.

Thirdly, we have the responsibility to ensure that staff in our organisations demonstrate appropriate partnership behaviour. Everyone will agree that good collaboration often depends on personality. The most important factors necessary for good collaboration are the skills, attitude, and disposition of the individuals involved in the collaborative relationship, rather than the actual form or structure of this relationship. Organisations, however, often underestimate or simply ignore the leverage that they can have on the behaviour of their staff. Ensuring that staff understand and apply the principles and values needed for collaboration starts with recruitment. Hiring someone solely based on their technical skill sets without assessing their attitude towards working with other stakeholders and partners can mean a missed opportunity. Collaboration does not only take place through those in charge of operations or involved in coordination. Training and staff development can, of course, also have an effect, but what could really make a difference is instilling in staff the need to adhere to the Principles of Partnership.

The three points that I have presented here are by no means idealistic thoughts. What they do critically require, however, is a fundamental reorientation of the aid system:

- in the “North”, donors should no longer promote the role and work of organisations that they consider to be their “own” NGOs, but promote and stimulate the work of those agencies, which have integrated working with local organisations throughout the disaster response cycle;
- International organisations (including INGOs) must develop strategic partnerships with local NGOs, instead of relationships that are based on a contract and transfer of money. They must also shape the behaviour of their staff and build a culture of collaboration in their organisations; and (lastly),
- We all have the responsibility to share with each other experiences in collaboration and discuss what works (and what does not work). Only through a process of mutual learning and dialogue can we better understand each other and, ultimately, work better together.