Improving Collaboration for Greater Impact

Humanitarian agencies generally acknowledge that no single agency can respond to humanitarian crises and that, as such, collaboration is an essential element of humanitarian action in order to meet needs. Collaboration, however, is often seen, principally, as participating in coordination meetings, which can be time-consuming for staff and inefficient for organisations. Within the ICVA network, there is often talk about collaboration between ICVA members, particularly between international NGOs and southern NGOs. In reality, however, there is much scope for improving the collaboration between ICVA members and between actors in the broader humanitarian community to have a greater impact on crisis-affected populations.

What is the Real Value of Collaboration?

There are varying definitions and degrees of collaboration, with the true value of collaboration not always being proven in terms of a more effective humanitarian response, nor always readily apparent. An increased number of bodies promoting inter-agency collaboration and coordination have been created, but sometimes, it appears as if collaboration alone is seen as the objective, instead of improving humanitarian outcomes. Collaboration should make the impact of the humanitarian community greater than the mere sum of its parts. It should produce system-wide efficiencies to maximise public and private donations; enable new perspectives and knowledge to enter the humanitarian community; and, create the right environment for innovation. It is often assumed that collaboration adds value, but it is crucial to understand what are the best forms of working together, instead of just taking it for granted that “business as usual” is enough.

Are We Ready to Face Bigger Challenges?

In the coming decade, the world is likely to experience increasing turbulence and complexity resulting from the effects of climate change; pandemics; urbanisation; migration; scarcity of critical resources, such as water, energy, and arable land; as well as other phenomena associated with the interconnections of globalisation. The humanitarian community will be faced with more and more crises and, consequently, a greater number of people will be affected, as they are caught up in emergencies of an increasingly uncertain and rapidly evolving nature. This predicted intensification could easily overwhelm the present capacity to respond. There will, therefore, be a need to work more with others outside the traditional “humanitarian community” if we are to be able to meet these greater challenges.

Taking a Step Back

Given today’s mixed success with collaboration, and tomorrow’s greater need for effective collaboration, the time has come to challenge the humanitarian community to look harder beyond the processes of collaboration and coordination and to find ways to improve the impacts on peoples’ lives. Coordination meetings and inter-agency collaboration can be seen as an end in themselves instead of really pushing organisations to see why such collaboration can be of benefit to those for, and with, whom we work.
The ICVA-HFP project on *The Future of Humanitarian Collaboration: An ICVA Perspective* provides a chance to take a step back and ascertain the real value of collaboration on the effectiveness of humanitarian response. What are the impacts of different forms of collaboration? What are the best means of collaborating to achieve better humanitarian outcomes? What forms of collaboration are most appropriate for different types of organisations to meet needs?

**Helping Organisations Reach Better Outcomes**
Through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups with a sample of 15 ICVA members, combined with a desk study looking at collaboration outside the humanitarian community, the project will help provide a better understanding of what forms of collaboration exist and what value each of those forms can offer. One outcome will be a report that will provide the broader humanitarian community with reflections on new dimensions of collaboration, as well as helping to clearly define the varying concepts of collaboration and their values. By feeding this work into existing mechanisms, such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and clusters, the project will help the humanitarian community push for better humanitarian outcomes and to move beyond the process-oriented approach that has dominated the UN-led humanitarian reform process.

**Helping Make ICVA More Relevant in the Coming Years**
How do populations for, and with, whom we work benefit from the collaboration taking place in the context of ICVA? The project will provide a strategic look at what forms of collaboration the ICVA network would be best placed to undertake in the future to make it a more effective network on humanitarian action, particularly in terms of being able to better address the larger challenges that are likely to arise in the future. Simulation exercises will also help to frame the action plan, which will then feed into ICVA’s strategic direction over the next 5-10 years. The project provides an opportunity to help ICVA become a more cutting edge network that better uses the unique composition of its membership from the North and the South.

**Better Humanitarian Outcomes**
Through the research and work that will be conducted through the project, the broader humanitarian community – and ICVA specifically – will gain a better understanding of the costs and benefits of collaboration so that these efforts can provide a true added-value to populations affected by conflict and disaster. Without constantly pushing ourselves to do better in the humanitarian community, as this project aims to do, those who suffer the inefficiencies of collaboration are the populations we are meant to serve.

The detailed activities of the project, including goals, objectives, and outputs, are outlined in the project document available on the ICVA website at: <www.icva.ch/doc00002895.html>. ICVA member agencies interested in participating in the project should contact: <secretariat@icva.ch>

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