Meeting Summary / ICVA Notes

Disaster Response Dialogue Workshop – New York, 7 March 2013

This workshop summary is based on the ICVA Secretariat’s perspective and accompanies the official workshop report, which will be posted on the ICVA website when finalized.

In October 2011, Switzerland through its Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), ICVA and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) convened the “International Dialogue on Strengthening Partnership in Disaster Response: Bridging National and International Support” (IDDR). The IDDR – renamed Disaster Response Dialogue (DRD) in 2013 - gathered over 130 representatives from governments and humanitarian organizations to discuss how to improve cooperation in international disaster assistance, identify common challenges, exchange best practices, and develop new ideas for moving forward, with a particular focus on the role of affected states. At this meeting, participants recommended a range of actions, including efforts to share knowledge and foster additional dialogue on the humanitarian system. The conveners responded by developing a “training workshop on the institutional and legal frameworks for international disaster response” aimed at legal and humanitarian focal points in the permanent missions in Geneva, New York, Brussels, Addis Ababa and other regional locations. The workshop in New York took place on 7 March 2013.

ICVA Summary of Workshop
The workshop was attended by 35 permanent missions' representatives working on both humanitarian (General Assembly - 3rd Committee) and legal (General Assembly - 6th Committee) issues. There was quite a good geographical spread with missions from Europe (e.g. France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, UK, EU), Africa (Burundi and Mozambique), Americas and the Caribbean (Ecuador, US, Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti), Asia (Japan, Myanmar, China). The morning session focused on the international humanitarian coordination and the international legal frameworks for disaster response with presentations from OCHA and IFRC while the afternoon focused on quality and accountability issues. The format of the workshop included both presentations and working group sessions with hands-on study of different scenarios.

OCHA, referring to UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991), described the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), being also the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs (heading OCHA), and the chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Outlining the evolution of the coordination system, OCHA discussed the 2005 humanitarian reform launched by the ERC to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response as well as the role of cluster and the specific role of OCHA in the coordination of humanitarian response. IFRC noted that there is no major flagship treaty on international disaster response laws, rules and procedures (IDRL) and presented the “Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance” (IDRL Guidelines), which were adopted by consensus by the state parties to the Geneva Conventions in 2007. The IDRL Guidelines contain recommendations to governments on how to prepare their domestic laws and procedures for international assistance in cases of major disaster for which they require international assistance.
The session on quality and accountability issues was led by ICVA, which focused on a historical overview of quality and accountability initiatives and included a presentation by Oxfam on some operational implications and perspectives. Oxfam focused in particular on five key areas for the future, which bring a broader perspective to quality and accountability initiatives: building the capacity of states and civil society; building communities’ resilience to cope with disasters, climate change, violence, and economic and political shocks; encouraging states and others to uphold and implement humanitarian principles; encouraging new and different sources of funding and action from emerging economies, private companies, and others; strengthening the quality and accountability of INGOs, including through some form of certification of effective humanitarian action.

In general:

1. The workshop was welcomed by all the participants as an informal space where they could come together to discuss humanitarian issues of importance to their individual countries without feeling the need to 'score points' for their governments as it is done in the context of the negotiations for the intergovernmental debates. Conveners were highly encouraged to replicate such a format in the near future.

2. As the invitation went out to staff working on both humanitarian and legal issues, it became apparent that even within the missions these two figures do not communicate with each other leaving a gap on what is negotiated in inter-governmental debates on humanitarian issues in disaster response (e.g. no humanitarian focal points were aware of the work of the International Law Commission at the 6th Committee).

3. A number of participants wished for the development of a flagship set of Conventions on humanitarian response in disaster settings such as the Geneva Conventions. They also highlighted the importance of having a coordination mechanism that brings together the relevant international, regional and national structures.

4. There was a lot of interest in understanding the quality and accountability initiatives being developed by the NGO community as not many participants really knew many of the standards. It was also wished for the UN to have a similar type of discussion with permanent missions on standard setting and standard harmonisation under the overall aid effectiveness agenda.

5. It was suggested that this not remain a one-off training workshop but that the outcome of this and other workshops feed into the discussions for the World Humanitarian Summit in 2015. Having a side event during ECOSOC's humanitarian affairs segment was also put forward as a concrete way to advance the discussions following the workshop.