ICVA Interview about UN Reform

with Fabrizio Hochschild

UN Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination in the Secretary-General’s Executive Office

21 March 2018

1. Humanitarian Space: The Secretary-General’s stated priorities are prevention/peace, the SDGs, and internal UN reform. How can we ensure the humanitarian imperative gets the appropriate space? How do we ensure the centrality of protection?

There is no intention at all to dilute the humanitarian space or centrality of protection within the articulation of the UN reforms. On the contrary. The ambition of the Secretary-General’s priorities is to ensure that the UN delivers on all its mandates, more effectively and with greater accountability. There is no confusion of mandates or of budgetary resources allocated to different pillars of work. He is committed to responses that are context-specific, driven primarily by the situation and the needs on the ground rather than pre-existing frameworks and solutions. As a long serving humanitarian leader, he has been clear from the start that this includes upholding humanitarian principles in all situations that demand it.

It is important to remember that the populations we serve do not differentiate between our service lines when they receive support. The lines of distinction can be artificial to an extent and bolstered by the way the system is financed – this is true for both UN and NGOs.

However, the root causes of many of the most urgent humanitarian situations today are political or require long-term action to build resilience and institutions, thus we cannot speak of humanitarian solutions without taking into consideration work on peace and or development.

Moreover, Humanitarian access in many cases needs to be negotiated with political actors. This is not to take away from the importance of safeguarding humanitarian principles, but to recognize the need for coherence with the work of the peace and political communities.

2. Engaging Non-UN Actors: The proposed reforms are naturally-UN centric and speak to Member States. How should NGOs and civil society engage in this context? What will be the role of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in relation to the new “Joint Steering Committee” of UN Principals?

While the reforms do indeed primarily speak to the relationship and expectations between the UN secretariat, agencies, programs and UN Member States, it is important to remember that the UN development system reform is primarily an effort to realign the UN to deliver support to the implementation of the SDGs. It is about the UN system operating as a system, so it can become a more effective partner for governments, civil society and the people we serve.
Within this there is a strong commitment to partnerships that go beyond the UN. The SDGs are universal and owned by all. Civil society and NGOs should continue to act as a catalyst for critical global and national agenda’s and assist in bringing the voices of citizens to national debates and development strategies. The UN reforms are only one part of this broader picture, the engagement that is needed is on how to jointly deliver for the people we serve. Through the reforms, we believe that the UN will be better positioned to foster meaningful, system-wide partnerships that take action to scale. With a better core funding base, it would also be less incentivized to compete for funding with civil society and local institutions – but rather serve as a neutral convener that can enable and support financing for others to perform their respective roles.

The Joint Steering Committee does not replace existing mechanism, such as the IASC and UNDG, where the actual work to progress this agenda needs to take place. The Committee is not a policy-making body. It is there to primarily deal with UN internal bottlenecks and create the needed impetus for this agenda within the UN System. The Committee’s role is to break down internal barriers and enhance the enablers that can result in better collaboration.

There is need for a coherent UN that takes forward the best possible response for the populations that we serve. The role of the Joint Steering Committee is to ensure that the UN progresses towards that goal. It relies and continues to draw on the UNDG and IASC, through UNDP and the ERC/OCHA, who are vice-chairs of the Steering Committee and lead on day-to-day operational work.

3. Planning: How best should the proposed HRP-UNDAF alignment be carried out, balancing the need for inclusivity with the need for independence and efficiency?

The system clearly needs to do better at planning in protracted crisis situations if we are to realise our agreed commitments towards reducing humanitarian needs. There is no doubt that better joined-up planning and programming, and the identification of collective outcomes that contribute to reducing vulnerability and risk, are at the heart of making this shift. In fact, in places like Sudan, Cameroon and Somalia, this is already taking place.

The reforms do not call for the merging of the UNDAF and HRP, but the alignment of interventions across the two under jointly agreed outcomes that ultimately contribute to the achievement of SDGs. This is in line with the New Way of Working and existing good practices in many countries.

Take responses to displacement as a concrete example. We acknowledge that seeing the needs of refugees and IDPs as a challenge that is separate from development met by short-term humanitarian needs and appeals is no longer good enough. These populations should be seen as a core part of the SDG commitment to “leave no-one behind”. In practice, the HRP would capture a part of this support, for example around care and maintenance regimes in camps. The UNDAF, on the other hand, would be the tool to work with national partners on the legal, regulatory and fiscal frameworks to over time allow these populations to contribute to a broader national economic and social development process.

This cannot take place if the planning has not been done jointly from the start against agreed goals and in a way that allows the two planning documents to interact. There are ways to structure planning instruments in a manner that allows for the required flexibility for humanitarian action, for example through modular UNDAF’s that have an emergency
window with a separate governance arrangement. This has to be driven by context and common sense.

4. Funding Streams: The proposed Funding Compact sounds like the Grand Bargain minus non-UN partners. The report talks a lot about pooled funds. What will this mean for NGOs?

It is important to differentiate between funding and financing. The Funding Compact that the UN development reform refers to aims to address the funding base for the UN development system, in other words the characteristic and volume of resources required for the UN development system to adequately support Member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda. It is formulated within the parameters of a more robust UN development system to address the decline in core funding and imbalance of core and non-core resources. The intention is to eventually reverse the funding trends that have led to a highly fragmented funding base within the UN Development System. It is a tool of mutual accountability between the UN development system and Member States. This does not have an effect on the overall financing picture for humanitarian or development aid.

The discussions around pooled financing aims to similarly reduce fragmentation within the UN system by ensuring that investments made through the UN serve as enablers for more collective UN action.

Pooled funds can be set up to support a “whole of system” response and better UN activities. For example, a pooled fund can be set up to include, within its programmatic scope, interventions that not only cover development issues but also include humanitarian and emergency response windows, where relevant to the country context. One example of this is the Malawi One Fund, which was set up to resource Malawi’s One Plan, but following natural disasters was expanded to include a ‘Humanitarian Window’. In such contexts, pooled funds can be instrumental at driving UN collective action at country-level to support impact at a larger scale.

Pooled financing in the UN development system reform context should not be confused with the way in which for example, humanitarian Country-Based Pooled Funds operate. The former is about UN effectiveness as the latter is about working through national and international NGO partners. These are two separate streams of work.

5. Partnerships: The report talks about the need for better due diligence across the UN and a new UN Office for Partnerships. What could this mean, if anything, for NGO partnerships with UN agencies like UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and OCHA?

The aim of this is to develop a system-wide approach to partnerships and common vetting and integrity measures, building on the strengths of the UN entities that are most advanced in their partnership efforts. This is done to ensure that the UN upholds the principles, objectives and priorities it stands for and that Member States have set. This is true for engagement with international financial institutions, as well as with all other partners.

The process of vetting and forging partnerships would remain decentralized at the specific UN entity level. The intention is not to infringe on ongoing partnerships that NGOs have with individual UN agencies, but to ensure that there is better accountability for them across the system. There is also potential to scale up existing partnerships by using best practice of one
UN agency to inform the work of the others, and by strengthening system-wide partnerships that are critical for impact at a level that cannot be achieved by any single UN entity alone.

6. Leadership: While not wanting to get too involved in the UN’s internal reporting lines, it would be helpful to understand what, exactly, will change and how that could impact NGOs.

The current multi-hatting arrangements for the Resident Coordinator will remain similar, i.e. Resident Coordinators and Special Representatives of the Secretary-General will report to the Secretary-General, through UN DOCO and DPKO/DPA, respectively. When the person is designated as Humanitarian Coordinator the s/he will continue to report to the Emergency Relief Coordinator as has been the case previously. The change envisioned is around more robust support structures and accountability mechanisms to ensure that Resident Coordinators have the capacities within their office to deliver on the SDGs, not in the reporting lines themselves. There is no foreseen impact on the UN’s engagement with NGOs except that the UN should become a more agile and effective partner better able to work in partnerships to deliver on the SDGs.