Message from Beth Ferris, ICVA Chair, to Jan Egeland, IASC Chair, to suggest a process of strengthening NGO participation in the IASC:

Dear Jan,

Thank you for the opportunity to suggest some concrete ways of increasing IASC-NGO collaboration. I have consulted extensively with the three NGO consortia represented in the IASC - ICVA, InterAction, and SCHR - in making the suggestions outlined in the attached paper (although we have not yet circulated this paper to our broad constituencies.)

We agree with you that it is in all of our interests to increase our collaboration in both our operational work on the ground and our policy discussions at the global level. Ultimately, of course, it is in the interests of the people we seek to serve in humanitarian emergencies that we develop more effective means of providing needed assistance, prevention, protection and recovery.

We also agree with you that humanitarian reform needs more NGO "buy-in." But we also know that this "buy-in" can come only with honest discussion based on mutual respect and appreciation. We have appreciated your efforts to reach out to the NGO community and the seriousness with which you have taken many of our suggestions. But most of our NGO members have never heard about IASC (particularly at the field level) and those that do know about IASC see it as a UN-driven process. We hope that through a process of increasing IASC-NGO collaboration, we will not only have more NGO participation in humanitarian reform, but that the reforms themselves will be stronger and more effective because of NGO participation in the process.

Most of the suggestions in the attached discussion paper focus on "how" IASC-NGO collaboration can be strengthened. But much more thought needs to be given to the reasons for strengthening our collaboration and the particular issues on which joint IASC-NGO reflection is needed.

We hope through this process not only to increase our dialogue with each other, but to strengthen the ability of the international humanitarian community to respond more effectively and more quickly to people in need.

We look forward to discussing these ideas further with you, your staff and other IASC members in the coming months.

With best wishes for the New Year,

Beth Ferris
Chair, ICVA

Strengthening NGO Participation in the IASC

Basic principles:

1. NGOs are major actors in the field of humanitarian response whose resources and expertise are often greater - and may differ from - those of UN agencies. Given that no agency can fulfill all humanitarian needs alone, the UN and other international agencies, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and NGOs have a responsibility to coordinate their work. While the IASC
is intended to be an inclusive and representative mechanism for humanitarian coordination, it remains largely UN-centric. For NGOs, IASC discussions may seem at times to be out of touch or even irrelevant when compared with the reality they see on the ground.

2. In order for the IASC to better reflect operational capacities, the 2003 External Review of the IASC recommended the creation of an outreach mechanism for enhanced dialogue with NGO Consortia, in particular with representatives of their members. At this moment, the IASC remains largely unknown to most NGOs. While many NGOs work and meet regularly with UN agencies (on a bilateral basis), the link between these relations and the work of the IASC is not always clear or has not sufficiently been made.

3. NGOs need to play a more active role in the IASC in order for the IASC to be more effective. Contributing from their operational experiences, NGOs have much to offer to the international policy discussions - and decisions - on humanitarian issues. **The purpose of increasing IASC-NGO collaboration is to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian response.** It is not to add another layer of meetings to already busy schedules.

4. NGOs are an extraordinarily diverse group and coordination mechanisms - on all levels - are weak. Although generalizations are difficult, it is probably fair to say that most NGO staff are action-oriented and resist spending a lot of time in meetings, which are not perceived as helping the work on the ground.

5. NGOs have been represented in the IASC since its inception in 1992 by three NGO Consortia: the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction, and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR). While there is overlap in membership, these three Consortia are quite different in their ways of working and their mandates. The contributions that the Consortia have made in the IASC over the years have been largely positive.

6. The IASC works through regular meetings of the Principals, through the IASC Working Group and through a number of thematic subsidiary bodies. NGOs have been represented in all of these fora although their contributions to the subsidiary bodies are uneven. Further discussion is needed about the concept of IASC Country Teams and how NGOs are included and/or represented in these teams.

7. The participation of the 3 NGO Consortia in IASC has been strongest when they have presented a specific issue (e.g. ICVA's work on the humanitarian coordinator system, or the SCHR presentation alerting on the southern Africa food crisis in 2002) and when there is adequate time to consult with their members on particular issues. The value of the Consortia is not the particular expertise of the individuals around the table but their ability to represent their membership. This representation is difficult unless there is time for consultation.

8. NGOs, like others, are most likely to be engaged in a consultative process when they are involved in setting the agenda, when their views are taken seriously and when they perceive that the outcome of the process is to strengthen their own work. The annual UNHCR-NGO consultations, for example, are widely appreciated by NGOs, as they are full and equal partners in setting the agenda and in the consultations.

**A proposal for increasing IASC-NGO consultation:**

1. **Use existing NGO fora more effectively.** For example, InterAction co-hosts with OCHA a monthly meeting at the UN Secretariat to exchange information on current crises and thematic issues with the UN and other members of the IASC. These meetings are generally well attended by NGOs, ICRC, and UN agencies and provide a forum where larger issues - such as
the Humanitarian Response Review -- could be discussed. NGO-IASC monthly meetings have also been held in Geneva on the basis of a jointly agreed agenda. These regular meetings offer an opportunity for OCHA or any other UN agency to put on the agenda issues on which they want NGO input or reaction. Unfortunately, the objective of attracting representatives from operational NGOs based outside Geneva has not (yet) been achieved. Perhaps more senior representation from OCHA and other UN agencies might attract more attention from the NGOs.

**Strengthen IASC’s participation in regular NGO meetings.** InterAction has a well-attended annual meeting as well as an annual CEO retreat, which the ERC could be invited to address. Both ICVA and SCHR have regular meetings (the General Assembly and Executive Committee in the case of ICVA, and bi-annual meetings of CEOs in the case of SCHR.) The ERC has participated occasionally in these meetings, which have been perceived in the NGO constituency as being very positive. It would be possible to include other IASC members in these meetings on occasion. In addition, all three Consortia can convene ad hoc meetings for OCHA staff or other IASC members to discuss major issues at their headquarters; however, this requires sufficient advance notice to ensure NGO participation.

**Look for opportunities to increase the IASC’s visibility in NGO publications.** For example, InterAction publishes a bi-weekly newsletter, *Monday Developments*, with a wide circulation to the US humanitarian community. ICVA publishes *Talk Back*, which reaches a large number of NGOs and UN agencies. Both of these publications could be used to increase IASC visibility, present issues where IASC would like more NGO input, and to stress the need for closer IASC-NGO working relationships in the field and at the headquarters level. More could also be done with all of our websites to demonstrate a closer relationship between IASC members.

All of these changes could be implemented relatively easily. They would require an interest on the part of the ERC and other IASC members to participate in NGO fora. It would also require careful planning by both the NGOs and the IASC members on the purpose of this participation. Again, the purpose of IASC participation in NGO fora should be to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The ERC has already set a good example by meeting with some of the NGO Consortia as well as individual NGOs, but more could be done. For example, the IASC could be asked to make a commitment to send a representative to an additional NGO meeting each year and NGOs could agree to invite IASC members to relevant meetings on a regular basis.

2. **Specific suggestions for the IASC process:**

2.1 The regular IASC meetings continue, with the participation of the 3 Consortia, but with the difference that the agenda is circulated at least one month in advance of the meetings and that background papers for the meeting are circulated at least two weeks before the meeting. This period is necessary to ensure time for consultation with the membership of the Consortia. Although NGOs have repeatedly raised this concern, the papers continue to arrive too late to ensure meaningful consultation within NGO networks.

2.2 NGOs are presently invited to suggest topics for the agendas of the various IASC instruments and our experience has been that the IASC Secretariat has been quite cooperative in trying to see that NGO suggestions are incorporated in the agendas. The NGO Consortia could be more intentional in discussing within their constituencies possible agenda items. This process will be helped by increased IASC visibility within the NGO community. This year, ICVA will develop a guide for NGOs on the workings of the IASC, which will also explain how NGOs can interact with the IASC and the opportunities that the IASC could offer to them.

3.1 In addition to the regular IASC meetings, the IASC could organize regular consultations with NGOs as follows:
At the global level, one of the two IASC Principals meetings could be an expanded NGO-IASC consultation, which will discuss some of the major strategic issues in humanitarian response. An additional 20 NGO representatives could be invited to this meeting, including 10 of the largest international NGOs active in humanitarian response and 10 representatives of Southern NGOs. Invitations could be sent to the Directors of the NGOs who could also be invited to suggest agenda items. The ERC and the 3 NGO Consortia could jointly set the agenda of the NGO-IASC consultation. The meeting could also be co-moderated by the ERC and a representative of one of the three NGO Consortia (on a rotating basis.) This event could be held in conjunction with the ECOSOC humanitarian segment.

Funds need to be made available to support the participation of Southern NGOs as necessary. ICVA has already submitted a proposal to some donors to cover these costs. The 3 Consortia will organize a pre-meeting for the NGO participants.

If this suggestion for an IASC-NGO consultation is accepted, it will be necessary to consider carefully the issues to be discussed at such a meeting. One issue, which has repeatedly come up in both UN and NGO fora is the need to more effectively address the "gaps" in humanitarian response. The cluster approach is one response to addressing the gaps, but there are other dimensions which could benefit from joint discussion. For example, what will be the approach to build up capacity in the gap areas and how are NGOs going to be involved? Probably all international NGOs are involved with capacity-building, but are there UN tools which are available to enable us to talk the same language?

It will also be important to be clear about the criteria for determining the 10 "largest NGOs" (total revenues? total humanitarian revenues? representation by international secretariats?) and for the Southern NGOs. The 3 NGO Consortia are willing to help formulate these criteria and other IASC members with experience in NGO consultations may also have helpful insights.

3.2 As the need for strengthening NGO-IASC collaboration is particularly great at the operational level, a second joint meeting could be focused on a particular situation. This could be held in the region and bring together the UN/IASC country team, and the largest operational NGOs (both international and local.) The agenda for this meeting would be set jointly by the NGOs in the country, especially through NGO coordination mechanisms in the country, and the Humanitarian Coordinator. The focus of this meeting would be two-fold: to reflect on the strategic and operational issues in humanitarian response and to develop concrete ways of strengthening on-going collaboration in the country. The ERC and at least one representative of the 3 NGO Consortia would participate in this meeting and would jointly evaluate its success as a model for further meetings. The Policy Working Group of SCHR and OCHA are discussing a joint field survey to look directly at how NGOs could interact with UN and what clarity and mechanisms are needed. This survey could be helpful background to this proposed operational meeting.

It is suggested that the first regional consultation be organized for the second half of 2006 and that the report of the meeting be shared with the principals. One possibility might be Sudan (either Southern Sudan or Darfur).

The suggestions here are for consultations at both the international and one regional levels. In planning these consultations, we would need to distinguish between working meetings, consultations, and decision-making meetings.