Who will write the future of humanitarian NGOs?

Governments, international organisations, the private sector, civil society and private individuals are engaged at different degrees in working together to respond to the current humanitarian challenges to save lives and restore human dignity. Humanitarian principles and human rights must guide Covid-19 response and recovery.

We need sustained political will and the infusion of trust built upon the belief in our collective abilities to ensure that our humanitarian aid system responds to meet the challenges presented by Covid-19. While these challenges are unprecedented in the global nature of the pandemic, they also present a significant opportunity to put into practice many of the existing commitments that humanitarians have already made to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the system. Now is the time to act with agility to transform the current situation into an accelerator of the Grand Bargain commitments as well as an opportunity to mobilise additional funds through traditional and innovative mechanisms.

In all humanitarian responses, NGOs play a critical role to ensure that funds are transformed into live-giving support in the most difficult field contexts. With the Covid-19 response, NGOs ability to stay and deliver humanitarian assistance is linked to four key elements: (a) their field presence and the operational footprint, (b) adaptation to measures imposed by countries, (c) access to flexible funding, and (d) ability to procure relevant materials to respond to the pandemic.

(a) Field presence and the operational footprint
Local actors, including NGOs and other CSOs, government and the private sector, are critical in every humanitarian operation, and even more so in the current context that is shaped by restrictions on travel and movement because of COVID-19. International actors also have an important role in the response to ensure that frontline national staff are fully supported.

Covid-19 is putting disaster-hit farmers, the informal sector and small and medium enterprises under enormous pressure. This is a huge additional challenge for the livelihoods of the most vulnerable.

NGOs and other CSOs, with local staff in the forefront, are putting up a spirited fight as livelihoods are endangered, needs for protection have escalated and health systems struggle to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and to decrease morbidity and mortality.

International and national NGOs, faith-based groups, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent and its National Societies are doing their best to stay and deliver with the incentives for a localized approach and with due regard to the risks associated, and the duty of care for the teams and the communities server.

(b) Influencing and adapting to measures
Covid-19 measures imposed by countries to contain and mitigate the virus are inadvertently impeding the international community to surge international staff and supplies at the usual scale and speed. The local footprint of NGOs is also affected by these restrictions, but they retain a comparatively greater possibility to maintain and scale up operations, provided they are given the means to do so. The feasibility of many of the measures in most humanitarian settings are
questioned and more evidence is needed to adapt the measures according to varying contexts and socio-cultural settings.

(c) Access to flexible funding
Sustaining and expanding programming depends on flexible funding being made available. The commitment to good funding practices – including timely, predictable and flexible funding – is critical to enable humanitarian partners to respond quickly and effectively. This is particularly true for COVID-19, where humanitarians are faced with new and unpredictable challenges in responding to a truly global crisis. Donors are assisting NGOs, the Red Cross-Red Crescent and the UN ensure that there are no disruptions in the life-saving humanitarian interventions that they are funding. UN agencies such as UNHCR and OCHA have rapidly strengthened their NGO funding arrangements with flexible measures.

While the Covid-19 Humanitarian Response Plans remain underfunded, there is a risk funding be diverted from other humanitarian needs. In order to ensure that the most vulnerable populations do not become even more susceptible to the effects of the pandemic, the humanitarian community must find a balance between the need to maintain existing operations, and raise new funds to cover additional programming for Covid-19 response.

(d) Procurement ability
The ability to procure and import, when necessary, protective equipment, medical supplies and medicines to effectively respond to the pandemic is fundamental but the concerns on the supply are not only with the impact of the disease in developing countries. The knock-on effect in pre-existing emergencies is devastating in places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Zimbabwe, where humanitarian supply lines to hugely vulnerable populations are already extremely fragile.

Without NGOs, the humanitarian system would not be able to reach the millions of people who need humanitarian assistance. Ensuring the NGOs can remain fully engaged and able to operate is a top priority for leadership from donor countries and from the UN system. This is a race against time and the big question is whether our multiple systems can deliver the resources directly in the hands of people rapidly enough before the social fabric of our societies are further torn.

Shared understanding and open communication between local, national and international actors across medical, humanitarian and development sectors may be central to overcoming these challenges1. NGOs need to build new models of support based on strengthening relationships with community workers and volunteers, including engaging emerging leaders within the populations they are supporting. NGOs must continue to support and strengthen women’s leadership and rely on the key role that faith leaders can play.

As we address some of the immediate challenges, we are also looking at the longer term for NGOs and how to support the way NGOs navigate change. The future of NGOs in the humanitarian sector is not simply an important question for NGOs; it is an important question for the sector.

1 ICVA has developed a note to support dialogue on strengthening principled and effective humanitarian action by NGOs during the COVID-19 response, with a focus on reinforcing local and national action wherever possible. REINFORCE, REINFORCE, REINFORCE: Localization in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response, ICVA, March 2020
A question framed by ICVA in its ICVA 2030 process looking at adaptations in the ways of working and at the future of ICVA’s added value.

The current economic and political trends may well see a number of NGOs with insufficient resilience to the shocks. This may result in a consolidation within the NGO sector and a reduction in diversity and complexity of NGOs. The humanitarian system would in its turn be at risk of being less resilient than it is today.

International NGOs, national and local NGOs and community based organisations need to find new ways of working together and with others and write the future of humanitarian NGOs. The choice we have is about adaptation, collaboration and re-discovering roles. This requires all of us to consider how power can be shifted, accountability improved, social connections built and trust strengthened.

NGOs themselves are best placed to write their future, so long as they are able to act from a willingness to be reactive to the needs of the people they desire to serve, rather than protect the status quo within the system.

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