Global Humanitarian Platform Background Paper

"Changing environment, growing complexities, increasing demands – implications for humanitarian actors"

Introduction

A number of inter-connected factors contribute to exacerbate people's vulnerability around the world: including climate change, global financial crisis, rapid demographic changes and human displacement, growing stresses on natural resources, and sometimes underlying political instability or conflict. All these factors when combined often have dramatic consequences for poor people and will most likely increase the humanitarian caseload in the years to come. The traditional distinction between natural and man-made disasters is often blurred in reality: people face what has been called "compound crises", characterised by multiple and inter-connected aspects of vulnerability reinforcing each other[1].

At the same time, it is becoming particularly challenging for humanitarian actors to maintain sufficient humanitarian space in order to access populations in need: in some contexts like in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia, maintaining an operational presence requires considerable efforts and sometimes a complete rethink of the modus operandi, with greater emphasis on working with or through local partners and a renewed commitment to principled humanitarian action.

This paper highlights some of the trends that contribute to a deteriorating cycle of vulnerability. It then examines the different factors that affect "humanitarian space" and make operations sometimes extremely difficult or dangerous. In conclusion, it draws attention to some of the implications for humanitarian action.

Deteriorating cycles of vulnerability

<u>Climate change</u>

The latest scientific projections suggest that the world is moving fast towards a climate catastrophe that will see further increases to disaster risk through the altering of average climatic conditions, increased climate variability, increase magnitude and frequency of extreme events, and new threats in regions with no previous experience of them. Climate change could well have a significant impact on associated humanitarian costs with authoritative projections suggesting a 16-fold increase by 2030. There has been a doubling of the number of recorded disasters from approximately 200 to over 400 per year over the past two decades. Seven out of every ten disasters recorded are now climate-related. The total number of people affected by disasters has tripled over the past decade with an average of 211 million people directly affected each year, nearly five times the number of people affected by conflict in the same period. Overall economic losses have increased to more than 83 billion dollars per year.

Natural disasters attack the poor and most vulnerable at several levels: they interrupt income, reduce productive and personal assets, destroy essential public infrastructure, and heighten social and

---

[1] This notion was explored at the 22nd ALNAP meeting focusing on West Africa

economic uncertainty – driving affected communities deeper into poverty. Poor people in low income countries are 20 times more likely to die from natural hazards than those in high income countries.

Water stress and food insecurity

The diminishing access to natural resources (water, land, forest, energy) – often as a direct consequence of climate change – is having dire consequences on the most vulnerable. More than one sixth of the world population is currently dependent on water from receding glacial watersheds. With the decline of water stored in glacier and snow, a large part of the population is likely to face increased water stress in the future. A large part of the world population does not have access to clean water. Agricultural production is likely to be severely affected in some parts of the world: a decade from now, crop yields in some parts of Africa are expected to drop by 50% according to the IPCC.

The FAO estimates that over 1 billion people are undernourished worldwide in 2009[2]. This is more than any time since 1970 and this has been reinforced by last year's economic and financial crisis.

Health risks

In 2008, a total of 33.4 million people are living with HIV; 2.7 million were newly infected, and 2 million died from AIDS[3]. In addition, the burden of communicable diseases in developing countries represents a significant stress on already weak health systems, and is likely to be exacerbated by some of the above factors. Pandemics such as the influenza A (H1N1) in June 2009 are other risk factors with potentially significant humanitarian consequences.

Demographic pressures

The world's population is growing by about 80 million people a year, implying increased demand for food water and other commodities. An estimated 90% of the 3 billion people who are expected to be added to the population by 2050 will be in developing countries, many in regions where poverty levels are already high. Urban populations are expected to double between 2000 and 2030 in Africa and Asia and by 2030 the towns and cities of the developing world will make up an estimated 81% of urban humanity and urban dwellers will make up 60% of the world's population.

In 2008, 20 million people have been displaced by extreme weather events, compared to 4,6 millions internally displaced by conflict and violence over the same period. Estimates suggest that between 150 and 200 million people may be displaced by 2050 as a result of climate change[4].

Trends in conflict

While there is a trend of declining international conflicts (from 66 to 56 during 2002-5), particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa[5], the humanitarian consequences of conflicts remain very high for civilian

---

[2] The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2009, FAO
[3] UNAIDS Aids epidemic update, December 2009
[4] OCHA and IDMC, Climate changed, people displaced, December 2009

populations, and conflict situations have become increasingly difficult and dangerous for humanitarian workers, with overall declining humanitarian space/access. In addition, it is anticipated that there will be new forms of conflicts over scare resources, declines in agricultural productivity and water and food security.

Challenges to humanitarian space

The term "humanitarian space" was defined in the early 1990's by former MSF President Rony Brauman as the space of freedom in which humanitarian actors are free to evaluate needs, dialogue with the recipients of aid, and monitor the distribution and use of relief. By the very nature of the situations in which humanitarian assistance takes place, humanitarian space in various contexts is regularly challenged by a range of actors and therefore can never be taken for granted. The humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence are Key to ensure (but not guarantee) a certain degree of humanitarian space: acting (and being perceived as doing so), independently from political powers, on the basis of needs only and without taking side in a conflict, are core values of humanitarian actors operating in difficult environments.

There are serious concerns that today's humanitarian space is considerably shrinking, as experienced in some recent contexts such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, DRC or Chad. Different elements contribute to the deterioration of humanitarian space:

- The politicisation of aid, with pressure to integrate humanitarian assistance into broader political or military agendas; the latest iteration is the so-called "comprehensive approach" that combines military, diplomatic and aid efforts and which is now embraced by several Western governments and more recently NATO. Similarly, UN Integrated Missions represent challenges for neutral and independent humanitarian action and it is an ongoing challenge to safeguard humanitarian space in the context of UN integrated missions.

- The mistrust that national governments, non state actors and sometimes local population express in some countries vis-a-vis international humanitarian actors, often perceived as being part of a Western agenda. More efforts are needed to re-establish trust and maintain dialogue with all stakeholders.

- The proliferation of non-traditional actors (the military, for-profit contractors, private philanthropists) in the humanitarian arena contributes to the deterioration of humanitarian space, as it is difficult to distinguish principled humanitarian action from other forms of intervention. While humanitarian actors should not claim to have the primacy of humanitarian action (under IHL, this role falls under the state or the occupying power), it must keep a clear distinction from other actors.

- The deteriorating security situation in some contexts, with an important rise in deliberate violence against aid workers is alarming. In 2008, 260 humanitarian aid workers were killed, kidnapped or seriously injured in violent attacks, according to recent research. This study

---

[5] The Human Security Brief 2006, Human Security Centre.

shows a concentration of violence in a few contexts: Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia account for over 60% of cases. [6]

Implications for humanitarian action

The above trends and challenges are unprecedented. They are likely to have important implications on the nature and scale of humanitarian needs in the years to come. Below are some possible implications for humanitarian actors:

- Given the complexity of compound crises, it is very important for humanitarian actors to develop strong context analysis, and to make sure that the nature and causes of vulnerability are well understood, in order to provide the most appropriate responses. A stronger evidence-base is paramount to guarantee that the right decisions are made for the greater benefit of affected populations.

- The scale of humanitarian needs is likely to outweigh the capacity of humanitarian organisations in some situations. Greater clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of different actors (military, civil defence/civil protection, private) and about how humanitarian should interact with these actors will be important. The primary role and responsibility of the affected states must be restated.

- In situations where humanitarian space is reduced, humanitarian organisations have to rethink the manner in which they operate. A greater focus on working through local partners is sometimes the only option. It can be appropriate as long as it is coupled with a genuine transfer of competences, rather than a mere transfer of risks.

- Generally, a reduction of the humanitarian international footprint coupled with greater support to local partners seems desirable. Too often, the international humanitarian "system" operates in parallel to, rather than in conjunction with local actors.

- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the perception of humanitarian actors is sometimes negative and based on misunderstandings from both sides. Greater efforts in communication and dialogue, including with non state actors, is important. In this context, reasserting the fundamental humanitarian principles and the fact that humanitarian action is separate from political agendas is essential.

- Finally, supporting disaster risk reduction, preparedness and contingency planning in coordination with the development community is crucial to mitigate the impact of disasters and to improve response to emergencies.

---

[6] A Stoddard et a. (2009) *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update" HPG Policy Brief 34
joint research conducted by the Overseas Development Institute in London and the Center on International Cooperation in New York