

Global Humanitarian Platform, Strengthening Partnership for Effective Humanitarian Action

2-3 February, 2010

Final Summary Note

42 participants from the three pillars of the humanitarian community – the United Nations, other intergovernmental bodies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement; and non-governmental organizations – came together in Geneva from 2- 3 February, 2010 in the third meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform. Participants came together in a spirit of collaboration to consider key strategic issues that impact on humanitarian response and to identify ways to strengthen response as a humanitarian community. This year saw a welcome increase in the number of participating NGOs that are based in developing countries. Co-chairs of the meeting were Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, and Barbara Stocking, CEO of Oxfam and Chair of SCHR.

Although partnership has been strengthened over the past years, work needs to continue to create an enabling environment for both national and international partners alike. As one participant noted: “The crisis in Haiti has again demonstrated, that regardless of the distinction between UN and non-UN, we face the same challenges and we must work better together to respond to those challenges.”

Collaboration is needed not only between humanitarian actors but also with the broad range of stakeholders involved in humanitarian response. The humanitarian community needs to strengthen communication lines with national government, the military, armed groups, the private sector, national NGOs and civil society in order to ensure better understanding and acceptance of humanitarian principles, but also to reinforce, in a practical way, the value added of the humanitarian community.

The meeting opened with a key note address from Dr. Eric Laroche, Assistant Director General of Health Action in Crises of the World Health Organization that emphasized the growing complexities facing humanitarian actors. Dr. Laroche urged that in order to meet the needs of the people we are helping, we must do more to engage, listen to, negotiate and seek acceptance from all sides: “from the village chief to the general”.

Humanitarian space, humanitarian- military relationships, and the ‘new business model’ that emphasizes the increased delivery of humanitarian response through local NGOs and community-based groups, were the main topics on the agenda. Each topic was introduced by UN and non-UN speakers.

The ‘Principles of Partnership’

There has been progress made in terms of partnerships since the inception of the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2006. The Principles of Partnership have been disseminated and gradually incorporated into our ways of working. It has been clearly demonstrated in Darfur following the expulsion of the 13 NGOs and during the recent crisis in Sri Lanka that the humanitarian community whether it is UN or non-UN are often facing similar challenges, and efforts are being made to address those challenges as in a spirit of partnership and complementarity.

Improving partnership is however a process and efforts need to be continued to ensure appropriate changes in behavior. While there was general agreement that significant progress has been made, the view was also expressed that partnership is still too much dependent on individuals. It is also not sufficient to limit partnership between organizations working within the international humanitarian community. Partnership needs to be strengthened with national NGOs, but also with key players that

can create an enabling environment within which we work. That includes partnership with civil society, governments, with the private sector, with national and international military and with armed groups.

Reference was also made to the guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams, and the increasingly inclusive nature of this forum in the field; although it was noted that too much time had passed before NGOs were included in the Humanitarian Country Team in Haiti. Partnerships are stronger, however, in humanitarian response than in longer-term development work and coordination processes where NGOs do not have a seat at the table.

Humanitarian Space

States that affirm their national sovereignty in order to control or limit humanitarian action diminishes humanitarian space. Some of the NGOs from the developing world expressed the view that the notion of humanitarian space is intimately linked with the policies and practices of national governments towards civil society and fundamental freedoms. Humanitarian space therefore cannot only be defended and maintained through emphasis or explanation of humanitarian principles. The requirement of humanitarian space within which to work needs to be presented in a pragmatic way that demonstrates that we as a humanitarian community know how to respond and are the most efficient and effective in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It also must be emphasised that the humanitarian community knows how to work with national partners and civil society.

Obtaining access to civilian populations in need does not only depend upon the good will of armed forces or armed groups controlling such access, but also the trust of the local population. We need to examine how the humanitarian community's perceived and work on acceptance strategies that can explain the rationale behind humanitarian principles but also to find ways of communicating those concerns to outside actors.

Communication and strategy vis-à-vis humanitarian space must be flexible and adapted to the context in question. Respect for our missions will depend on humanitarian organizations demonstrating themselves as reliable and predictable partners. A dialogue is needed on international humanitarian law with all parties to an armed conflict. International humanitarian agencies need to work on their acceptance and they need to learn from local groups and communities in terms of how they understand humanitarian response. Efforts must be made to reach out to regional actors as well as to sovereign governments to better explain the importance and added value of the humanitarian community.

The political incentive to maintain peace may undermine the humanitarian imperative to act. Integrated missions can jeopardize the perception of the UN as a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor in certain contexts. NGOs noted that these missions are not the solution everywhere. While some NGOs may want to disassociate themselves from the UN, it is also important to note that the UN can offer a framework for NGOs to work in, especially in situations when national governments are reluctant to accept NGOs and the UN's mandate and role has more legitimacy. Within the UN system OCHA is resisting being integrated in every situation, pointing out that a special case needs to be made on the humanitarian side. The Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative does not need to be the same person as the Humanitarian Coordinator in all humanitarian contexts.

Humanitarian-Military Relationship

Meanwhile, there is a blurring of lines between humanitarian and military actors. Work that is carried out by humanitarian actors is of long term benefit and must be differentiated from the 'pacification' aid that is provided by the military.

The military is a key player in humanitarian contexts and dialogue with the military to allow for humanitarian action and respect of humanitarian principles is crucial. The military includes a broad range of players, from western military intervening in the international arena, unions or individual countries that are members of peacekeeping forces, national militaries, non-state military type actors

such as contractors or military type armed groups. Advocacy or training needs therefore needs to be adapted to the type of structure or issue that is being addressed.

It was generally noted that it is not necessarily military forces who seek a humanitarian role but the politicians of the countries who see this as the new *raison d'être* for their militaries. The message that military can actually save lives and that they have the capacity is used as a public relations tool. The question was raised how much the UN could push back governments on their desire to deploy military forces to do humanitarian work. It was also noted that there are a number of guidelines that seek to regulate the relationship, but that these guidelines are not known or not followed on the ground. A complicating factor is the diversity of NGOs and the different approaches they follow in relating to the military.

The parameters of the relationship with the military can be different in natural disasters as compared to armed conflicts. In natural disaster contexts, the capacity of the military can be of benefit to humanitarian agencies. It should be recognized that in some contexts the deployment of the military is response to natural disasters is not a last resort measure but the first response. There is also a need for more involvement of NGOs in training and exercises with the military. In Haiti, when the military was asked not to use airdrops, they stopped. In this respect, it was recognized that UN and non-UN agencies can be more concerted in advocacy efforts vis-à-vis the military.

Specific mandates and the role of some organisations could make them better placed to dialogue and communicate with the military, but that dialogue should not be for individual organisations but rather for the preservation and maintenance of humanitarian space of the humanitarian community as a whole. NGOs must be more concerted in advocacy efforts vis-à-vis the military, but also feed into existing dialogue and opportunities to discuss.

The 'New Business Model'

The 'new business model' is a term that describes different way of working or responding for the humanitarian community. Thinking around new modes of humanitarian action is required because of the new humanitarian challenges caused by climate change and the decline in humanitarian space, the need for sustainability and the need to better understand the local context. All participants acknowledged the current and potential future global challenges and the need to identify new ways of thinking, working and advocating for humanitarian action.

The involvement of local NGOs based in developing countries in humanitarian response and the collaboration with them will have to increase if the international humanitarian community remains extremely relevant. In a number of countries, especially where there are many NGOs, national NGOs could perhaps play an intermediary role in identifying local partners for international organizations for example. A link should be made between humanitarian and development programmes in supporting local NGOs and community-based groups to play greater roles in disaster management, risk reduction and preparedness. One NGO noted the importance of South-South cooperation in the transfer of knowledge in this context.

In developing the new business model, attention should also be given to building local leadership, supporting local governments, and working with regional organizations. A broader humanitarian community will remove the outsider's image that exists towards international agencies. Ways have to be found to address the tension between the need to increase the role of local NGOs, which includes providing them with more financial resources, and the requirements of international auditors and donors who want more stringent reporting rules. Involving local NGOs and civil society groups implies making a long-term commitment.

The meeting closed with the views expressed that the GHP can make a major contribution towards moving the new business model forward, and that the interest and engagement at the meeting has demonstrated the usefulness of a partnership forum to discuss issues of strategic interest and concern.

The GHP Principals will meet again in February 2011. The agenda will focus around the new business model particularly the support to local communities and local actors, but also including the continuum of activities from prevention and preparedness, response right through to development. In particular there was interest in looking at good practice in local capacity enhancement by commissioning a very practical piece of work under the guidance of a Steering Committee. The meeting will also maintain a focus and sense of accountability on the Principles of Partnership.

The GHP Task Force should continue, co-chaired by ICVA and UNICEF and a dedicated GHP coordinator will be appointed by the NGO community. The Task Force and the coordinator will identify proposals to strengthen and monitor the Principles of Partnership and the Steering Committee established to work on good practice at local level and ensure participation of national NGOs.