

Global Humanitarian Platform - Compilation of Strategic Issues, November 2008

Dear Colleagues;

Following recommendations made at the Global Humanitarian Platform meeting in July, 2008, a new GHP Task Force has been formed, succeeding the former GHP Working Level Group and Steering Committee structure.

The new GHP Task Force is co-chaired by Eva von Oelreich, Executive Secretary, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and Kasidis Rochanakorn, Director of the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Geneva.

One of the Task Force's first priorities is to take forward recommendations made at the GHP July meeting. One of the key recommendations was to provide a choice of thematic issues for strategic discussion in the GHP in 2009. The seven strategic issues that were outlined in the GHP Summary note for 2008 have been briefly expanded below. Each paragraph indicates the purpose of discussion, the added value of holding the discussion within the GHP and how the discussion relates to partnership.

It has been suggested by the Task Force in an initial review of the strategic issues that one possibility is also to combine some of these strategic issues into one topic, specifically issues that have a direct correlation to each other, such as combining issue numbers 3, 4 and 5 or combining issue number 6 and 7.

As a participant of the GHP, you are kindly requested to provide input on your and your organisation's area of interest for the GHP meeting next year.

Please provide 2 or 3 priority strategic areas or a grouping of particular issues you would like to discuss and the GHP Task Force will make every effort to ensure views are reflected in the final short list of issues.

Input must be provided no later than 30 November 2008. Please send all replies to [...] and [...].

We appreciate your continued support in this process,
Regards,

Proposed Issues for Strategic Discussion

1. Partnership to fight the humanitarian impact of climate change
2. The necessity for diversity, plurality and complementary of funding channels
3. Shrinking humanitarian space

4. Growing complexities in humanitarian-military relationships
5. Increasingly restrictive security measures for UN compared to NGO staff
6. The business model of humanitarian response and capacity building in the South, including governments
7. The emergence of new humanitarian actors

1. Partnerships to Fight the Humanitarian Impact of Climate Change

A discussion that will aim to enable GHP Principals better understand the humanitarian implications over time of climate change and explore practical ways in which they can work together to address them. The GHP provides a unique opportunity to bring together diverse players and vulnerable people to reduce the alarming humanitarian implications of climate change. The discussions will explore the opportunities for a holistic partnership approach that brings together development with humanitarian players and those affected with humanitarian organisations.

This proposed discussion will identify processes by which international humanitarian organisations might support a strengthened and rapidly augmented capacity development to respond to adverse humanitarian trends at the local and national level, i.e. working from the bottom to deal with global issues. The GHP brings together a range of players that have a potential capacity to identify both the difficulties and the opportunities for a new emphasis to humanitarian response that requires an effective partnership for success.

2. The Necessity for Diversity, Plurality and Complementarity of Funding Channels

Competition for funding is often cited as one of the main issues that stand in the way of better partnerships between humanitarian agencies. New funding mechanisms have primarily been of benefit to the UN-system, with NGOs receiving relatively less direct funding. Continued bilateral funding has been seen as the appropriate channel for non-UN agencies, but more attention should be given to how this funding modality impacts on multilateral coordination. Recognizing the diversity, plurality and complementarity of funding channels, open and frank dialogue is needed on what strategies and channels humanitarian agencies should pursue and prioritize in mobilizing public funds that do not inhibit or are at the detriment of our partnerships.

How funding channels are managed has far reaching implications for both national and international humanitarian organizations, the GHP will provide a forum where a wide range of opinions and considerations can be presented.

3. Humanitarian Space: Definition and Concept

The term “humanitarian space” means different things to different organizations. While it might not be fruitful to try to reach a clear-cut definition of humanitarian space, the GHP might examine the origins, evolution and, most importantly, the overall usefulness of the concept, given the dominant role that it now plays in the humanitarian discourse and the 'ideological' status it has gained. Is it in fact the case that all members of the 'humanitarian community' (and of course we don't really know who that includes or excludes any more!)

support and stand by the notion of 'humanitarian space', or are there those who are prepared to question it?

More and more agencies are expressing concern about what is perceived to be an unprecedented threat to humanitarian space. But is there a real deterioration of humanitarian space? In this context, what indicators can be used to assess whether humanitarian space is expanding or diminishing, both in respect to specific situations and on a global basis (e.g. 'The state of the world's humanitarian space')?

Expected outcomes:

1. Agree on the usefulness or not of a common definition or concept of humanitarian space;
2. Agree on a set of indicators to help determine the state of humanitarian space; and
3. Reach conclusions on the degree to which humanitarian space is diminishing, if at all, in the modern world.

4. Growing Complexities in Humanitarian-Military Relationships

For a variety of reasons the military forces of traditional donor states are becoming increasingly involved in humanitarian and development activities traditionally the responsibility of civilian branches of government. In the United States this reflects, in part, years of contraction in USAID staffing and the agency's consequent inability to deploy sufficient personnel to meet surge requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Hearts and minds" strategies, which include development and humanitarian programs in areas of conflict, have spawned hybrid military/civilian teams such as the PRTs. Funds from military budgets are being routed through civilian agencies to pay for programs intended to forestall terrorism and other strategic threats in "phase zero" pre-emptive initiatives. In addition, in the United States and elsewhere governments are using the military to "show the flag" when there is a strategic/political motive to humanitarian response, e.g. the United States in Georgia and European governments in the Balkans.

The expanding role of the military (in the United States the military's share of foreign aid expenditures has grown to 21%, a fourfold increase in just six years) has blurred the lines between military and humanitarian activities and actors in the perception of local populations. Some NGOs have contributed to the confusion by consciously working with the military as implementing partners. Others have discovered that projects they thought they were implementing for civilian agencies actually were financed by the military. In very insecure areas some UN and NGO personnel have become visibly dependent on the military for their physical protection. Whether actually convinced that UN and NGO personnel are collaborating with the military forces they oppose, or exploiting popular confusion about relationships between the military and humanitarians, militants have increasingly cited the relationship as justification for targeting humanitarians.

The expanding role of the military is a shared concern among GHP members but has not provoked a serious dialogue across sectoral boundaries. While achievement of a common policy more binding than the Voluntary Guidelines in the IASC Reference Paper is unlikely, a number of GHP participants have engaged in re-examinations of their policies and formulated guidelines that may be of broad interest.

5. Increasingly Restrictive Security Measures for UN Compared to NGO Staff

The increased number of security incidents and threats to humanitarian workers over the past years has meant that there has been a response by the humanitarian community, and particularly the UN, to put in place guidelines that reduce and manage risk. However, the implications are that more security controls and less flexibility and delegation to the field results in a reduced ability to address humanitarian needs. The UN safety and security systems prevent humanitarian action, and this puts pressure on NGOs, particularly national NGOs, to intervene. It is often felt that national NGOs and their staff take security risks creating double standards for national and international staff.

This reduction in ability of the UN and some international organizations to respond to needs is context specific and needs to be viewed jointly by a broad range of humanitarian actors such as those represented in the GHP to identify how overall response can be improved and how humanitarian actors can be treated more equitably. The GHP can also address some of the concerns about the ‘top down’ approach to humanitarian response and security limiting adaptability and flexibility and can take up the challenge to adapt how the humanitarian system currently works.

6. The Business Model of Humanitarian Response and Capacity Building in the South

The changing humanitarian contexts are fostering reforms in the emergency response systems and also structural and organizational changes for many international humanitarian actors. There is recognition that the implementation of those reforms provides much needed assistance to affected populations. This is particularly true for the “big” international organizations at the level of practical delivery and coordination on the ground (sector/cluster based), in setting internationally-agreed standards and to a certain extent in achieving humanitarian policy change (convening power and advocacy).

However, several research studies and inter-agency evaluations highlight that national capacity development in emergencies has not been given the same priority. Building capacities in the South is generally neglected in the humanitarian sector (from preparedness, response, recovery to risk reduction) although support to national partners (i.e. government at all levels, NGOs, civil society and affected communities) is seen as essential for the effectiveness and the sustainability of humanitarian action.

There are both legitimate expectations (e.g. ownership) and key challenges (e.g. accountabilities) posed by national partners that should be addressed in reviewing the “business” model of humanitarian response. The expected outcome of the discussion among the GHP members would help identify innovative approaches and more comprehensive strategies to build national capacities to respond to increasing emergencies and more protracted, complex crises.

7. What about the Partnership with Emerging humanitarian actors?

Humanitarian space is populated by a variety of actors, above and beyond the traditional three families (UN, NGO, and RC/RC) which meet in the GHP. If partnership among actors who have worked alongside each other for decades is testing – and requires particular efforts to nurture it – working in partnership with new and emerging actors is that much more of a challenge. The new actors that are referred to here are admittedly not really new but are "noticed" now by the three traditional families of humanitarian actors: local NGOs, faith-based (Islamic and other) NGOs, national governmental actors, private sector actors, civil society organizations, humanitarian branches of political parties and armed groups, etc. The GHP must now turn its attention to ways and means of engaging these actors.