

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system



Humanitarian Reform: Basic Information Leaflet Series' Principles of Partnership



The Principles of Partnership

No single humanitarian actor, whether it is a large international organisation or a small non-governmental organisation (NGO) deeply rooted in its local community, can meet humanitarian needs on its own. Working in partnership with other humanitarian actors can help to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian actions.

What is partnership?

Effective partnership is not just about mechanistic relationships where actors come together to achieve a set of common objectives, dividing up responsibilities and planning joint work. Rather it requires attention to underlying issues of power, attitudes and styles of working, as well as identifying which partner is best placed to deliver on each of the desired outcomes.

In recognition of the need for partnership to become a more integral aspect of humanitarian response, the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) adopted Principles of Partnership (PoP) in 2007. The GHP was originally set up in 2006 by leaders of 40 humanitarian organisations (including NGOs, UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Bank and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement) in response to the

recognised need for more genuine partnerships between humanitarian actors.²

The PoP can be seen as an attempt to fill some of the shortfalls of the humanitarian reform, which include neglecting the role of local and national humanitarian response capacity. This reform sought improvements in humanitarian action through various routes:

- the introduction of the cluster approach³
- humanitarian financing, through the establishment of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)
- improved humanitarian leadership through the enhanced role of Humanitarian Coordinators.

Following the Global Humanitarian Platform meeting in 2007, the participants committed to disseminating the PoP within their own organisations.

PoP in Practice

In the past, relationships between some UN agencies and NGOs, particularly in crisis situations, had at times been marred by a mutual lack of trust and understanding. The PoP should support national and international NGOs to improve such relationships, underscoring as they do the value of each actor's contribution, and emphasising the importance of building relationships on the basis of transparency and trust.

Principles of Partnership (PoP)

A Statement of Commitment

Endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform, 12 July 2007

The Global Humanitarian Platform, created in July 2006, brings together UN and non-UN humanitarian organisations on an equal footing. The platform's mission involves:

Striving to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action, based on an ethical obligation and accountability to the populations we serve,

Acknowledging diversity as an asset of the humanitarian community and recognising the interdependence among humanitarian organisations,

Commitment to building and nurturing an effective partnership.

... the organisations participating in the Global Humanitarian Platform agree to base their partnership on the following principles:

Equality

Equality requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other's mandates, obligations and independence and recognise each other's constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organisations from engaging in constructive dissent.

Transparency

Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organisations.

Results-oriented approach

Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires results-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.

Responsibility

Humanitarian organisations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their tasks responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.

Complementarity

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organisations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

¹ This leaflet is part of a series produced by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project. The series aims to provide simple, user friendly material for field-level staff on the different aspects of humanitarian reform. For further details, see <http://www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org>

² See <http://www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org/ghp.html>

³ For further details on the cluster approach see <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=70>

Applying the Principles of Partnerships

The PoP are not just applicable to UN agencies and inter-governmental organisations, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and international NGOs (INGOs). They also provide a framework for all international humanitarian actors to improve engagement with national actors, including local civil society. Partnership arrangements at the national level should seek to ensure that local actors are included and involved in coordination and financing structures. Such arrangements should also place a priority on making sure that local and national NGOs are better supported to enable their participation in humanitarian action including preparedness and response. At an operational level for INGOs, the PoP should serve as a reminder of the ongoing need to ensure that partnership arrangements with local NGOs are rooted in equality, and that the implementation of humanitarian activities seeks to involve, respect and react to valuable input from local partners and crisis-affected communities.

- lobby donors to provide dedicated funds to facilitate national and international NGO participation in humanitarian coordination structures and processes
- encourage NGO participation in pooled funding oversight or advisory boards
- ensure that NGOs have access to pooled funds, including national NGOs, which currently receive only a small percentage of funds from country-level Emergency Response Funds.

All these steps require particular attention to engaging national NGOs at the strategic level, by encouraging national NGO participation in all strategic planning processes, including for example the Consolidated Appeals Processes (CAP) through the active involvement of NNGOs at cluster level.

Clusters lead agencies and cluster coordinators could consider working towards the following:

- treat all participants equally regardless of their size or the level of their participation and contribution to cluster activities
- encourage cluster participants to actively contribute in cluster activities and hold them accountable for the commitments they make
- ensure humanitarian organisations are actively welcomed to participate in the cluster, particularly local and national NGOs
- hold cluster meetings in the local language so that national actors are not marginalised on this basis and ensure interpretation is available
- distribute PoP and regularly review them in relation to the modus operandi of the cluster
- context-specific ‘ways of working in partnership’ are identified in keeping with the spirit of the PoP
- at HCT level, as cluster lead agency, ensure that the strategic concerns of the broad cluster membership are represented
- ensure that information on strategic decisions taken at HCT and inter-cluster coordination level is regularly shared with all cluster members.

1. Partnership, Coordination and Leadership

The effective application of the Principles of Partnership is a means to achieving more effective humanitarian outcomes. The PoP can be applied to humanitarian actors as follows:

Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) are accountable for the timely and effective delivery of humanitarian aid, including working across the spectrum of humanitarian actors.⁴ This includes how well they ensure partnership ways of working pervade the activities of all actors within the humanitarian community at country level. They should stimulate discussion on the implications of the PoP on ways of working and openly encourage debate aimed at changing attitudes and moving away from old style vertical/hierarchical ways of working. Among the concrete steps they could take are:

- in consultation with all humanitarian actors through the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), actively encourage both national and international NGOs to take leadership roles in the clusters (as appropriate to the country context and based on their presence, capacities and willingness)
- ensure more equal participation of NGOs in the HCT and ensure that the modus operandi of the HCT is governed by the Principles of Partnership⁵
- establish and regularly convene a separate all-inclusive forum to ensure information sharing and periodic interaction with all operational humanitarian actors in-country⁶
- proactively support opportunities for national and international NGOs to coordinate between themselves to provide a platform for them to engage more meaningfully in humanitarian coordination processes
- encourage the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and cluster coordinators to explore creative ways to actively facilitate the participation of INGOs and NNGOs in cluster and inter-cluster coordination structures and processes

2. Partnership and Pooled Funding

The Principles of Partnership are particularly important where clusters are involved in coordination and processing of funding proposals. Some cluster coordinators also have functions within their own agency, and thus face potential conflicts of interest when making funding decisions. Cluster coordinators should ensure that funding decisions within the cluster are made entirely on the basis of sectoral needs identified, the calibre and appropriateness of projects developed in response to those needs, and the capacity of humanitarian actors to implement those projects. All decisions made in relation to fund allocation should be transparent, accountable, and made in consultation with all cluster members, in order to avoid perceptions of favouritism and self-interest. Cluster leads could undertake the following:

- document and disseminate good practice examples of partnership working within clusters

⁴ According to the HC Terms of Reference this includes “building consensus among relevant organisations involved in humanitarian action and actively facilitating cooperation among them, recognising that the ownership of coordination rests with all relevant organisations”. See Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Terms of Reference for Humanitarian Coordinators, (2009) at <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/H%20Coordinators/Revised%20HC%20TOR,%204%20May%2009.doc>

⁵ It should be noted, however, that as per the IASC HCT Guidance Note (2010), HCTs should only include operationally relevant organisations (both UN and non-UN) and should not strive to be all-inclusive, as this would prevent the forum from engaging in effective strategic decision-making.

⁶ Assuming that not all operational humanitarian actors are included in the HCT.

- make sure the principle of transparency underpins the review of all funding applications, including applications submitted through the clusters or those submitted by national NGOs for funding through the cluster, an INGO or a UN agency
- widely disseminate the criteria for application, project vetting, deadlines and prioritisation decisions relating to all humanitarian financing processes and tools (including CERF, Flash Appeals, CAPs and Emergency Response Funds)⁷ and ensure they are accessible to all partners, paying special attention to making criteria for funding available in national language(s)
- make sure that adequate allowance for overhead costs is included in grants, on the basis of clear criteria
- ensure that clusters collaboratively identify and agree sectoral priority needs and response plans to feed into the Common Humanitarian Action Plans (CHAPs) in a manner that is in line with the Principles of Partnerships, and that a project oversight group comprised of both NGO and UN humanitarian actors ensures that submitted projects meet agreed priority and quality criteria.
- writing the principles into job descriptions (personal specifications and competencies) and including a question on candidates' views on partnership during the interview stage for all humanitarian staff
- ensuring that staff appraisals include consideration of what efforts have been made with regard to operationalising the PoP
- including the PoP in technical training for new humanitarian staff and organisations' humanitarian practice and standards manuals
- ensuring the same standards are applied by NGOs to their own work as the standards they expect of UN agencies. For example, supporting resource mobilisation efforts for common programmes of work (e.g. the CAPs or the Common Humanitarian Actions Plans – CHAPs), as well as in their own dealings with subcontracting NGO partners
- ensuring that discussions with local and national government officials refer to the PoP and clarify how partnership can and should be strengthened in humanitarian action.

3. Donors and the Principles of Partnership

While donors have not signed up to the PoP per se, they can play an important role in promoting the use of these principles. Donors could consider the following:

- use their influence to ensure that all humanitarian actors practice partnership ways of working
- be prepared to fund the increased costs of humanitarian action that may be implied by fully operationalising the PoP. For example, coordination costs may increase if NGO cluster co-coordinators are to have dedicated staff to perform this role
- be prepared to fund individual national NGOs to increase their capacity to participate in the work of clusters, as well as funding national NGO consortia to enable national actors to work more closely together on humanitarian issues.

4. What can NGOs do to operationalise the Principles of Partnership⁸?

NGOs should ensure that the principles become the default mode for behaviour between humanitarian actors. To effectively put the Principles of Partnership into practice, the following steps should be considered:

- humanitarian staff should be encouraged to be familiar with the principles. Beyond that, they should also understand the values embodied by the principles

Indicators for Monitoring Principles of Partnership

NGOs can use the following checklist to monitor their own progress in applying the PoP within their own organisations and with the humanitarian partners they work with:

- Have programme staff been trained on PoP?
- Do you use PoP as a framework within which to report on programme activities?
- Have you used the PoP to monitor your own organisation's relationship with other humanitarian actors?
- Have you used PoP in discussions with partners if there is a perception that either entity is not implementing one of the five Principles of Partnerships?
- Do meetings that your organisation convenes or chairs have language interpretation facilities when needed?
- Are minutes of meetings in local languages where necessary?
- The PoP have been translated into a number of languages.⁹ Are these in the languages used in the communities where you work? If not, could your organisation consider translating them? Have you shared relevant translations with your own partners and discussed what they mean for your own working relationships?
- How has leadership within your own agency/organisation enhanced a partnership approach to humanitarian action?

For further information contact:

Email: ngosandhrp@actionaid.org

Mobile: 075959 63594

Project website:

www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

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Cover photo: Lionel Healing/ActionAid. Marceline Semivumbi (41) with her children in Kibati refugee camp near Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 11 February 2009.

⁷ See Basic Information Leaflet Series: Financing Mechanisms, for further explanation of these processes www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

⁸ This and the ensuing section build on 10 Practical Ways to Use the Principles of Partnership, produced by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in 2008 and the Global Humanitarian Platform Template for Reporting on Outcomes for the GHP meeting in July 2008.

See: <http://www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org/doc00002892.doc>

⁹ For already translated versions of the PoP see <http://www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org/pop.html>