

Principles of Partnership: Changing the way UN agencies and NGOs relate

What Save the Children staff need to know

Summary

In July 2007, the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) – created by UN and IOM agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and NGOs – adopted the Principles of Partnership, designed to put humanitarian actors on more equal footing.

Save the Children agreed to endorse these Principles with the hope that they will provide a basis for improving interactions with the UN and help field staff negotiate contracts and agreements with UN agencies, including:

- MoUs
- CHAPs and CAPs
- CERF pass-through funding
- Real Time Evaluations

This briefing explains what those Principles are, why they were developed, and how they may help Save the Children staff in national and international level discussions and relationships.

Background

The goal of the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) is to improve humanitarian assistance by strengthening partnerships at the global and national levels. The Chief Executives of Save the Children UK and Save the Children US were present at the July 2007 meeting, along with the heads of 40 UN agencies, NGOs, and the Red Cross/ Red Crescent movement.

The relationship between the UN and NGOs has never been an easy one. We operate in uncertain climates with different, sometimes overlapping, mandates. UN agencies now frequently partner with NGOs on the ground and rely on both international and national NGOs to carry out much of their humanitarian work. At the same time, humanitarian reforms such as the introduction of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) have reinforced the inequalities in power and access to funding between UN agencies and NGOs.

Despite the fact that NGOs deliver the majority humanitarian aid, and often mobilise faster, we are often treated as subordinates. In addition, contracts and other financial aspects of the relationships between UN agencies and NGOs continue to be marred by misunderstandings and a lack of transparency.

Humanitarian reform initiatives focussed belatedly on questions of partnership. However, NGO consortia, OCHA and other humanitarian actors decided that a fresh approach was needed to bring together the three “pillars” of the humanitarian system – the UN agencies, the NGOs, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement – in a new way.

The main point of agreement was endorsement of the Principles of Partnership; we also agreed to disseminate the Principles throughout our own agencies, and to report back on progress in July 2008.

We would like to emphasize that we do not want to create more work or new structures for field staff. These Principles are not about doing new things; they are about doing things differently. The text below was agreed in July 2007.

Principles of Partnership

A Statement of Commitment

The *Global Humanitarian Platform*, created in July 2006, brings together UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations on an equal footing.

→ 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 recognizing the interdependence among humanitarian organizations,

→ Committed to building and nurturing an effective partnership,

... the organizations 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 recognize each other's constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organizations 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 organizations.

• Result-oriented approach

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

• Responsibility

Humanitarian organizations 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 organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

The wording in the short preamble and the Principles are important. Save the Children pressed hard for the inclusion of improving the effectiveness of humanitarian action, diversity as an asset of the humanitarian community, the need to allow constructive dissent, result-oriented approach, agencies taking responsibility (accountability) and decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians.

How could we make these Principles useful?

We're hoping that these Principles will be useful for staff in the field, for holding UN agencies – and our own staff – to higher standards of behaviour. They should help change the dynamics of relationships on the ground, giving NGOs more power in unequal contexts.

The Principles may be helpful in relationships involving negotiating contracts, Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), joint initiatives, monitoring CERF pass-through funding, preparing the Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) or negotiating the Consolidated Appeals (CAPs), for example. They also could be used in Real Time Evaluations where coordination or partnerships are being evaluated.

The Principles should help keep planning realistic. For example, if a UN agency is starting to commit to operations when they do not have the humanitarian staff, an operational NGO could raise concerns using the Principles, knowing that they have been endorsed at the highest level of that agency. If an NGO is pushing through operations in a way that cuts off local staff, concerns could again be raised using the Principles.

Agencies could encourage behavioural changes in their organisations by incorporating the Principles into staffing policy and procedures, as well as partnership contracts. The Principles could be incorporated into the job descriptions for those who, on a regular basis, negotiate with UN and non-UN staff – such as cluster leads, humanitarian coordinators, and liaison officers in UN agencies. They should also be used to instruct staff that turf battles are no longer acceptable.

How the Principles can help in the field:

The Principles have been piloted in El Salvador, Indonesia and Zimbabwe and are now being applied in all countries where the UN, Red Cross/Crescent and NGOs work together in humanitarian response. In Zimbabwe, Save the Children staff, as well as other NGOs, have found them useful in

framing feedback to UN agencies on partnership agreements.

In the course of 2008 we are hoping to hear from field staff from their experience as to whether these Principles are useful, and how.

Next steps for Save the Children

In addition to sharing these Principles with our field staff and learning from your experiences, we plan to introduce the Principles in inductions for new country directors and Emergency Relief Personnel. If they seem to be useful, we'd like to incorporate the Principles into training modules we conduct worldwide.

Across Save the Children, we plan to make presentations to HQ and field staff about the GHP and the Principles, and how to give feedback. The SCUK humanitarian policy team, on behalf of the Save the Children alliance, will also develop a follow-up strategy to build on the feedback we receive from Alliance members and field staff.

In addition, we believe that our work on humanitarian policy, UN reform, and humanitarian financing will be enhanced by reminding other actors in the humanitarian field about these commitments to transparency, mutual respect, and achieving results.

Q+As

• Am I obligated to use the Principles of Partnership?

While there is no formal obligation to use the Principles, as active participants in the GHP process, Save the Children has agreed to trial the Principles as the basis for improved relationships in the field.

• Will my counterparts at UN agencies in the field be familiar with the Principles of Partnership?

They should be. Some UN agencies have already displayed a commitment to the Principles, including FAO's practical suggestions for how to apply the them internally, and UNICEF's consultation with NGOs in January 2008.

UN staff should receive information about the Principles and be encouraged to promote them to foster better partnerships with NGOs. You should feel free to raise them in joint meetings, for example.

• How do the Principles apply to humanitarian reform initiatives, such as the introduction of clusters?

While there is no official connection between the Principles and humanitarian reform initiatives, they should improve the relationships on which improved humanitarian response depends. For example, if cluster leads or those facilitating CERF funding worked according to these Principles, there are many concrete ways in which humanitarian response would be improved.

• Should we use the Principles with local NGOs?

It is important for national and local NGOs, not just the major INGOs and UN agencies, to be part of the GHP process. You can report back to us if this works well in the field, or if there are more lessons to be learned.

• What about our own autonomy?

NGOs remain independent from the UN. Though we hope to improve our relationships with UN agencies, we expect them to respect our independence, and we have every right to engage in constructive criticism, if need be. At the same time, we should ensure that our staff, too, act according to the Principles and are open to constructive approaches.

• What about Donors and the Principles?

Donors should use their influence to help ensure that UN agencies apply the Principles at all levels, establishing inclusive humanitarian coordination and keeping humanitarian action free from institutional politics. Donors that have signed up to the Good Humanitarian Donorship process have a double incentive to ensure that humanitarian response is improved.

Resources:

Summary of GHP 2007:
<http://www.icva.ch/doc00002419.doc>

Humanitarian Reform information:
<http://www.humanitarianreform.org>

Save the Children's publications on the CERF:
http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_722.htm

Good Humanitarian Donorship:
<http://www.goodhumanitariananddonorship.org/>

The humanitarian policy team would appreciate any feedback you have on this document, or other observations about UN-NGO relationships on the ground. Please e-mail emergenciesinfo@savethechildren.org.uk