

## **Principles of Partnership in the Field: Recommendations from Asia\***

### **Context**

One of the most enduring challenges of international humanitarian partnerships is balancing short-term interventionist need to save lives with long-term needs to support local institutions to fulfil this need via their own methods. Tools with general applicability, such as the Principles of Partnership (PoP) may also be used to identify further options for resolving current inter-agency challenges.

This brief paper identifies three challenges to effective partnerships as seen by All India Disaster Mitigation Institute during several recent evaluations in South and South East Asia<sup>1</sup>. Although the reviews had their own specific objectives, several partnership challenges recurred across geographic and operational areas in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Indonesia. The three main challenges to performance include mismatches in pace of work, mismatches in accounting systems, and failure to conduct joint contingency planning. These three areas are hardly recorded or reported in regular ongoing evaluations on their ToRs. This discussion paper builds on the 2007 discussion on “The Goal of Humanitarian Partnership: Lip Service or A Way of working”.<sup>2</sup>

Below we mention the mismatch to initiate discussion. Next, we recommend actions against each that correspond with the five Principles of Partnerships.

### **Three Mismatches**

#### **1. Mismatch of Pace of Work**

The paces at which the UN and NGOs work are different. One moves fast when the other does not; then the other moves faster when the one slows down. In recent field evaluations, such stalling or slowing down is repeatedly mentioned as the basic reason for poor or lower performance of these partnerships<sup>3</sup>. Such slowing down is also noticed in single UN or large NGO working with many smaller local NGOs. More importantly, if the slow-down is not addressed within weeks, it becomes too late to pick up the pace of performance. The matter becomes even more complicated when the UN agency is expected to work with or through the government agencies.

Pace also differs in each organisation across headquarters and field levels. NGOs with partnerships with more than two UN agencies end up managing multiple paces simultaneously. The partnership comes under acute crisis when there is abrupt and lasting drop in the pace of one

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\* Prepared by All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (e-mail: [bestteam@aidmi.org](mailto:bestteam@aidmi.org)) with inputs from Mr. Sarwar Bari, Pattan, Pakistan; Mr. S.M.A. Rashid, NGO Forum, Bangladesh; Mr. Mohamed Zuhair, NGO Federation, Maldives as an input to the Global Humanitarian Platform meeting on July 1 and 2, 2008, Geneva, on Strengthening Partnerships to Improve Humanitarian Action. Comments were also provided by Adrian J.E. Ferf; Vijayalakshmi Vadivelu; and Divya Jacob on the second draft.

<sup>1</sup> Recent reviews include UN–NGO partnerships between newly launched after disaster NGOs such as those in Indonesia, Maldives and Sri Lanka; UN as One partnerships in India; UN partnership with Red Cross in Nepal and Bangladesh; and the UN partnership with Social movement NGOs in Indonesia and Philippines.

<sup>2</sup> Prepared for the Panel on “The Goal of Humanitarian *Partnership*: Lip Service or A Way of Working?” at he ICVA Conference: “How Compaible are UN Coherence and Humanitarian Partnership?” Geneva, 2 February, 2007. Moderator: Mihir R. Bhatt, Panellists: Toni Frisch, Eric Chevallier and Kasidis Rochanakorn.

<sup>3</sup> A concern similarly found in the study on building local capacities of the NGO Impact Initiative. See: AIDMI. 2006. *NGO Impact Initiative: Focusing on Results*. Southasiadisasters.net, Issue # 19. And OSE. 2006. *NGO Impact Initiative: An Assessment by the International Humanitarian NGO Community*.

of the two partners. The challenge is not just about differences in size. In fact, this issue is even more acute with larger UN agencies and larger local or international NGOs.

More recent “UN as One” efforts have made some progress towards a common and coherent approach. For example, the UN Tsunami Recovery Support team was able to serve as a focal point for communication and continuity throughout the large-scale recovery. This partnership challenge demonstrates the need for further efforts to unite approaches both within the UN and with UN-NGO relations.

There is no data, analysis, or consensus over events and across types of partnerships to understand this tension of mismatch of pace of work between the UN and NGOs in a humanitarian situation. There is no record of such slow downs or systematic research to identify their causes. Although efforts to prevent this tension are rare, the Principles of Partnership can become an exception.

Do PoPs help ensure suitable pace of work? How can PoP optimise suitable pace? How can flows of funds and conditions of funding improve the maintenance of pace of both partners? What role donors can play in facilitating or encouraging this? Many UN and NGO operational staff question how an additional set of principles will help? Who will enforce them? What are the consequences of violating these principles?

## **2. Mismatch of Accounting**

The second key area that came up repeatedly in these evaluations and reviews in Asia was inadequate understanding put in by UN agencies and INGOs in the management of accounting systems across the globe. There is little connectivity between accounting methods across institutions in UN–NGO partnerships. Both have their own accounting needs and demands. The costing, levels of specifications, and reporting differ significantly. The local NGOs suffer from the confusion on when, how, and to whom basic accounts should be provided. Ways must be found to increase partner satisfaction with the demands of accounting processes. Accounting needs, methods, and level of rigour range from one UN agency to another—even across organisations operating in the same area and addressing the same humanitarian crisis.

Systems for accounting are usually institution-centric and do not adequately allow room for partnership objectives. Accounts can kill the spirit of partnership. Often mere coordination of accounts is useful enough and does not need controlling of accounts. This does not mean that all NGOs have effective accounting system to perform well. Many NGOs, even of high repute, struggle with managing large amounts. The establishment of CERF is a major step towards improved and appropriate funding but eligibility should be available to qualified NGOs as well. The fund has provided over \$100m to UN programmes in South Asia since 2006<sup>4</sup>, yet local organisations remain excluded. What role UN agencies can play to harmonise these accounts? What role donors can play? Large international NGOs may not have interest in small CERF grants.

## **3. Failure to Conduct Joint Contingency Planning**

The third key area that has repeatedly emerges as a challenge to humanitarian partnerships in Asia is that of joint contingency planning by the UN and NGOs. Repeatedly the NGOs feel that they were not adequately involved in the UN contingency planning processes—even where it is made public and available to NGOs. Too often, the UN and the NGOs differ on what contingency planning includes as well as what are appropriate processes of such planning. NGOs

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<sup>4</sup> Data from: <http://ochaonline.un.org/cerf/CERFFigures/CountriesreceivingCERFfunds/tabid/1799/Default.aspx>.

typically find the planning process to be more dynamic and iterative than UN agencies. Despite the differences, for both, more focus is needed on increasing the impact of preparedness in disaster-prone areas. This is especially true for early warning systems.<sup>5</sup> The UN often has funds for this planning while local NGOs do not. This complicates the partnership.

The NGO teams interviewed during the evaluations in Asia expressed that a collaborative process in developing contingency plans—including response strategies, implementation plans, operational support plans, and budgets—would help to improve the quality of UN–NGO partnerships. Nevertheless, such planning is not systematically taken up. This challenge relates to the way surge capacity is supported—both by the UN and by individual NGOs. Beyond current stand-by agreements, surge capacity units in UN<sup>6</sup>, regional and global organisations may develop “Stand-by MoUs” with local partners that may be activated in emergencies. What role the UN can play in this process? Can donors support pilots?

### **Addressing the Mismatches**

These three issues are identified above to make them available for thought and discussion among those that manage partnerships in the UN and in the NGOs. More importantly, the UN heads and management leadership at the headquarters need to also address these three issues. Further efforts and research towards improved partnership performance is needed in UN–NGO humanitarian response. It is the responsibility of the humanitarian community to see that these and other issues are resolved in order to maintain public credibility through effective response.

The table below lists the challenges identified above. It draws on the five Principles of Partnership that were endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007 in order to identify actions and processes for addressing these challenges.

<b>Principle-based Solutions to Current Partnership Challenges</b>			
<b>Principles of Partnership</b>	<b>Partnership Challenge #1: Mismatched Pace of Work across Partners</b>	<b>Partnership Challenge #2: Mismatched Accounting Systems across Partners</b>	<b>Partnership Challenge #3: Failure to Conduct Joint Contingency Planning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Result-oriented approach</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Complementarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative design of work plans and timetables; early and open sharing of constraints and obligations;</li> <li>• A balance between speed of operations and accountability should be discussed in partnership agreements, MoUs, and joint proposals.</li> <li>• Additional activities, and related proportions of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about standard international accounting systems and tools is widely available (i.e. IFRS). An adaptive approach to using these standards may promote equity in partnerships, especially with local organisations.</li> <li>• Partner organisations should see that flows of funds do not dictate levels of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principle-based partnerships should be built <i>before</i> emergencies. Joint DRR and preparedness programming can help do so and help partners refine their comparative strengths and roles.</li> <li>• Pre-emergency preparedness programming may also serve as a vehicle to</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> See AIDMI. 2008. *The Community-based Last-mile Early Warning System*. Southasiadisasters.net issue # 46.

<sup>6</sup> The Stand-by Partnerships Program of OCHA may serve as a model, but MoU design will need to consider needs and circumstances of smaller local organizations.

	<p>funding, may be identified at an early stage for faster operating organisations to complete when they outpace slower organisations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focussing on different comparative advantages of larger or more localised organisations will promote complementarity and make results more achievable.</li> </ul>	<p>decision-making in partnerships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If one partner supports the other with funding, it should take responsibility to see that the other's independence is not compromised.</li> </ul>	<p>communicate humanitarian principles and beneficiary rights to primary stakeholders—strengthening a key partnership.</p>
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The above table is indicative. It should be developed by the partnership managers of the UN and NGO agencies. The UN agencies are learning to work with small and local NGOs. The small and local NGOs need to build their capacity to work with large international NGOs. Both need to make efforts to come closer. It is relatively easy to define the UN but to define the NGOs is not an easy. The range of NGOs is too wide to apply same PoP. Similarly NGO movement varies across region, Africa to Asia to other regions. Should PoP change across regions? One of the major mismatches is the conflicting agenda of UN and NGOs (particularly in the activities leading to advocacy). Often NGOs are disadvantaged when receiving UN funds as they may be restrained from advocacy against government. Should UN agenda of working with government (soft approach to government) be a constraint for NGO partnership and funding? This is more related to our observation on independence of NGOs when receiving UN funds.

**Next Steps**

It may be timely for the Global Humanitarian Platform, perhaps through one of the regional platforms or upcoming national teams, or a Working Group to further research current constraints to effective partnerships. This link is crucial, yet the performance of these partnerships is often lacking. There is a strong need for tools similar to the PoP that can facilitate partnerships between international UN and local NGOs in humanitarian action. Examples and case studies are needed to analyse how the principles have been applied, and to what result, in emergency and joint contingency planning across organisations. Factors contributing to and inhibiting PoP application in this context need to be identified. The GHP—including southern partners—should draft a plan for initiating research and development of these tools. Such actions will save time, account resources and prepare usable plans.