The humanitarian community is constantly being challenged to do a better job in responding to needs. In efforts to be more accountable, more quality-oriented, and more timely in responding, the general approach has been to apply "band-aids" to a system that is in need of fundamental changes. More training, guidelines, and task forces have been insufficient in addressing gaps. The reform process since 2005 seems to have been unable to address the essential problems that the humanitarian community repeatedly faces. Gaps in the humanitarian response, staffing challenges, and the neglect of local and national capacities recur in every situation. Such a pattern would seem to indicate that we need to look for "cures" instead of "band-aids" in improving the humanitarian system.

The 3rd one-day ICVA Conference provides an opportunity to take a step back and examine the essential reforms that will allow for longer-term changes to make the humanitarian community more effective. Three panels will address the following issues:
- Flipping the System
- The Perennial Personality Problem
- Organising Humanitarian Coordination Effectively

Flipping the System
The current humanitarian coordination and response system is one that is centred on international efforts. As a result, it tends to be a top-down approach that often overlooks local structures and capacities. The 2006 *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report* recommended that "The international humanitarian community needs a fundamental reorientation from supplying aid to supporting and facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities." There seems to have been little follow-up to this recommendation from the tsunami evaluation to date. A differentiation must be made in the way that a humanitarian response is carried out in natural disasters and situations of armed conflict. There needs to be a reorientation – or a flipping of the system – so that the humanitarian response starts by looking at the local and national capacities before "imposing aid".

The Perennial Personality Problem
The success or failure of humanitarian response and coordination is too often dependent on "personalities". The independent 2007 *Cluster Approach Evaluation Report* noted that "…attributing everything to personality underplays the degree to which institutions can and do shape the behaviour, practices, and skills of individuals". Yet, the humanitarian community has many serious weaknesses in managing human resources: from recruitment to training to appraisal. Humanitarian organisations need to address the perennial challenges related to staffing that impact directly on the effectiveness of their action, including high staff turnover, identifying and keeping competent staff, and ensuring that strong leaders with the right skill-sets are put in place.

Organising Humanitarian Coordination Effectively

In the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant, each man describes the elephant as something different depending on the part they touch: a snake (the trunk), a tree (the leg), a fan (the ear), or a wall (the body) – depending on which version of the story you read. None of these descriptions provide the whole picture – i.e. that what they are touching is an elephant. Similarly, the way in which humanitarian coordination is carried out could be characterised as various sectors (or clusters) coming together to describe the way in which they see the humanitarian needs and gaps. The result is that it becomes very difficult to have an overall analysis of the humanitarian situation that allows for an effective response to needs.

The coordination system that has generally been put in place tends to take a "silo" approach to response, with sectors/clusters looking at issues that then (should) feed into a broader coordination process. Over the years, as a result, gaps have been identified in the approach – gender, HIV/AIDS, the elderly, etc. – with guidelines and task forces created to try and fill those gaps. There will constantly be new issues that will emerge as gaps (the latest ones, for example, being safe access to firewood and other fuel sources in humanitarian settings and civil-military relations in clusterised countries).

While each of these gap areas rightly requires a response, the result is a more "congested" coordination field with a myriad of guidelines and task forces at the global level and numerous meetings at the field level. This system makes it difficult to ensure that there is an adequate shared analysis of the overall needs and vulnerabilities to be addressed by humanitarian actors.

Is it time to fundamentally shift the starting point of coordination from one that essentially brings various sectors together to one that starts with an overall shared analysis and prioritisation that would then allow for more *ad hoc* groupings on technical/sectoral areas, as required? We now, generally, bring together views from various sectors to try and form a picture of what the overall needs are, with the result that we might miss the "elephant". By starting with the overall picture of needs, we might be able to better agree on where the priorities lie and how we can better respond to gaps.

A longer background document laying out the issues further will be made available in January.

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