

ICVA Conference, 2 February 2009

Changing the Humanitarian Community

The Purpose of the ICVA Conference

For the past several years, the annual ICVA conferences have tried to provoke discussion around what needs to be improved in the humanitarian community – from getting the NGO community to take a critical look at ourselves (*The Principles and Politics of Humanitarian Action* in 2006) to improving partnerships (*How Compatible are UN Coherence and Humanitarian Partnership?* in 2007) to trying to get the humanitarian community to work through local capacities and identify better leaders (*The Essential Humanitarian Reforms* in 2008). Each year, there have been animated presentations and discussions identifying the areas where change is required. Yet, after that day of debate, it seems like we all go back to “business as usual”.

Why are the arguments for change and improvement not adequately taken up? Do we continue with the status quo because we can get away with doing so? With the increase in the numbers of disasters and the predictions for future humanitarian challenges being even greater, how long can we afford to continue putting off radical change in the humanitarian community?

Generally, there seems to be a broad understanding of what needs to be changed in the humanitarian community – more financial resources; more principled action; more accountability, in particular towards disaster-affected populations; better leadership and coordination; strengthened partnerships; and a stronger, and lead, role for organisations based in the affected countries – are the most often cited aspects where change is needed. These aspects, however, are by no means new ones. Apparently, there are not enough incentives to ensure that the efforts made so far have provided the adequate changes necessary.

This year’s ICVA Conference, therefore, aims to examine what are the incentives for getting the humanitarian community to change in order to make it more effective in achieving better humanitarian outcomes. The incentives to change can be grouped into three general categories: the moral imperative to provide better humanitarian aid; public criticism, from the media and others, that forces organisations to make changes; and donor money that pushes organisations to make certain changes.

Moral Imperative

The biggest incentive to make changes in the humanitarian community should be the moral imperative to improve our performance for those in need. The humanitarian community is meant to provide life-saving support to populations that have been affected by conflict or disasters. Those organisations that purport to carry out humanitarian work should be driven by the need to provide humanitarian assistance, in line with humanitarian principles. Humanitarian organisations should constantly have those for whom, and with whom, we work in mind when looking at how to modify programmes to make improvements.

It is a well recognised fact that no single humanitarian actor can meet all humanitarian needs. The imperative exists, therefore, to find ways to work together to be able to meet those needs. Too often, however, competition for funds and for profile seems to get in the way of better collaboration when providing responses. Do humanitarian organisations see the moral imperative of better serving those in need as an adequate incentive to make changes? On the face of it, organisations should be completely committed to making changes to their work in order to better assist and protect those in need. The reality, however, is that the moral imperative does not seem to push organisations to change.

Critique Hurts

One of the biggest drivers of change is “naming and shaming” of humanitarian organisations in specific contexts. When media reports or large scale (public) evaluations provide evidence of failures by the humanitarian community, there is an incentive to be (at least) seen as doing something to rectify the errors made or to fix the systems that allowed for such failures to happen. There have been several articles and books written criticising the aid industry. When they are specific to certain organisations, the incentive to change is greater. When the critique has been more general, it is easier to put aside that critique. Undoubtedly, the Sphere Project and other quality and accountability initiatives that grew out of the multi-donor evaluation of the response to the Rwanda crisis in 1994, have led to changes in the way humanitarian work is done. Yet, even the Sphere standards, in which hundreds of organisations and thousands of humanitarian staff have participated and have been trained, are still not as widely used in the sector as could be expected.

If there was more direct and individual naming and shaming of those agencies whose performance is questionable, would organisations be more likely to change? Should there be attempts to get journalists or others to start reporting more on the work of humanitarian agencies as a way to push for improvements in humanitarian response?

Money Talks

At the end of the day, however, the biggest incentive for change most probably comes down to money. Humanitarian assistance should be provided in an impartial manner, yet in many instances, it seems to be the case that money often drives when and where assistance is provided. If a donor has the desire to do so, they can often throw enough money at a situation to try and affect change. Donors also have the power to withhold money from agencies that they feel are not adequately carrying out the work that they should be doing. Donors, as such, can have a huge impact on getting humanitarian organisations to change for the better. The 2006 ICVA Conference background note referred to the effect that donors could have in terms of getting NGOs to be more forward looking and strategic. Are there ways to get donors to fund more strategically in ways that would encourage more collaboration so that humanitarians are better able to meet future challenges?

Outcome and Follow-up

Getting ICVA members, and others, to make those necessary changes, will remain a key challenge in the years to come. The hope is that the discussion during the Conference will help convince ICVA members of the need to start changing the way they work. The Conference is also meant to start the debate for ICVA members who will adopt a new three year Strategic Plan at the 14th ICVA General Assembly on 3 and 4 February 2009. The (new) Strategic Plan foresees ICVA members working more closely together

and striving towards better collaboration so that the ICVA network will have members that are able to change and adapt for the coming challenges that the future holds.

By many accounts, humanitarians will have to work better together in the future in order to be able to effectively respond to the humanitarian needs arising from climate change, urbanisation, or even the emerging financial crisis. There is a feeling that the challenges of future humanitarian crises will be so great that we will have to change the way we work now to be able to adapt to those challenges.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, changes will have to be made within the humanitarian community if we are to be able to respond to the humanitarian needs that will arise in the future. So far, the incentives to change have not been great enough to create radical change. Yet, the time is likely coming that we will need to make some difficult changes. Perhaps the only way to see those changes happen will be to orchestrate the incentives to change in one way or another.



*ICVA Secretariat
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