

## ICVA CONFERENCE

# Partnership, for a Change?

*Partnerships with national and local civil society in humanitarian response*

**MONDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2010**

**International Conference Centre Geneva (CICG)  
17 rue de Varembe, Geneva, Switzerland — [www.cicg.ch](http://www.cicg.ch)**

### *Partnership Discussions: Nothing New...*

For years, there has been much discussion about partnership in humanitarian response. While there are many different types of partnership that can be forged between various humanitarian actors, the one that seems most relevant to ICVA, as an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) consortium, is the relationship between international organisations (whether non-governmental, inter-governmental, or Red Cross/ Red Crescent – “international humanitarian agencies, for short) and national or local NGOs. In the last few years, the issue of such partnerships has come to the forefront even more. The response to cyclone Nargis in Myanmar required new ways of working for many international humanitarian actors. The increased attacks against aid workers in several situations has resulted in many international organisations working more and more through local staff or local partners. The expulsions of international NGOs and the shutting down of three national NGOs in Sudan in early 2009 led to increased discussions around partnership particularly between international NGOs and national NGOs.

### *Years of Talking About Partnership: But to What End?*

The annual ICVA Conference is meant to provide an opportunity for those interested and engaged in humanitarian response to take a step back from their day to day work and reflect on how to improve humanitarian aid, and the discussions have often attempted to tackle specifically the issue of partnership. In 2007, there was a panel on “The Goal of Partnership: Lip Service or a Way of Working?,” that examined whether or not international organisations are really committed to partnership. While international NGOs and organisations often talk about the need for capacity-building – or, more accurately put, capacity enhancement – there is still a long way to go before those words get put into adequate action. The 2008 ICVA Conference had a panel entitled “Flipping the System,” which tried to look at how to practically get to better partnerships between international, national and local NGOs so that the humanitarian system could be turned on its head and look at national and local responses to humanitarian needs before focusing on international responses. The 2009 ICVA Conference was all about “Changing the Humanitarian Community” and examining how the humanitarian community needed to change itself, which included putting national and local responses first.

Each of the discussions in previous ICVA Conferences have been able to put many of the issues and challenges on the table, however, after leaving the Conference, it seems that much of the

encouraging dialogue is forgotten once the regular challenges that face humanitarian actors reappear.

### ***Linking to the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) Meeting***

This year, the 2010 ICVA Conference will precede the Global Humanitarian Platform<sup>1</sup> (GHP) meeting. One of the themes for the GHP will be the “new business model,” which has a direct link to partnership and working with local and national NGOs. As such, it seems an ideal opportunity to try and make use of the ICVA Conference to provide GHP with some concrete recommendations. The GHP developed the *Principles of Partnership* (PoP) in 2007, which have become part of the language of many humanitarian agencies, but not yet necessarily part of day-to-day work. The 2010 ICVA Conference and GHP have the opportunity to really move beyond many of the discussions that have taken place in past years and look at the practicalities of developing better partnerships with national and local NGOs so that humanitarian response can be more effective and efficient. The hope is that back-to-back meetings will allow for the “talk” around partnership to genuinely progress towards “a way of working.”

### ***The 2010 ICVA Conference: Moving towards Practical Ways Forward***

Given the proximity with the GHP, this year’s ICVA Conference will take a slightly different approach and attempt to get to some practical outcomes that can be taken to the GHP. The 2010 Conference will start with an overview of some of the outstanding challenges that remain with partnership between international humanitarian organisations and national and local NGOs, providing the space for participants to discuss those. It will then look at some of the recent examples where humanitarian aid has been challenged to be better at partnership, namely the cyclone Nargis response, the fallout after the Sudan expulsions of humanitarian organisations, and the increasing shift of risk to national and local partners and staff.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way of approaching partnership. Instead, there is a range of different ways to approach it. Obviously, each type of partnership has its pros and cons. One of the hopes with the 2010 ICVA Conference is to be able to examine the pros and cons of various models of partnership by hearing some real examples of such models from the viewpoints of both the international and national or local partners in humanitarian response. The groups will then identify the obstacles to achieving the various types of partnership, as well as some practical suggestions of how to overcome these obstacles.

As another different perspective to the 2010 Conference, videos will be shown at the beginning of the Conference and during coffee breaks of people talking about the humanitarian aid that they have received, whether from national, local, and/or international humanitarian organisations. The hope with these “testimonies” is to get Conference participants to think about the views and perspectives of those who are affected by conflicts and natural disasters.

---

<sup>1</sup> The GHP is a forum bringing together the three operational families of the humanitarian community - NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the UN and related international organisation on an equal footing. Participation is on the heads of agency level and by invitation only.

*Taking a Critical Look at the Different Forms of Partnership*

The conversation about how to move to real partnership will not likely be an easy one: after all, the easier conversations are those where we talk about our commitment to partnership. Moving past the polite words and to the heart of the matter (which often means giving up some money, power, and profile) will not be a comfortable conversation for many (international) organisations. However, if the discussion around partnership – and particularly the GHP discussions around the “new business model” are to move forward – it will require some bold and honest conversations between humanitarian actors.

*ICVA Secretariat  
15 December 2009*