

# ICVA Conference: 4 March 2011, Geneva, Switzerland

## Concept Note

### Does Size Matter?

22 December 2010

#### **Big Crises, Small Crises: Similar Challenges**

2010 will be remembered for two of the biggest humanitarian crises. The earthquake in January in Haiti displaced hundreds of thousands and caused extensive damage to the capital, Port-au-Prince. The floods in southern Pakistan in August 2010 have affected some 18 million people and as of December, there are still hundreds of thousands, if not millions, that have not received aid. In both cases, the scale of displacement and the numbers of affected persons has challenged the humanitarian community to respond adequately.

Both crises have highlighted a number of challenges for the humanitarian system. These challenges are not necessarily new, but they have been brought to the forefront because of the size of the emergencies and the response. Emergencies continue in places like Niger or Somalia with similar challenges, but they do not receive as much attention from the media nor from those who reflect on humanitarian response at the international level. In both “big” and “small” emergencies, humanitarian organisations struggle to provide effective aid. Leadership continues to play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of the response. Coordination mechanisms can provide an improved response, but if they become too burdensome, they take away valuable time and resources from actual response. Local and national NGOs also struggle to meaningfully engage with international coordination mechanisms. Financing mechanisms, while much improved, continue to cause disruptions in operations with slow disbursements and heavy reporting requirements, for example. On a more fundamental level, concepts long discussed at the headquarters’ levels, like protection, continue to be difficult to apply in practice. Humanitarian principles are often not sufficiently applied.

One of the main points of discussion in the humanitarian community in recent years has been about how we should work through local and national partners much more. Haiti and Pakistan have shown rather different approaches to working through local and national partners. In Haiti, many were sidetracked as international organisations scaled up their operations to respond to the needs. In Pakistan, the government launched a massive response effort, and many international organisations have continued to work through local and national partners. The size of the crisis has meant that international organisations have also needed to scale up their operations in Pakistan, but such increases in programmes have also been inadequate in terms of meeting the needs of the huge numbers of affected persons. Do we need to find more complementary ways of ensuring that international organisations are able to scale up to meet huge needs, as well as working through local and national partners?

There are three panels proposed for the annual ICVA Conference on 4 March 2011:

## **1) Host Governments' Response**

The primary responsibility to respond to an emergency lies with the government. However, in some cases – whether in big or small emergencies – governments are either unable or unwilling to provide the necessary humanitarian aid to their populations. In such cases, governments should provide unimpeded access to impartial humanitarian organisations. Experience shows, however, that governments may not want to admit that humanitarian needs exist in their country; they may not allow humanitarian organisations into their country; or they may impose restrictions that make it difficult to deliver humanitarian aid in an impartial manner. It seems that some governments are questioning the work of legitimate humanitarian organisations. What criteria do governments use in determining whether a humanitarian organisation is capable of providing impartial humanitarian aid? Some governments' internal political concerns seem to prevail over meeting humanitarian needs. If, for example, governments do not allow humanitarian organisations to talk to all parties to a conflict, how can they continue to access populations in need? The use of militaries to respond to disasters causes further complications in ensuring that humanitarian aid is provided on an impartial basis and in an effective manner. The international aid system has had a tendency in recent years to impose coordination structures, like clusters, when responding to emergencies. How can host governments and humanitarian organisations work to better understand each other so that aid can be provided effectively and impartially to those in need?

## **2) Applying Standards and Principles**

There are a number of standards and principles that should be upheld in a humanitarian response. However, it seems that in many crises, we are unable to uphold those standards that humanitarian organisations have said they will abide by. Too often, we are not consistent in our application and use of humanitarian principles and standards: they seem to be used more when convenient. Some of the most concerning gaps in standards that are seen in many emergencies are around protection standards. In Pakistan, for example, many of the most vulnerable have not received adequate assistance or protection because they were more difficult to identify and many did not have identification cards. Protection was a major concern in Haiti and continues to remain a gap in the response from the government, as well as other humanitarian actors. One of the biggest problems that remain is that protection, in operational terms, particularly in internal displacement situations, is a concept that is often inadequately defined and understood. For all the protection discussions that take place at the global level, we still have a long way to go as a humanitarian community before we are able to translate those discussions into practical outcomes for persons affected by disasters or conflicts. Similarly, on the civil-military front, the contrast between approaches in Haiti and Pakistan in terms of using military and civil defence assets has been stark. In Haiti, several NGOs readily worked with the US military and did not look at the basic principles around civil-military coordination, such as “last resort,” “time-limited,” and “under civilian control.” In Pakistan, those principles were much more seriously discussed and were seen as necessary to uphold, given that there are also conflict-affected people that require humanitarian aid. How can we ensure that humanitarian organisations become more consistent in upholding essential standards and principles and what role should donors be playing to support such efforts?

### **3) Managing Size and Expectations**

With two major disasters in the same year, humanitarian organisations have been tested as to their ability to expand their operations rapidly. Many international organisations have also been challenged to respond to two big emergencies in the same year, while still responding to smaller or chronic emergencies, such as Niger. The big emergencies have also highlighted the challenge of being able to respond through national and local NGOs, which in many cases are smaller than many international organisations – at least in terms of budgets. While, arguably, this approach worked better in Pakistan than Haiti, the humanitarian system still struggles with being able to achieve the necessary scale of response when working through many, often smaller, organisations. The humanitarian community talks about having adequate preparedness to respond appropriately to emergencies, but it seems that most organisations still struggle with being able to expand and reduce their operations to respond to needs. Linked to the discussion is the way that aid is coordinated – the cluster system has sometimes provided some benefits, but has also resulted in similar challenges in both big and small emergencies, which still need to be addressed.

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