

Complementarity in humanitarian action:

What does it mean? What does it look like? What are the risks and benefits?

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Along with people affected by crises, **NGOs, the UN** and the **Red Cross Red Crescent movement** often work within a complex, diverse humanitarian “ecosystem”. These entities operate alongside **local and national governments, faith-based institutions, the military**, and increasingly with the **private sector, academia, regional organisations, and diaspora**. This diverse group of humanitarian entities must **better leverage their comparative advantages to create more coherent, flexible and effective responses**. The **Principles of Partnership**, endorsed in 2007, underscored the importance of ‘complementarity’:

“The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.”

Whilst the humanitarian sector is in constant evolution, complementarity remains hard to define and achieve. Organizational mandates and missions, public perceptions, donor interests and internal growth targets often drive institutional structures and operational decision-making. Often, this occurs at the expense of local actors and affected populations.

Humanitarian actors and affected populations have called for change. The World Humanitarian Summit consultations have stressed the need for global political leadership; to uphold the norms that safeguard humanity; to address displacement; to strengthen humanitarian financing; and to shift from delivering aid to ending need. Reoccurring in many of these calls, is the need *to reinforce local and national systems, and to deliver based on comparative advantages*.

This last call is not new, and is reflected in a commonly heard phrase *“humanitarian response must be as local as possible, and as international as necessary”*. However, the tools, criteria and even general understanding of operationalizing this call is challenging.

Leveraging experience, insights and tools from NGOs, academia, the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, civil society and the private sector, **ICVA’s 2016 Annual Conference** will explore **the concept of complementarity. The conference will hold conversations on how complementarity is understood and applied in various humanitarian relationships - through ideological, institutional and operational lenses.** The conference will provide a platform to:

- 1. Discuss and unpack the concept of complementarity**
 - *What does ‘complementarity’ mean? Does it lead to increased effectiveness?*
 - *What is the relationship between complementarity and local and national leadership?*
- 2. Share experiences of complementarity in humanitarian action**
 - *What shape has complementarity taken in diverse humanitarian contexts?*
 - *What drives and impedes complementarity in humanitarian practice?*
- 3. Consider complementarity in relation to the World Humanitarian Summit**
 - *How can the the WHS influence and promote complementarity in humanitarian action?*

The conference will include **key-note speaker** sessions, interactive **panel discussions** and **question & answer sessions**.

Further information, including the conference agenda and a background **briefing paper will be forthcoming**.