

**3<sup>rd</sup> ICVA Conference**

**THE ESSENTIAL HUMANITARIAN REFORMS**

**BACKGROUND DOCUMENT: FRAMING THE DEBATE**

**1 February 2008**  
**Geneva, Switzerland**

**THE PURPOSE OF THE ICVA CONFERENCE**

ICVA hosts its annual Conference to allow those working on humanitarian issues to take a step back from their daily work and to reflect on challenges facing the humanitarian community. The theme and panel titles have been deliberately chosen to provoke debate so that participants can actively suggest ways forward, without feeling constrained by their institutional affiliations. The format of the Conference is informal to encourage reflection and dialogue.

The theme of this year's Conference has been chosen to try and address some of the challenges that seem to repeatedly arise in the midst of humanitarian responses to natural disasters or during armed conflicts. The UN-led humanitarian reform process has been working to address a number of the weaknesses in the humanitarian system. In almost every humanitarian response, however, there are concerns about how well the international community has built upon local and national capacities. There are constant references to personalities and how much of a response is dependent on people instead of having predictable systems that get the right people in place. Coordination structures too often dictate how we respond to a situation instead of ensuring that needs are the basis for our response and coordination structures. These are challenges that have long plagued the humanitarian community and in order to address them, longer-term strategies will have to be put in place.

This background document aims to stimulate thinking in advance of the Conference. The paper is not meant to be exhaustive, but presents some topics for discussion without delving into details. The issues being addressed by the three panels during the ICVA Conference are not meant to suggest that these are the only areas that require changes in the humanitarian system. They are simply three areas that consistently recur and that need to be better addressed if the humanitarian community is to become more accountable and more quality-oriented. They are not distinct topics and there are clear links between the three issues.

The humanitarian system is a complex one, which does not lend itself to "quick-fixes". Changes made in one area may have unforeseen impacts on other areas. A one day Conference obviously cannot provide solutions to the various challenges, but steps may be suggested that can be pursued. Through engaging in frank discussions about the state of humanitarian action and how we are responding to needs, hopefully new ways forward will be found. If there are solutions to these challenges, they will likely be achieved in the long-term, but they will be essential if the humanitarian community is to be more effective in responding to needs.



## PANEL 1: FLIPPING THE SYSTEM

Many of the discussions about improving humanitarian response generally centre on the international level, as for example the *Humanitarian Response Review* did in 2004–2005. While international organisations provide a significant amount of the response in crises, local and national organisations and structures are often the first ones to respond, especially to natural disasters. National governments, of course, must take the lead in responding to disasters. The focus of the discussions for the ICVA Conference, however, is on local and national NGOs (NNGOs), as they are a group that needs to be better involved in the humanitarian response, particularly by international organisations.

### *Distinguishing Between Natural Disasters and Armed Conflict*

When talking about building upon local and national capacities, a distinction should be drawn between natural disasters and armed conflicts. In natural disasters when governments ask for international assistance, it is generally easier for ties to be built with local and national partners. In countries where disasters recur, the kind of capacity required to address the humanitarian consequences of annual flooding, for example, can be determined so that relationships can be built up over a longer period of time. As pointed out in the 2004 *ALNAP Review*, “Capacity building has a natural place in disaster cycles, and in the past this provided a logical basis for deciding who should have their capacity built to do what, and when.”<sup>1</sup>

It is quite difficult to build new NNGO partners in the midst of an armed conflict or in a sudden, large-scale response. When access is impeded by governments in a conflict area, it becomes even more difficult for international organisations to build relationships with NNGOs, which may be seen by the government as siding with the “wrong” side of the conflict. It may also be quite difficult for NNGOs themselves to be put in a position where they work with international partners if the government is one that does not look favourably upon international humanitarian organisations.

### *More Talk than Action*

Repeatedly, failures are cited of NNGOs being adequately involved in response and coordination mechanisms. One of the “most disappointing findings regarding the cluster approach” cited by the external evaluation was around the involvement of NNGOs and community-based organisations in clusters.<sup>2</sup> Getting information about such meetings can be difficult for NNGOs, with many never having heard of clusters. Even those that do attend often face language and jargon barriers.

The 2006 Tsunami Evaluation recommended that “The international humanitarian community needs a fundamental reorientation from supplying aid to supporting and facilitating communities’ own relief and recovery priorities.”<sup>3</sup> How much follow-up has been done on this recommendation by the humanitarian community when it comes to natural disaster response? In the *NGO Impact Initiative* report, there was a commitment made by the involved NGOs to “increase investments in local capacity building and report systematically

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<sup>1</sup> Christoplos, Ian, “Institutional capacity building amid humanitarian action” in *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004: Capacity Building*, ODI, 2005, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Cluster Approach Evaluation Report*, 21 November 2007, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Telford, John and John Cosgrove. *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report*, TEC, 2006, p. 110.

on such activities”.<sup>4</sup> How much have international NGOs (INGOs) followed up on this rather open-ended commitment?

One of the major challenges for international organisations in working with NNGOs is the limited capacity that they may have. The limited capacity – while needing to be built upon – affects the mounting of a large scale response. If there are several NGOs with limited capacities, there is a risk of fragmentation, given that the response must be coordinated with an increased number of actors. In addition, if these NGOs’ programmes are funded through an international organisation, the transaction costs of working through numerous NNGOs can be quite high. How can these costs be balanced against the effectiveness of the response, in terms of coordination and in terms of costs?

### ***The Basics of Partnership***

When the *Principles of Partnership* (PoP) were endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007, they were meant to provide a yardstick by which partnerships could be measured: between NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and UN agencies, but also within each of those families. While the 5 *Principles* reflect quite basic ways of dealing with each other (equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity), there is still a long way to go for these PoP to be achieved, particularly when it comes to partnerships with NNGOs. Instilling in staff the need to adhere to these PoP is a responsibility that falls to all humanitarian organisations. Making sure that organisations have staff that see these PoP as a priority is an ongoing challenge.

### ***Adding Incentives for Better Partnerships***

How can we fundamentally reorient the system so that international organisations build upon existing local and national capacities without going into a country and “imposing aid”? How would international organisations have to change in order to allow for such a system? A number of INGOs work with, and through, local partners in designing and responding to emergencies. Such partnerships do, however, come at a cost for the INGO. By working through local partners, some do not have their own capacity to carry out large scale programmes. They may get less publicity for such partnership work, which can result in less funding. Are there ways to better profile INGOs that work through partners so that they can access more resources to support such programmes?

### ***Funding Implications***

How would donors respond if the system were to be flipped? Such a “bottom up” system could mean a change each time in the way that the response is organised, depending on the context. Would donors’ systems be flexible enough to support both international and national NGOs to respond? Given the challenges that NNGOs face in securing funding, a real flipped system would require a number of changes in the traditional funding structures to be put in place.

The 2004 *ALNAP Review* suggested that “Donors are often far more flexible than NGOs claim with respect to integration of capacity-building costs in plans and budgets, especially with sectoral programming.”<sup>5</sup> Are there ways to ensure that such capacity-building happens prior to emergencies, with donors’ humanitarian budgets being made available?

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<sup>4</sup> *NGO Impact Initiative: An Assessment by the International Humanitarian NGO Community*, October 2006, p xi.

<sup>5</sup> Christoplos, Ian, “Institutional capacity building amid humanitarian action” in *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004: Capacity Building*, ODI, 2005, p.41.

Could there be conditions put in place so that INGOs must ensure that some of the funds they receive go to NNGOs – for example, a solidarity fund for NNGOs using a percentage of contracts signed with donors or UN agencies? Are donors willing to let some of their money go to NGOs that are not from “their” country, given the potential impact of public perceptions at home?

Such a reorientation in the system would also call upon “non-traditional” and emerging donors to put in place systems to better support NNGOs in transparent ways. In the context of the “war on terror”, some sources of funding have been blocked by Western governments, but ways must be found to release such funds so that legitimate NGOs can benefit from the money available to allow for increased humanitarian response.

### ***Who Should be Doing Capacity-Building?***

An area that requires further discussion is whether capacity-building should be done by humanitarian organisations or if it is not best left to development organisations? If development organisations have such a role, how can we get such organisations (including institutions like the World Bank) to focus on helping to build the capacity of organisations to respond to humanitarian crises?

### ***Hiring Locally Without Draining***

International organisations are heavily reliant on staff hired locally to help them run operations, to understand the local context, and to continue programmes in the case of an evacuation of international staff. Local staff (and NNGOs) may also be closer to the affected populations and so may have an easier time involving them in the various stages of programming. The issue of poaching local staff from existing structures or organisations is a recurring challenge, particularly in large scale emergencies. Countless times, stories are told of educated professionals working as drivers or interpreters for international organisations because of higher salaries and benefits. As recommended in the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*, “A salary policy is needed before a relief programme begins, to avoid unnecessary weakening of local structures”.<sup>6</sup> More than a decade later, this recommendation still requires implementation in most, if not all, situations. What can be done to better support local structures without causing such a drain on existing institutions?

### ***NGO Relations***

How can we ensure that the NGO community brings together INGOs and NNGOs in effective NGO coordination mechanisms? Are NGOs willing to invest the time and resources required to put together such mechanisms to not only ensure that NGOs are able to work together on policy and operational issues, but also to provide ways to share experiences and help build the capacity of both national and international NGOs? Are donors prepared to fund such NGO coordination mechanisms?

### ***Moving Forward***

Trying to reorient the system is not an easy challenge. Some of the answers to these questions and challenges may be difficult ones that simply say that flipping the system is not going to be possible in every case. Having an open debate about the issues, however, will be the only way that the humanitarian community will be able to move forward on the issue of building on local and national capacity.



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<sup>6</sup> *Study 3: Humanitarian Aid and Effects, The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, 1996, p.147.

## **PANEL 2: THE PERENNIAL PERSONALITY PROBLEM**

When someone talks about the strength or weakness of a humanitarian response, there is, more often than not, reference to a person or persons that played a key role in the response (whether good or bad). A humanitarian response is dependent on the people that are involved in providing that response and so removing the “personality” factor is virtually impossible. That does not mean, however, that steps cannot be taken by organisations to improve their chances of getting the right people with the right skill sets to the right place at the right time.

Getting and keeping people with the right attitudes, personalities, and skill sets in place is a key challenge for the humanitarian community. There are too many times when staff of the UN or international NGOs are cited as being arrogant, wanting to have little to do with NNGOs or even beneficiaries. The same case often occurs between UN staff and international NGO staff. The PoP were developed largely to help overcome situations where the attitudes of staff in organisations worked contrary to partnership and which consequently had a negative impact upon the humanitarian response. While the PoP are quite basic, they are a merely a “band-aid”: more fundamental changes to the current system need to be made to ensure that such PoP are commonplace instead of needing to instil them in staff.

### *Attitudes or Skills?*

What can organisations do to make sure that they find people with the right attitudes towards working with affected populations and partners? Hiring someone solely based on their skill sets without assessing their attitudes towards working with affected populations and partners will not ensure finding appropriate staff. It may actually be better to find people with the right attitudes and then ensure that they have the appropriate skill sets, as skill sets can be developed, whereas personalities can rarely be changed.

### *Keeping the Right People*

What are the changes that can be put into place in order to ensure that the right people stay in the humanitarian system? Given that humanitarian action often takes place in difficult circumstances, it will be impossible to keep all the good people, as personal choices around lifestyle will come into play. However, there are ways in which humanitarian organisations can better invest in their staff, through better career planning, improved training, and helping with career development.

How can humanitarian organisations be adapted to ensure that they keep good people (i.e. those that are willing to work with affected populations and other humanitarian actors and who have the right skill sets) and let the not-so-good people go? How can humanitarian organisations be better meritocracies? Can a bureaucracy, like the UN, adopt a true meritocracy system?

### *Sending Out the “A” Team*

The issues of staff turnover and junior staff being sent to challenging situations are all too familiar. Systems need to be put into place to ensure that good, senior staff are sent to the toughest emergencies because those are the ones that need experienced staff. Evaluations have often spoken about the “B” teams being sent out instead of the “A” team from organisations in almost every major emergency in the last decade (Kosovo, Darfur, the tsunami response, Uganda, Chad). Are there ways to get more “A” teams within organisations so that a more consistent humanitarian response can be provided, instead of leaving the worst crises with the poorest team of responders? What can humanitarian organisations do to

develop a strong pool of humanitarian staff that can be drawn upon for multiple emergencies? What role will donors play to ensure that investment in staff can be prioritised by organisations?

### *Treating National and International Staff Equally*

International organisations must also ensure that measures to improve human resources do not just focus on international staff. As noted above, international organisations are heavily reliant on good national staff. Those staff must also be provided with development opportunities so that they can either remain with the international organisation or return to local and national structures. Such a means of staff capacity building must be done in a more concerted manner than is currently done, with the robust support of donors.

Ensuring that organisations work on staff development is not enough. There need to be more efforts made to develop systems within countries that help to build capacities through programmes in universities or institutes that focus on humanitarian action and response. Only through such concerted efforts will there be a better possibility of developing a strong cadre of humanitarians. Institutions and programmes that currently exist could help to develop similar programmes in other countries, particularly in countries prone to natural disasters.

### *Better Leaders*

One of the biggest gap areas in the humanitarian community, as a whole, is identifying and developing strong leaders. This weakness is seen most often when it comes to Humanitarian Coordinators (HC). Currently, it is rare to find an HC that is seen as providing strong leadership in humanitarian response. Partly related to this weakness is the fact that the UN prefers to combine Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators, which means often getting someone with little or no humanitarian experience appointed as an HC. Being an HC not only requires strong leadership skills that ensure that you can engage with the broader humanitarian community, but it also requires understanding humanitarian action and the challenges that arise in a response.

When there is a good Humanitarian Coordinator, he (rarely, she) is usually the one that is brought out in conferences and is also used as the “guinea pig” for innovations. After all, the chances of a new concept succeeding – like a common humanitarian fund at the country level – are greater if there is a strong HC pushing the concept. What makes a good HC and how can the humanitarian community ensure that more of them are “created”? Attempts being undertaken by OCHA now to help develop HCs over a period of time are needed, but risk to be very long-term. Are there ways to identify strong humanitarian leaders in the short term? Can the political obstacles of the UN bureaucracy be overcome?

Leadership should not only be seen as focusing on the HC position. While important, it is equally urgent for NGOs to be able to develop strong leaders that have the understanding and experience of humanitarian action. Just as systems need to be developed to keep good staff in place, efforts need to be made to help develop strong leaders within the NGO community.

### *Commitment from Management*

Solving the “personality problem” is one that needs to be tackled not just from a human resources perspective, but also from a management perspective. Too often, decisions around staffing are left to a human resources department with a result that is not always satisfactory. Without serious engagement from senior managers to ensure systems are put in place to get the right people with the right personalities, the humanitarian system will continue to rely on

the luck of getting a good group of people together to provide a good response. In order to make the humanitarian response more predictable, there needs to be much heavier investment in getting and keeping the right people – in terms of attitudes, personalities, and then skill sets.

### *People and Reform*

Critical to the success of a reform or change process are the people who are involved. For changes to occur, a new vision must be bought into, multiplied, and implemented by those who form part of the system or organisation. Reforms in the humanitarian system cannot imply doing “business as usual”. Yet, the human resource implications of the UN-led humanitarian reform process seem to have been seriously underestimated. The translation of reform goals into adjusted job descriptions, the consistent training of staff, and performance appraisals that include reform indicators, are the basic elements for a carrying forward an effective change process. If the reform of the humanitarian system is to have a lasting impact, the people who are part of it must also adapt.



## **PANEL 3: ORGANISING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE EFFECTIVELY**

Humanitarian action ideally should respond to assessed needs. Each humanitarian organisation will assess needs in a given context based on their way of working and their perspective of how broadly or narrowly humanitarian action is defined. At the same time, response can be project- (or donor-) driven when funds are available for a particular sector or area of response, even if there are other, greater needs to be met. In such an environment, how can the various assessments of needs be brought together and prioritisation for response be agreed between humanitarian actors? The coordination system that has been created, particularly with clusters, attempts to provide an “off-the-shelf” response, even though in many cases there needs to be more tailoring to the situation.

### *The Expanded Humanitarian Response*

Over the years, expectations have been raised for the humanitarian response to meet a wide range of needs. There has been the addition of numerous areas that people feel must be part of a humanitarian response – from gender to the environment to emergency education, to name just a few. These areas of activity have been added-on as organisations use different lenses and/or have different underpinning philosophies of what constitutes humanitarian response. As a community, however, it seems that we have become extremely ambitious in delivering services and offering protection in a very broad range of areas. Some of these (social) services, it must be said, may not even be fully available in functioning States, let alone in countries affected by disaster or armed conflict. Essentially, the question is whether humanitarians are expected to (re)create societies and whether humanitarian action is to become a system for social welfare in emergencies? Have we become too demanding of the humanitarian “enterprise”?

Should we be trying to go “back to basics” instead of trying to have humanitarian response address all the needs arising in a crisis? If we were to go “back to basics” would there be an improvement in the humanitarian response? Or would that simply be shifting the “goal posts” for how we measure our response?

Would we be able to reach agreement on the basic areas of humanitarian response? Could agreement, for example, be found around the sectors included in the current *Sphere* handbook

as being the basics of a humanitarian response: water, sanitation, and hygiene promotion; nutrition and food aid; shelter, settlement, and non-food items; and health services? Would we be able, as a humanitarian community, to take such a step back in terms of defining our response more narrowly?

### *Improving Needs Assessments*

The assessment of needs continues to be a weakness cited of the humanitarian community. Even if the ideal needs assessment tools were developed, would we be able to accurately assess the needs within a given context? With little agreement on what constitutes the range of activities to be considered “humanitarian”, combined with the fact that assessments will be influenced by how an organisation works, can we realistically hope to be able to gain an overall picture of needs in a crisis? Or, is the best for which we can hope that we improve our methods of assessing and then improve the way that we share analyses of the situation, generally, and with regards to specific, prioritised areas?

With the increase in the number of areas to which to respond, we have also created competing demands for limited resources. There is the constant refrain that there are not enough resources available to fund the response to the needs that are currently being assessed. If assessment methodologies were improved, there would likely be even more needs that would require funding, especially if a broad definition of humanitarian response is used. Would more funds be made available for an increase in identified needs?

### *The “How-to” Approach to Humanitarian Response*

One of the difficulties that has arisen as a result of our attempts to respond to a wide range of issues in the humanitarian response is that we have created quite a complex system that requires a range of specialists for various parts of the response. The reaction to these challenges has been to try to find “out-of-the-box” solutions or to create a sort of “how-to” approach for humanitarian response. There are numerous guidelines that have been, and continue to be, produced in order to help people respond to the various activities that are now seen as part of humanitarian response. Field-based staff often complain about the overload of guidelines.

### *More Complex Response, More Coordination?*

With an increasing number of areas to which to respond, the overall response and the coordination around response become increasingly complex. With different organisations seeing priorities from their own perspective, identifying priority areas for response and ensuring complementarity becomes more challenging. If we had a more “basic” view of humanitarian response, would coordination of the response be easier?

As a result of having different interpretations of how broad or narrow humanitarian action should be, combined with the fact that needs do not always form the basis of the response, it becomes increasingly difficult for the humanitarian community in a country to agree on where priorities in the response lie. This diversity does not preclude being able to share assessments of needs to be able to come to an understanding of how each organisation will respond.

How can the various assessments of needs be brought together to allow for a shared analysis of the situation, which can then ensure gaps are filled? Is developing a framework for needs assessments the solution when there are different understandings of what humanitarian response entails? Even if priorities can be agreed between humanitarian actors, are we able to convince governments or local authorities to agree to those priorities? What does the



humanitarian community need to do differently in order to find agreed priorities with governments in disasters?

Yet, even with “off-the-shelf” responses, in many places, gaps remain, duplication in the information shared occurs, and staff spend large amounts of time in coordination meetings. The risk with an over-focus on coordination within sectors is that the overall assessment of the context and needs – otherwise referred to as general or inter-cluster coordination – falls through the cracks.

Is what we need a flexible coordination framework that can be adapted to each context, but which ensures that the basic elements of humanitarian response do not fall through the cracks? In order to be able to judge what that adaptation should be, there is a need for people that are able to assess the situation and the needs and decide on the most appropriate way of coordinating the humanitarian response.

### *Are We Making a Science Out of Humanitarianism?*

In our attempts to create a better system to respond, are we perhaps making humanitarian response more of a “science” than it needs to, or even can, be? Are we trying to make humanitarian response more technical than it should be? Can we realistically expect humanitarian action to be carried out by following the various guidelines that are being produced and using the various frameworks for needs assessments, which are being developed? After all, humanitarian response involves providing many services that usually are quite complicated to provide in most countries. With the attempts to make our humanitarian response more measurable, are we moving towards what “many in the French tradition fear: that the system has passed its innovative phase and is now creaking towards bureaucracy and overfed inertia”?<sup>7</sup>



### *A Final Note*

The issues raised in this background document are not easy ones to tackle. Some of the questions will require difficult answers. Many of them have been discussed for years. If there are to be fundamental improvements in the way that humanitarian action is delivered, there needs to be movement forward on these issues. The time for talk has passed (well, by the end of the Conference it will have).



*ICVA Secretariat  
25 January 2008*

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<sup>7</sup> Slim, Hugo, “Global welfare: A realistic expectation for the international humanitarian system?” in *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action: Evaluation Utilisation*, ODI, 2006, p.24.