



# talk back

The occasional Newsletter of ICVA

Volume 9-1, 15 June 2010

## SPECIAL ISSUE: APPOINTING THE NEXT UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF: IS THE RACE OVER BEFORE IT HAS BEGUN?

The time is upon us for the appointment of the next UN humanitarian chief, known formally as the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). As usual, names have been floating of people rumoured to be in the race to fill the position, following John Holmes' announcement in late February of his departure. Recent rumours suggest that it is up to one country to decide who will fill the position, which becomes vacant in August. Reportedly, a shortlist with names of candidates from that country has been passed to the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who may announce his decision at any moment.

The ERC position is one that can have a great impact on making humanitarian action more effective. Jan Egeland, John Holmes' predecessor, demonstrated that the ERC can put forward a vision of how the humanitarian community should operate. He launched a highly ambitious set of reforms, not just for the UN, but also for the broader humanitarian community. The ERC leads humanitarian response and advocates for populations caught in armed conflicts or hit by

disasters. S/He also appoints the UN's most senior in-country official in charge of humanitarian coordination, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), and chairs international coordination mechanisms. Given the increasingly complex environment in which humanitarian response is undertaken, there is a need for a strong and effective leader to be appointed as ERC.

### *Opening up the Appointment Process*

Many questions remain around the ERC appointment: Will the Secretary-General (SG) appoint the new ERC on the basis of merit or on the basis of the candidate's passport? Is the SG interviewing the shortlisted candidates to ascertain their views and understanding of humanitarian response? Is he checking references to find out how the candidates have performed in managing humanitarian organisations?

Sadly, it seems there is a risk that, for this appointment, Ban Ki-moon might not take the necessary steps to make the recruitment process open and transparent. In the absence of such a process, and given the impact of the ERC's position for humanitarian action, it seems appropriate for someone else to take up the gauntlet. Outside pressure from NGOs, which together are the largest operational humanitarian players, seems to be the only way to push for an appointment based on qualifications and experience.

### *A Space for Potential Candidates to 'Talk Back'*

As done previously, ICVA is offering a public forum for (potential) candidates to write about how they would take up the challenge of the ERC post by expressing their views on the position and how they foresee carrying out the job. The responses will be brought to the attention of the Secretary-General so that, hopefully, he can take a better informed decision. ICVA will also make all contributions publicly available as we receive them (details further below). After all, populations affected by disasters and armed conflict have the right to know who will be the UN's highest official in charge of coordinating

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the operations that seek to alleviate their suffering and restore their dignity.

### ***The Challenges Facing the Next ERC***

The response to the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti on 12 January 2010 saw masses of organisations and other well-intentioned actors flocking to the island to assist the affected population in their struggle for survival. Coordinating such an operation is fraught with challenges and problems and even the most seasoned ERC may struggle to put the right structures and people in place on the ground. Among these challenges are not only the question of the division of labour – who will do what and where – but also how to manage relations with the government, itself largely incapacitated by the earthquake, and which may not necessarily have the confidence of its population. While Haiti may be unique because of the scale of the disaster and the numbers of agencies that arrived on the scene, these questions of a division of labour and how to manage relations with the government of the affected country are seen in many crisis situations. These are but a few of the many challenges that the new ERC will have to address.

Without wanting to give the responding potential candidates too much help, we thought it would be useful to at least highlight some of the major challenges – from an NGO perspective – that the next ERC will face. Hopefully, candidates will not only address these issues, but will also provide readers with more insight as to their vision for the ERC post and for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which the ERC leads.

### ***What's Different Now?***

At the time of the appointment of John Holmes, a number of the issues that ICVA had highlighted (in “*Talk Back*” Volume 8-1, 8 December 2006 <[www.icva.ch/doc00001982.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00001982.html)>) are still relevant today. Independent and impartial humanitarian action continues to be challenged by governments and other actors. Rising insecurity makes it difficult for humanitarian agencies to access populations in need in many countries. At the same time, political or military objectives too frequently dominate the UN’s missions, calling into doubt its motivations to also be a humanitarian player. The perception that exists in some parts of the world that humanitarian agencies are part of a Western agenda must be contradicted, which is why humanitarians should remain separate from other actors. Without a strong voice advocating for an independent identity, it will be increasingly difficult for humanitarian organisations to access those in need of assistance and protection.

In 2006, we wrote about the future challenges facing the humanitarian community: those concerns remain equally relevant today. While some progress has been made in terms of preparing the humanitarian community for the impacts of climate change or in assisting populations affected by disasters in urban settings, for example, we have a considerable way to go. Disaster preparedness, not to mention disaster risk reduction, continue to be the orphans of the humanitarian community. Despite clear

evidence that there will be a significant return on investments in these areas, it continues to be difficult to get adequate funding for disaster preparedness. National and local actors are often best placed to work on disaster preparedness and risk reduction, but funding is often difficult for these actors to access, particularly from donor governments. A much higher investment in these activities is needed if the effectiveness of humanitarian action is to increase. We hope that those interested in the position will provide us with their views on the challenges for the humanitarian community and the actions needed to address these challenges.

### ***Being a Strong Advocate and Principled Negotiator***

The UN Security Council is a key arena in which the ERC can raise humanitarian concerns. John Holmes did so repeatedly on countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan. He also continued to brief the Council on the protection of civilians, a powerful report that seeks commitments from UN Member States to do a better job in honouring their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

More general humanitarian diplomacy should not be forgotten: the ERC can provide a strong voice on behalf of those affected by conflicts or disasters. Reminding all actors of the principles by which humanitarian organisations work is another area where the ERC’s voice can be useful. NGOs witness a frequent return to the sovereignty and non-interference arguments of States in times of human suffering, as we saw last year in Sudan when 13 agencies were forced to close down their operations in Darfur. In those situations, the ERC must play a leadership role in advocating for humanitarian access. The balance between maintaining good relations with governments and speaking out on humanitarian concerns is a delicate, but critical one. We would like to hear from the candidates where they stand with regards to this balance.

### ***Process or Outcomes?***

One of the biggest challenges for the next ERC will be to make sense of humanitarian coordination. With the number of agencies in Haiti, the earthquake response presented a certain disorder, which raises concerns about aid efficiency and effectiveness. The question is whether the 60 or so coordination meetings that take place in Port-au-Prince on a weekly basis help to create the framework and strategy for putting all actors on the same page in terms of the response. This question is particularly poignant in Haiti, but is by no means unique to that situation. Nowadays, much of coordination seems to be focussed on processes, instead of on outcomes.

Holmes’ predecessor, Jan Egeland, put in place a new way in which agencies coordinate their work and appointed UN agencies to lead “clusters” for various areas of humanitarian response. While these clusters have become the way in which agencies work together in many situations, a question remains whether coordination has not been overdone. As a recent evaluation noted, the benefits of the clusters only “slightly outweigh” the costs. The real issue seems to be the leadership of both the clusters and, higher up the chain, the leadership provided

by the Humanitarian Coordinator. The strengthening of this latter function was also part of Egeland's reform process started in 2005. Yet, five years later, too little progress has been made on this part of the reforms. When Holmes came to the post, his approach to the reforms was "evolution, not revolution" and so the implementation continued.

An October 2009 report published by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (of which ICVA is a part) noted the need for leadership to be given a much greater focus in the reform agenda <[www.icva.ch/doc00003914.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00003914.html)>. Very few of the HCs that have been appointed in recent years have extensive experience in humanitarian response. Most HCs have a diplomatic and/or long-term development background. They are generally judged on the quality of their relations with the government of the country in which they are stationed, instead of on what impact they have on the lives of those in need.

The one "pillar" of Egeland's reform process that has yet to be evaluated remains that of the Humanitarian Coordinators. Given that this role is pivotal in so many humanitarian responses, it would seem about time that the ERC backed ongoing NGO calls to evaluate the HC pillar of reform so that necessary improvements can be made. Again, we hope that candidates will share their thoughts on the issue of humanitarian leadership.

#### ***Putting OCHA Back on Track***

The ERC is also the chief executive of OCHA, the office that is meant to support her/him in the job. Worldwide these days, OCHA has nearly 1,900 staff and a budget of almost US\$240 million. These are no small figures for an organisation whose job is 'just' coordination. In 2009, OCHA launched a strategic framework, but it has not yet been followed by institutional change. Internal alignment around OCHA's main functions – field coordination and advocacy – will certainly have to be a priority for the new ERC.

The functioning of OCHA's field offices, which play a critical role in sharing information and analysing data that helps operational agencies to understand unmet needs and the context, appear too dependent on the person heading the office. Usually in humanitarian agencies, an international headquarters exists to support field operations. In the case of OCHA, it seems to be the other way around, given the desires in New York and Geneva to feed the 'humanitarian system' with information, especially on available financial resources. A perennial issue in this context is the divide between the New York and Geneva offices. Geneva is often said to focus on field coordination, although its field support functions were largely moved to New York about five years ago. Yet the New York office is frequently forced to prioritise Security Council processes.

Probably the most critical internal issue for the new ERC will be OCHA's human resources management. S/He will need to find a way out of the UN Secretariat's staff rules and regulations which, reportedly, prevent it from appointing senior (field) staff on longer-term contracts.

Those restrictive rules seem to contribute to OCHA's Head of Office vacancies in the most critical capitals, such as Khartoum, Kinshasa, or Port-au Prince, sometimes even for prolonged periods of time. Clearly, high staff turn-over will also make it more difficult to build up an institutional knowledge and to instil a sense of corporate identity in OCHA staff. How will potential candidates deal with these looming management challenges?

#### ***Moving Towards Real Partnerships***

Partnership has been a much used word in the humanitarian community for the last several years, to the point of almost losing its real meaning. Do humanitarian agencies really want to determine priorities together or do they want to cooperate only when there is a contract in place? The relationships between international organisations, including international NGOs, and national or local agencies particularly must be improved. There is a broad sense in the humanitarian community that it remains too 'white.' Creating local ownership by "flipping the system" (as ICVA called it in its 2008 annual Conference) should see national and local actors in the driver's seat of humanitarian response.

Working in partnership with local and national humanitarian organisations will require more concrete outcomes in the years to come. Partnership, after all, was codified for humanitarians in the "Principles of Partnership," but putting partnership into real action requires further improvement. While many discussions have taken place around how international humanitarian organisations need to work better with local and national ones, partnerships still have a tendency to be more about window dressing than actual changes in practice. Making the rhetoric a reality remains a necessity and we are keen to know what the candidates intend to do in this respect.

#### ***A Merit-based Appointment, Please***

The candidates' views and approaches in addressing these and other challenges may help to determine which of them is best placed for the job. We hope that the Secretary-General will be guided by their contributions. This time, it is essential to have the ERC appointment made on the basis of qualifications and experience; not on the basis of political influence or sway. The impact of the ERC's job is one that is not limited to the world of UN agencies, which means that actors outside the UN have a legitimate stake in who is appointed. The position requires someone with the necessary stature to bring the humanitarian community together to respond to the increasing number of disasters that are likely in the coming years. Situations like the Haiti earthquake response, with massive humanitarian needs, require strong and effective leadership. Other, smaller, neglected crises also require similarly effective leadership. In either case, the humanitarian community is more likely to trust the leadership of someone who has relevant humanitarian experience and a demonstrated understanding of how to coordinate humanitarian response.

#### ***Learning from Past Experience***

The shift towards a merit-based appointment system, which started in 2005, should be taken up again by the

UN. In that year, then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, asked organisations, including ICVA, to provide him with the names of possible candidates for the position of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). He set up a panel, made up of representatives of various agencies (not just UN ones), to interview the candidates for that position. He provided, in his letter to ICVA, a list of criteria for the position. In addition, he released a shortlist containing eight names. He explained that these steps were part of new internal selection procedures and noted that “[w]e need to approach the choice of leaders for international institutions in a new way,” citing the UNHCR appointment as an example for future appointments.

ICVA offered candidates for the HCR position a platform to provide their views on the position and all eight candidates on the shortlist responded to ICVA’s call, with their views published in “Talk Back” 7-2, 30 March 2005 <[www.icva.ch/doc00001356.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00001356.html)> and “Talk Back” 7-2a, 14 April 2005 <[www.icva.ch/doc00001363.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00001363.html)>. This campaign in 2005 followed an earlier attempt in 2000, when ICVA also pushed for an open and transparent selection process of the UNHCR. At that time, three out of eight candidates responded. The improved UNHCR selection process in 2005 was a most welcome one and largely reflected the points that ICVA had put forward five years earlier.

Unfortunately, the 2005 example of the UNHCR recruitment was not followed when it came to the ERC appointment in 2007. ICVA tried to provide a similar open forum for candidates for the position of ERC with “Talk Back” 8-1, 8 December 2006 <[www.icva.ch/doc00001987.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00001987.html)>. In early 2007, however, the appointment of Sir John Holmes to the post by Ban Ki-moon was announced following a process of “horse-trading” where the UK government did not get the top job in the UN Department for Political Affairs, but instead got the head of OCHA position. The more transparent recruiting procedures for senior UN staff that Kofi Annan started introducing towards the end of his tenure as SG seem to have fallen by the wayside since his predecessor took over.

#### ***If the Shoe Fits....***

As noted in “Talk Back” 8-1 <[www.icva.ch/doc00001987.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00001987.html)>, “the post of ERC is probably one of the most unforgiving jobs in the humanitarian world.” Between advocating; coordinating a diverse, and not always willing, group of actors in humanitarian response; and leading OCHA, the role of ERC makes for a rather daunting task. Given the context in which humanitarian action takes place today, the job is not likely to get easier in the coming years. It can, however, be one of the most influential positions at the international level that can push for more effective humanitarian responses and that can advocate for more accountability to affected populations, instead of just to donor governments.

Candidates who feel that they are up for the task now have the opportunity to show the public – and

particularly the constituency for whom they are to work: affected populations and the humanitarian community – what they could bring to the table. By providing potential candidates with an open forum to articulate how they are qualified for the position and how they will take up the challenges facing the humanitarian community, as a whole, and facing the ERC, in particular, ICVA hopes to give the UN’s Secretariat and its Member States a gentle push in the direction of a merit-based appointment.

#### ***May the Best Candidate Win***

The ERC job is up for grabs and we look forward to hearing the views of each of the candidates. Submissions from candidates will be posted on the ‘What’s New’ page of ICVA’s website: <[www.icva.ch/whatsshot.html](http://www.icva.ch/whatsshot.html)> as they are received. If an appointment is not made this month, ICVA may publish the responses in a further issue of “Talk Back.” With this effort, we hope that the best qualified candidate will be appointed to the job by the UN Secretary-General through an open and transparent process. We also hope that UN Member States will take seriously the call for meritocracy to be the basis of their nominations.

*\* Candidates interested in the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator position should send their submissions to <[talkback@icva.ch](mailto:talkback@icva.ch)> as soon as possible. Responses will be posted on the ICVA website as received: <[www.icva.ch/whatsshot.html](http://www.icva.ch/whatsshot.html)>. Any questions should kindly be directed to the same address.*

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