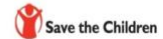


The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence
the humanitarian system



Reflections from the Experience of the Humanitarian Reform Officer NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project Ethiopia

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Background to Humanitarian Situation in Ethiopia

The scale of humanitarian needs and size of humanitarian operations in Ethiopia remain immense. Ethiopia is the second largest recipient of humanitarian donor assistance after Sudan in response to persistent humanitarian needs and donor recognition of the effects of the ongoing food crises, outbreaks of disease, and the impact of internal and external conflicts. Ethiopia also presents a unique context in which humanitarian and development objectives are closely intertwined with political agendas and where linkages between humanitarian and development structures are historically weak. It is precisely these demands that have made the application of the humanitarian reform agenda and roll-out of reform structures especially challenging. It also illustrates in particular the crucial need for strong, experienced humanitarian leadership to protect humanitarian principles and seek appropriate coordination with development programmes to ensure humanitarian aid is accountable and directed by identified needs.

This is not an easy task in a country characterised by a strong government that plays a key role in leadership of international and national humanitarian response efforts, as well as coordination and management of humanitarian activities. The international community and humanitarian partners have struggled to keep pace of evolving national governance structures² and to engage meaningfully in humanitarian dialogue with national actors. An ongoing move towards development oriented rhetoric on the part of donors and government, along with an increasingly restrictive NGO environment, have also contributed to a sidelining of humanitarian issues and discussion on needs in recent years.

Strong government involvement in humanitarian response policy is manifested most prominently by the absence of a Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP). The government does not participate in this standard humanitarian appeals process and instead carries out its own assessment with humanitarian partners participating in each region – the Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD) is thus the humanitarian sector's main tool for coordination, strategic planning and programming and also informs Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Humanitarian Response Fund (HRF) allocations in-country. While these assessments attract the close involvement of NGOs, donors and UN agencies, they are frequently contested on political, rather than humanitarian, grounds – meaning

¹ Disclaimer: This background paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the participating NGOs in the Ethiopia steering group, but is a personal reflection by the Humanitarian Reform Officer (HRO).

² Such as the recent Government of Ethiopia (GoE) Business Re-Engineering Process, which has important implications for the structure of aid architecture and disaster management/development policy frameworks in Ethiopia, for example the recent GoE 2010 five-year Growth and Transformation Plan.

negotiations to agree assessment figures can delay the publication of the bi-yearly HRD and delay donor responses.

In a humanitarian environment marked by strong donor presence and development (bilateral) programmes, humanitarian NGOs take on the role of junior partners with the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) and rely heavily on donors for leverage on access and humanitarian space issues with the government. The UN, while enjoying strong relationships with the GoE on the development agenda, struggles to represent humanitarian needs and policy issues with the government and often sees a silo approach in operations, with individual UN agencies negotiating bilaterally with government rather than on behalf of the wider humanitarian community.

The current mix of international donor humanitarian and development aid, linking closely with political agendas and the strong government structures in place to direct prioritisation of resources, have presented a complex environment for the effective roll-out of clusters (Ethiopia has a long-standing national system of sectoral coordination for emergencies and regional access is curtailed). The application of needs-based humanitarian pooled funds (the HRD needs assessment methodology is contentious and GoE sensitivities attached to the language of 'emergencies' abound) and the potential role of humanitarian leadership is severely constrained by political priorities. Conversely, Ethiopia also acts as a timely case-study for the limits of humanitarian reform ideals given the increasingly assertive role national governments are playing globally in the involvement of humanitarian response. Being attuned to the difficulties this places on the effective application of context-appropriate humanitarian reform structures and the need to sensitise national authorities to international humanitarian mechanisms (such as clusters and pooled funds) is crucial for the delivery of principled humanitarian action.

Objectives of the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project in Ethiopia: Coordination Case-Study

Background

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (NHRP) in Ethiopia has placed a significant priority on assessing the blockages to effective humanitarian coordination and on working wherever possible with OCHA to address these, placing a particular focus on ensuring NGO views inform new strategies and approaches. Within the coordination umbrella of the project activities, the Humanitarian Reform Officer (HRO) has invested significant capacity in working with NGOs and project partners to highlight recommendations which would serve to strengthen coordination structures and help support the Ethiopian Humanitarian Country Team (EHCT) fulfill its mandate as the primary humanitarian decision making, policy analysis and coordination body in Ethiopia. The NHRP's focus on coordination has placed a priority on addressing the following:

- the performance of the EHCT;
- reform of cluster system;
- strengthening NGO coordination;
- engagement of donors in humanitarian reform structures; and
- government relations.

Coordination in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the central pillars of the coordination architecture include: the EHCT, clusters, humanitarian financing and the recently established Humanitarian NGO (HINGO) Forum. The EHCT is the 'top layer' of the coordination architecture in Ethiopia and its capacity to fulfill its intended duties as the primary decision-making, policy analysis and coordination

body for the humanitarian community is contingent on the strength and complementarity of each 'layer' of the system which lies below.

Structurally, there is coherence, in relation to each of the 'pillars' of the coordination architecture (Humanitarian Country Team, clusters, etc.) in Ethiopia. Yet, the efforts of the EHCT, as a body which sits at the apex of the overall coordination structure, to ensure that the system is in a position to prepare and respond to humanitarian needs, are constantly challenged. One of the causes of this challenge is the recurrent disjuncture between the understanding of the range and scope of humanitarian needs, as well as the factors which underlie the cyclical nature of shocks, on the part of government and the humanitarian community. Preparedness and response, as well as strategy to promote early recovery and establish more effective linkages between the humanitarian and development wings of intervention, are contingent on strong analysis based on needs assessment and early warning information. However, political dynamics particular to the operational context are increasingly casting a shadow over the ability to assess needs in the country. Information and, more specifically, verifiable data about sectoral needs, is not readily available (especially regional needs) and this undermines the capacity of the EHCT to activate each pillar of the coordination system in a way that is strategically geared to meeting humanitarian needs in Ethiopia.

Challenges, achievements and lessons learnt

Below, the key challenges, approaches and lessons learnt from the NHRP Ethiopia in seeking to address specific coordination gaps are outlined, placing an emphasis on how capacity and accountability constraints were viewed through the lens of NGOs and on where achievements were secured for the benefit of NGOs seeking to engage more effectively in humanitarian coordination and related humanitarian reform structures.

i. Clusters

In Ethiopia, lines of accountability and the added value of clusters is, at times, unclear given the pre-existence of government Sectoral Task Forces (STF). An HRO NGO cluster assessment revealed that, three years after clusters were formally introduced at the federal level, there remains a limited understanding amongst NGOs of cluster arrangements, intended aims and mandates. Feedback from the NHRP highlights that purposes of meetings are not always clear and significant confusion exists about the role of clusters and there are significant misunderstandings around the separation (and potential duplication) of STF and cluster meetings.

NGOs are unclear as to the added value of clusters vis-à-vis STF meetings and of the relationship and linkages between the two coordination groups – this is evidenced by inconsistent levels of NGO attendance and participation at both cluster and STF meetings – especially by national and local NGOs (NNGOs). Furthermore, many NGOs feel there are too many coordination meetings; that the purpose of meetings is often unclear; and that levels of participation are inconsistent and representation is not always at the right level to facilitate timely decision-making. Coupled with complaints of meeting overload from NGOs, there is a marked lack of understanding as to whom clusters are accountable to (as reporting lines and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for clusters are often unclear) and how federal level coordination structures link to regional response mechanisms.

The added value of the clusters for the EHCT, aside from the obvious role that each cluster plays in terms of coordination of response to needs, is that each is uniquely positioned to provide the level of information and analysis that is required to support decision-making and policy orientation of the EHCT. Yet efforts to gain this information from cluster leads have led to difficulties owing to the weak level of resources attached to clusters to support management and facilitation (no cluster currently has dedicated technical cluster coordinator support). In practice, linkages between clusters and donors, the government and the EHCT are weak and clusters are characterised by variable operational effectiveness and usefulness to NGOs.

ii. NGOs

NGO coordination in Ethiopia has made important strides over the past year. The Humanitarian INGO Forum, with the support of the HRO, was established with the drafting and agreement by participating NGOs of Terms of Reference (TOR) in November 2009, which set out practical arrangements for more structured, collaborative NGO engagement with humanitarian partners in Ethiopia. The TOR outline an ambitious set of objectives and responsibilities including the creation of a HINGO Forum Steering Group and arrangements for engagement between the forum and external entities and mechanisms such as EHCT, HRF and GoE. The document also sets out new practical arrangements for strengthening the inclusivity of NGO coordination meetings, enhancing collaborative ways of working and improving the overall coherence and consistency of INGO representation and engagement on humanitarian issues.

The agreement of the TOR was an important step for the NGO humanitarian community in Ethiopia. By creating a HINGO Steering Group mandated with representing the wider HINGO Forum on the EHCT, the NGO community signalled a willingness and motivation to better coordinate and share information for the collective benefit of all agencies. Importantly, the visibility of the HINGO Forum has grown rapidly within the broader humanitarian community and continues to gain recognition as a credible interlocutor for non-INGO partners in Ethiopia (it is now frequently referenced by donors, UN officials and NNGO partners).

It is to the credit of the HINGO Steering Group that outreach to the wider NGO community has resulted in a significant expansion in HINGO meeting attendance (the membership contact list of the HINGO Forum currently stands at 44 agencies and continues to grow). Their strong representation at the EHCT is also consistently acknowledged by others (and has arguably motivated enhanced commitment to the Forum by other, non-NGO, members). The HINGO Steering Group has also been instrumental in ensuring NGO viewpoints inform priority-setting and strategic decision-making at the EHCT and has contributed to a strengthening of trust within the humanitarian community. Noteworthy successes of the HINGO Forum and the HINGO Steering Group in relation to NGO engagement in humanitarian reform structures in Ethiopia include:

- leading on the revision and redrafting of the EHCT TOR (and ensuring the *Principles of Partnership* (PoP) are referenced in the document);
- securing the membership of an additional NGO and three donors on the EHCT and promoting the need for stronger mutual accountability of the group;
- leading and steering the agenda for the EHCT Retreat in February 2010 (with the drafting of policy background papers) and setting priorities for the EHCT in absence of formal work-plan (assessments, access and architecture – now known widely within the Ethiopian humanitarian community as the ‘3As’);
- instituting transparent HRF rotation arrangements for NGO membership on the HRF Review Board;
- promoting advocacy coherence and encouraging HC action; sharing information relating to NGO access constraints (particularly in the Somali Regional State) and humanitarian needs;
- pushing for the establishment of new dialogue channels with the GoE via the EHCT and the HC;
- advocacy on appointment of the new HC with key national and international stakeholders; and
- briefing the incoming HC and successfully promoting the HINGO Forum as a vehicle for NGO dialogue on humanitarian issues.

Currently, the EHCT is the primary vehicle through which the HINGO seeks to engage and raise issues. The inclusion of donors on the EHCT has increased the likelihood of traction on the current '3A' priority areas, but the EHCT still remains a relatively inactive body in relation to decision-making, strategic planning and influencing humanitarian policy in Ethiopia. Therefore, it is important that the HINGO Forum moves forward by utilising other avenues of engagement, including NNGOs, international forums and the GoE – possibly seeking to establish new independent channels of NGO dialogue with the latter.

iii. **Donors**

The EHCT offers a unique means of steering dialogue on specific issues with relevant external actors and yet does not always maximise its relationship with donors in such a way that encourages them to exert full leverage with the government on challenging issues including access and assessments. In part, this is due to the difficulties inherent in identifying common positions and strategies to address recurrent problems which the humanitarian community can put on the table for discussion. Previously, the EHCT lacked a formal mechanism with donors through which it could engage to define areas of mutual priorities and to steer joint engagement with the government to address outstanding challenges. While UN and NGOs consistently interacted with donors through bilateral coordination channels, such as the Donor Advisory Group (DAG) Humanitarian Sub-Group and the various NGO-donor forums, the added value of the EHCT vis-à-vis donors was not maximised.

In March 2010, following advocacy efforts of NGO representatives, the EHCT invited three donors to join the membership³. This is in line with revised Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines and has helped considerably the humanitarian community to both inform the agenda of donors and to explore options for future synchronised government advocacy. The entry of donors to the EHCT has been widely appreciated by NGOs as a means of strengthening the oversight of the group and accountability. It is hoped that, as a result of this donor presence, UN representatives will commit more fully to their responsibilities and incentivise UN agencies to increase their cluster accountabilities to the HC. It also marks an important step forward in promoting best partnership practice and improving humanitarian coordination and dialogue.

iv. **Government**

The effectiveness of the EHCT largely rests on its collective ability to positively influence government humanitarian policies, adapt strategies to reflect the capacities of government structures and to ensure full engagement of development partners. The EHCT also has a primary responsibility to safeguard the independence of humanitarian action and ensure political and other agendas are kept separate from humanitarian objectives.

To fulfill this role, it is crucial that the EHCT ensures it works cohesively and in such a way that enables core priorities to be raised with government – this is seen to be the primary added value of the group by NGOs, as it offers the chance to be a vehicle for dialogue channels and space to discuss humanitarian needs at the right levels of government. The EHCT is also equipped with technical expertise to support the government in their efforts to address chronic vulnerability, support early recovery and prevent new crises. NGOs believe that this added value should be better defined to, and then utilised by, the government.

Yet, to achieve this partnership, further trust-building efforts and consistent engagement at all levels of government are required. This will help improve interaction, trust and confidence between the EHCT and government. The NGO membership on the EHCT has consistently pushed for formal meeting arrangements to be instituted by the EHCT with GoE and for these meetings to happen consistently and represent a key forum within the overall coordination structure. While the HC has managed to facilitate one EHCT-GoE meeting, significant work remains to ensure these become a permanent feature of coordination architecture in Ethiopia.

³ Currently DFID, USAID and ECHO sit on the EHCT with a rotation arrangement in place with other donors on the donor Humanitarian Group for future membership arrangements

Next Steps and Recommendations

The NHRP in Ethiopia has come up against a number of barriers in relation to effectively engaging NGOs in humanitarian reform structures, most notably the difficulties of engaging NNGOs in a context that typically places low emphasis on partnership with local NGOs and strengthening humanitarian accountability structures in an environment characterised by strong government and a politically charged development approach. That said, the NHRP has added value to the humanitarian community at large by:

- promoting shared issues of concern, such as coordination;
- working closely with all humanitarian stakeholders to facilitate greater partnership in practice; and
- seeking to raise the profile of NGOs (including local NGOs via the Ethiopia NGO consortium association, CCRDA) in organising and contributing more effectively to humanitarian reform mechanisms.

Recommendations

Engaging NNGOs

The NHRP in Ethiopia has invested significant energy in exploring best practice in partnership between international NGOs (INGOs) and NNGOs, providing capacity-building for both on practical emergency project management and humanitarian accountability and using such training workshops to facilitate discussion around the principles of partnership. The HRO has also sought to ensure the Consortium of Christian Relief and Development Association (CCRDA), as the main Ethiopian NGO membership agency, is engaged with formal and informal humanitarian coordination bodies, such as the HINGO Forum and the EHCT. Yet, overall, there continues to be a lack of capacity for NNGO engagement in coordination bodies with UN and donors and it continues to be a key challenge for the HRO to reach out to NNGOs on a consistent basis and identify an appropriate vehicle for this.

- All humanitarian actors need to ensure further outreach efforts are made to NNGOs to ensure humanitarian organisations are supporting local NGOs and involving local communities in humanitarian action wherever possible. This requires concerted effort on part of all actors, including GoE, donors, the UN and INGOs.
- Incentives for enhancing NNGO engagement must be explored and acted on, such as reforming HRF access eligibility rules for NNGOs so that they are able to utilise the fund and have motivation to engage in cluster/STF coordination meetings.

Streamlining Multiple Coordination Forums:

While the NHRP has made strides in bringing NGO perspectives on the cluster system to the table and highlighted a number of areas in which important improvements could be made, progress is hindered by the lack of engagement from OCHA in pushing these recommendations and, ultimately, the weak level of oversight and inertia from the EHCT, as well as strong leadership to push forward necessary reforms.

- The EHCT must agree and issue context-appropriate country-level guidance on how to streamline the cluster system so as to avoid duplication of the work of Task Forces, better involve government bodies and NNGOs in clusters, enhance regional coordination efforts and strengthen accountability. Engagement of NNGOs in coordination bodies should be a key benchmark by which success is measured.
- The HC must request cluster leads to strengthen their commitment to provide updates to inform and guide the agenda of the EHCT and take measures to increase accountability of clusters to the HC and EHCT. If agreed, further cluster support

capacity is required, donors should encourage the HRF to fund dedicated sectoral coordinators.

- In order to preserve and build on productive relations with the GoE, the HC should renew efforts to institute regular meetings of the EHCT and government in order to highlight EHCT priorities and broker agreement on action points. As members of the EHCT, donors should leverage influence at the highest levels to ensure the EHCT is viewed as a credible humanitarian body by the GoE.
- The EHCT should institute a monitoring and evaluation process, such as a bi-yearly reviewed work-plan and peer accountability mechanisms between members, to enhance EHCT accountability, encouraging consistent commitment to high level attendance and track progress of (and hold agencies accountable to) the body against TOR and ensure that meetings go beyond information sharing and result in decisions.

Supporting NGO Coordination:

The support of the HRO to the newly established HINGO Forum has helped ensure NGOs can more effectively and strategically address areas of humanitarian concern, such as poor coordination, partnership and accountability, in a more collaborative and cohesive manner. Importantly, the HINGO Forum has illustrated the importance of effective NGO coordination to affect positive change. A cohesive NGO community can be a positive force for influencing humanitarian policy at the country level and promoting partnership with external partners, such as UN, donors and government.

Moreover, NGO coordination can help achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency, ensuring agencies are collaborating (on advocacy, programming and information-sharing) for collective benefit of the wider humanitarian community and ultimately delivering more positive outcomes for affected populations. However, NGO coordination rests against a number of considerable barriers. In Ethiopia, these constraints are presently shaped by a lack of resources and dedicated support for the HINGO Forum, as well as weak entry-points for dialogue with external partners.

- Further recognition from donors is required for the importance of NGO coordination support to engage more effectively in humanitarian structures in Ethiopia and financial support should be provided to ensure the HINGO is able to acquire dedicated capacity to coordinate the work of the group and act as a focal point for sharing information relating to humanitarian coordination.
- The HINGO Forum needs to strengthen the sustainability and coverage of its engagement in humanitarian coordination structures, widening membership to NNGOs and focusing on how to incorporate greater programme learning into policy and advocacy efforts at the EHCT level.