

# talk back

The Newsletter of ICVA

Volume 8-1, 8 December 2006

---

---

## SELECTING THE NEXT UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF: THE WORST RECRUITING CRISIS?

**T**he rumours are already flying as to who will be the next UN Humanitarian Chief. Even before the date of Jan Egeland's departure was announced, the speculation had begun as to who would take over one of the top jobs in the humanitarian world. Three years ago, before Egeland came into the position, officially called the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), it was hardly one for which many countries would fight. With the profile that Egeland has given to the position, the number of interested countries and candidates has increased.

The appointment process for this post, in the past, has been the traditionally secretive political "horse-trading" game for which the UN is, sadly, so well-known. The likelihood of this practice continuing is great, given that the ERC is also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, a senior UN Secretariat position. UN Member States trade such positions very seriously. The difference with this USG post is that the other hat the person wears - ERC - is a function in which the broader humanitarian community has a stake.

As was done with the selection of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), ICVA is again

pushing for an open and transparent process for the selection of a senior UN humanitarian official, which should include the application of the UN's senior management appointment procedures. This process should involve a set of known criteria and qualifications for the position, the publication of a short-list of candidates, and an interview panel with NGO participation, as was done in the case of the HCR. Unfortunately, there are currently no publicly available official criteria or qualifications for the post.

As we did with the HCR selection, we are offering interested candidates a platform to express how they expect to meet the challenges facing the ERC. In his/her capacity as Chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which brings together the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RC/RC) Movement, NGOs, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank, the ERC has an influential role to play for the broader humanitarian community. These stakeholders should also be consulted on who gets chosen for this post.

This issue of *Talk Back* presents some of the current and future challenges for the next ERC, seen from an NGO perspective. Many of the issues that the new person will have to tackle are a direct result of the efforts of the current ERC. Other challenges raised in this *Talk Back* have yet to be addressed, but are considerations that - again from an NGO point of view - will need to be taken into account in the coming years. A number of qualifications for the post are also highlighted throughout this piece.

Candidates are invited to write back addressing these issues and others not raised here. They will also

*see over*

### Table of Contents

#### In the News

- Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief:  
The Worst Recruiting Crisis 1
- CAR: Lost in the Midst of Bigger Crises 7

#### Opinion

- Humanitarian Reconfiguration 9
- Protection: A Good Idea Gone too Far? 14

## IN THE NEWS

# Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief: The Worst Recruiting Crisis?

*continued from previous page*

hopefully describe how they meet the qualifications, so that interested stakeholders can see how they will approach one of the most difficult positions in the humanitarian world. The submissions should be sent to [talkback@icva.ch](mailto:talkback@icva.ch) by **8 January 2007** and they will be published in the next edition of *Talk Back*. By providing such a forum, ICVA aims to inject a measure of transparency into the selection process of the next ERC.

### ***Does Vision Lead to Change?***

The ERC's core business is supposed to be humanitarian coordination. The long-standing challenge for the ERC has been how to deliver on this mandate in the face of well-known gaps, duplication, and competition, which exists even between UN agencies. Leadership and vision are critical for the ERC to be respected within, and outside, the UN system. The next ERC has a tough act to follow, as Egeland has set a new standard.

Egeland will be remembered most for the humanitarian reform process that he started in late 2004. The failure of the majority of UN and non-UN humanitarian agencies to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the crisis in Darfur, Sudan in the first half of 2004 prompted Egeland to propose a number of measures to reform the humanitarian system.

Coming to the end of Egeland's term, one must ask how successful his vision of reform has been in evoking much needed change. The new ERC may want to build on the work done on the coordination architecture that Egeland is leaving behind. S/He may also want to divert the course of parts of the reform process that have been less successful.

### ***Talk Back Editorial Team***

Manisha Thomas, Editor-in-Chief, ICVA Policy Officer  
Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop, ICVA Coordinator

Myke Leahy, Editorial Assistant, ICVA Information Officer

### ***Clusters: A Mixed Blessing?***

The main, and most debated, part of Egeland's reform process has been the cluster approach, which envisioned clearer sectoral responsibilities to be delivered in a predictable manner. Originally clusters were conceived as a gap-filling mechanism for situations involving internally displaced persons (IDPs). When the cluster approach was tabled at the IASC Working Group (WG) in July 2005, certain clusters were created specifically for IDP situations, while others were not. The result has been a great deal of confusion about whether the clusters are meant to fill gaps or to create a different coordination structure.

A quick cost-benefit analysis of the cluster approach might suggest that the clusters have been a mixed blessing. On the positive side are more (some say unprecedented) opportunities for dialogue and partnership between the UN, RC/RC Movement, and NGOs and, in some cases, improved presence on the ground. The introduction of the accountability principle that came with the cluster approach has also made it possible for the ERC to better push his operational UN colleagues into action. Less positive are the clusters' process-orientation; the bureaucratic machinery of matrices, capacity-mapping, and action plans that came with cluster roll-out; and the risk of non-UN agencies being co-opted into a single coordination framework that does not allow for different modes of action.

The litmus test for the clusters will be an evaluation, to be carried out during 2007, which will look at the impact of the clusters in improving humanitarian conditions on the ground. Improved presence and coordination do not necessarily equal increased impact. For evaluations to measure impact, they need to have a baseline and a set of indicators against which to measure progress. The baseline, however, was never agreed upon and, as such, indicators do not exist. As a result, there will be little, or no, basis upon which to assess the impact of a cluster on improving humanitarian response. The next ERC will be faced with having to make a judgement call as to the value

*see next page*

## Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief: The Worst Recruiting Crisis?

*continued from previous page*

of clusters, given that attributing all improvements in a humanitarian response to the clusters can hardly be considered an honest appraisal.

### **An Agenda for Real Reform?**

Global threats and hazards will pose serious challenges to humanity and are perhaps more important for the new ERC to address than the current reforms. The reform process, unfortunately, has failed to look at the possible implications for humanitarian agencies of broader trends and developments. Climate change and global warming; migration and urbanisation; (potential) pandemics (like HIV/AIDS and avian flu); environmental degradation; increased levels of vulnerability due to globalisation and/or marginalisation; and the consequences of the new polarisation between different cultures, resulting from the so-called war on terror, all will potentially require massive humanitarian responses. A report

*The stated goal of many organisations to “put ourselves out of business” is one that tends to ring hollow when the focus is much more on direct delivery than through supporting local actors.*

prepared for a group of NGOs by the Feinstein International Famine Center of Tufts University in 2004, called *Ambiguity and Change*, presents a helpful overview for the next ERC to promote an agenda for real reform in the humanitarian sector.<sup>1</sup>

### **Leaving a “Lighter Footprint”?**

One of the most refreshing goals when Egeland came into office was to make the international humanitarian system “less white” and to leave a “lighter footprint” when the internationals left. Such signals made it seem like there would be a push to have more emphasis on building upon local capacity, instead of the oft-seen pattern of Westerners coming in with their white four-by-four vehicles. Yet the focus of Egeland’s reform has been the international humanitarian community – a weakness that was raised by the non-UN. One of the biggest criticisms of the cluster approach has been the lack of

participation of local NGOs and local structures at the field level. The first response to humanitarian crises mostly comes from local and national structures, not from international agencies. The attention on these local structures, however, pales in comparison to that given to international organisations.

The real question that the new ERC needs to address is whether the international humanitarian system is prepared to change its way of working or if it can even afford to do so. Too many evaluations and studies continue to report on the same mistakes made by the humanitarian community, particularly the failure of international agencies to involve local actors and communities in the response.

Strengthening local capacities and supporting local actors is much less visible than delivering assistance directly, which, from both a publicity and fundraising point of view, is more appealing (or perhaps more necessary) for international humanitarian actors. The stated goal of many organisations to “put ourselves out of business” is one that tends to ring hollow when the focus is much more on direct delivery than through supporting local actors.

### **Making OCHA less Western**

As the head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Egeland has made efforts to make the organisation “less white,” but it is an uphill struggle. Being an advocacy and coordination body, OCHA requires staff who have the ability to communicate effectively in English, can churn out numerous policy papers, can write convincing speeches, and can efficiently facilitate coordination meetings. Those who are anglophones and have a Western education appear to have an advantage, especially as many Western universities have well-established links with the UN through internship programmes and/or active alumni networks. The challenge for the next ERC will be to tap into other networks and OCHA’s pool of talented national staff.

OCHA is not operational in the traditional sense (of implementing programmes), nor is it meant to maintain a long-term presence in emergencies, but it

*see over*

<sup>1</sup> Feinstein International Famine Center, “Ambiguity and Change,” Tufts University, 2004, <[http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/ambiguity\\_and\\_change.pdf](http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/ambiguity_and_change.pdf)>.

## IN THE NEWS

### Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief: The Worst Recruiting Crisis?

*continued from previous page*

could benefit from some of the same human resources policies as operational agencies. By improving its human resources policies at the field level, and instituting policies to retain and train national staff, OCHA should be able to better help national staff move into international posts.

#### ***OCHA: To Serve the ERC or the Field?***

Over the past years, there have been a number of changes made in terms of where OCHA is located and, it seems, in the focus of OCHA's desk officers. There has been a massive shift of the desk officers covering complex emergencies to New York, with those covering natural disasters remaining in Geneva. At the time that the move was announced, there was much concern expressed by a number of humanitarian partners about the potential politicisation of OCHA's work. The move of desk officers to New York was seen as a clear signal that Egeland saw their role as being primarily to support his advocacy, particularly *vis-à-vis* the Security Council. The planned move of the natural disasters desk officers to New York is a further sign of this viewpoint.

There are a number of practical difficulties attached with moving the bulk of OCHA's headquarters to New York – the main one being the ability to support OCHA's field offices. The very fact that New York wakes up late in the day for most offices dealing with complex emergencies in Africa and Asia reduces the ability of desk officers to adequately support OCHA's field offices, as has already been witnessed. Whether OCHA desk officers actually support their field colleagues is an issue that also needs to be addressed. The current responsibilities advertised for a Humanitarian Affairs Officer, who also acts as a desk officer, do not seem to include much (if any) field support.

#### ***Spelling IDP***

Respected leadership in coordination with NGOs comes with operational experience and a thorough understanding of humanitarian affairs. Unfortunately, the widespread poor performance in the area of humanitarian affairs by UN Resident Coordinators

(RCs) who have acted as Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) has not helped. Many of them were given an HC hat when they had no humanitarian experience. As a senior NGO official once described such persons, "they cannot even spell the word IDP."

The collaborative approach to IDPs has been cited widely as failing to assign responsibility to agencies for responding to IDPs. As some have pointed out, however, the collaborative approach, as such, may not be at fault for IDPs regularly lacking protection and assistance. The lack of competent HCs may have played an important factor in the so-called failure of this approach. Few HCs were found willing to take on governments, which are often part of the problem in IDP situations. As one NGO representative pointed out, "the clusters would have been unnecessary, if HCs had done their job."

***A bargaining chip for more NGO buy-in into the reform process has been the opening up of a pool of HCs to candidates from the non-UN community.***

#### ***Appointing HCs***

The ERC's job is to appoint HCs in consultation with the IASC. Given that many of the reform proposals are interdependent, Egeland saw that strengthening the HC function had to be included. A bargaining chip for more NGO buy-in into the reform process has been the opening up of a pool of HCs to candidates from the non-UN community. Several of the non-UN candidates who are part of the HC pool want to be deployed exclusively as HCs.

The UN system, and particularly OCHA, finds itself in a difficult position. The UN party line has been to combine the two positions of Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator in one person. Separating the HC and the RC has been the exception, not the rule. NGOs, for years, have been pointing to the weaknesses of HCs and pushing for their separation from RCs. The latest proposal in improving the appointment of separate HCs has been the formulation of a set of criteria under which separation could be envisaged. The new ERC may want to take

*see next page*

## IN THE NEWS

### Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief: The Worst Recruiting Crisis?

*continued from previous page*

up the suggestion to establish a small inter-agency committee that could decide when these criteria apply. Otherwise, based on the UN's coherence agenda, the pressure to follow the UN party line of combined RC/HCs will likely grow.

#### **Coherence or Humanitarian Partnership?**

The UN, itself, is at a crossroads, with a new Secretary-General about to take up office and the *Delivering as One* report on the UN's agenda. It is concerning that the report did little to take into consideration the views of non-UN humanitarian actors and that the High-Level Panel did not even meet with the IASC, which is often described as the main humanitarian coordination body. ICVA tried to gain access to the Panel that wrote the report, but had no luck. What was the ERC's role, as Chair of the IASC, in pushing the concerns of humanitarian actors with the Panel and then how seriously were any of those views taken?

The coherence agenda that is likely to be pursued by the UN will pose one of the biggest challenges for the next ERC. The push to have the UN respond as a coherent whole generally results in the political agenda of the UN being primary. Humanitarian goals become secondary, if not subsumed, by the political and development agendas. The post of ERC is meant to serve the broader humanitarian community, but how will the new ERC handle the pressure to be part of "one UN," while at the same time defending humanitarian principles and action?

#### **Is the System Ready for Diversity?**

The ERC's role *vis-à-vis* the non-UN humanitarian community is more complicated. The relationship of the non-UN humanitarian community with the UN system is framed by their independence and impartiality. Whereas Egeland had some expectation that the 10 largest international NGOs would buy

into his reform proposals, many of them did not accept his proposals as marching orders. They prefer "coordination with" the UN system, instead of being "coordinated by" the UN. This subtle distinction in words can make a world of difference in relationships.

The efforts by Egeland to reform the humanitarian system have ruffled more than a few feathers, given the manner in which the reform was pushed through. The humanitarian community needs an ERC who is not afraid to move the system forward, but s/he must be able to do so in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that not all humanitarian actors work or think like the UN system.

The diversity of the humanitarian community is one of its greatest strengths. There should not be a "one-size-fits-all" approach to humanitarian action, nor should all humanitarian actors be expected to respond in the same manner. The ability of the humanitarian community to respond to the variety of needs in different manners, while following basic principles, allows for a better overall response.

Dialogue in the humanitarian community is essential. One objective that Egeland seemed to have with the reform process was to have a more "coherent" humanitarian NGO community. The expectation that all NGOs should agree on issues and respond in the same way is unrealistic, given the diversity that exists. As Angelo Gnaedinger, Director-General of the ICRC asked at the ICVA Conference earlier this year, "Diversity is valued in every other sphere of life, why is the humanitarian sector supposed to be different?"<sup>2</sup>

One way in which the new ERC can show his/her commitment to collaboration with the non-UN humanitarian actors and to diversity is to invest in the process around the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP). The Platform (which came out of the 12-13 July 2006 meeting between the heads of humanitarian organisations) brings the three main families of the humanitarian system together – NGOs, the RC/RC Movement, and the UN – to

<sup>2</sup> Angelo Gnaedinger, "The Value of Diversity," Keynote address at the ICVA conference "NGOs: The Principles and Politics of Humanitarian Action," 1 February 2006. <<http://www.icva.ch/doc00001661.html>>.

*see over*

**IN THE NEWS**  
**Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief:  
The Worst Recruiting Crisis?**

*continued from previous page*

find ways of working better to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The unique aspect of the GHP is that it brings the three families together on a more equitable basis, which is a better foundation for partnership and dialogue.

Worryingly, a number of donors have been quite keen in following Egeland's line of thinking in terms of bringing NGOs in-line with each other and in terms of trying to "reign" them in.

There is an often-described "proliferation of NGOs," which needs to be countered. The reality is that the large numbers of NGOs are seen in high-profile emergencies, which happen once every three years or so. In most humanitarian responses, like in the Central African Republic (*see article in this issue*), there is a lack of humanitarian actors, including NGOs, responding. Donors themselves, almost ironically, have contributed, in a way, to the proliferation of NGOs in high profile crises – the amounts of money made available in short periods of time provide the perfect breeding ground for new NGOs to be created to respond.

### ***Moving past Sound-bites***

If the outgoing ERC is to be praised for one achievement, it has to be his ability to make the international headlines. Never before has an ERC been so vocal and visible in calling the world's attention to human suffering. Egeland's ability to shine the spotlight on crises, such as Darfur and northern Uganda, has been thanks to his exceptional skill to portray these humanitarian crises in terms that are understandable to the general public. The parallels he made with historic landmark events also helped to gain the concern and interest of those not usually abreast of humanitarian emergencies. Perhaps his most famous historic parallel was the call for a "second Berlin air-bridge" to earthquake-hit Pakistan in October 2005.

Being an advocate of humanitarian issues and an excellent communicator are clearly qualifications the new ERC needs. The person should be asked, however, how s/he intends to communicate and what kind of messages s/he will deliver. Given their complexity, many humanitarian crises are not easily portrayed in sound-bites.

### ***Which is the Worst Crisis?***

Darfur and northern Uganda have clearly been on the top of Egeland's advocacy list. But how many

times can one label a crisis as the "worst ever" or call a relief effort "a race against time?" How will the new ERC decide on which countries to focus his/her attention? There are certainly a number of neglected emergencies in need of more attention. While the international media most

likely will not have the time for detailed explanations, a fatigue may also set in if the ERC's messages are not sufficiently evidence-based or balanced in terms of attributing failure. Analysis is critical in pointing fingers to those who fail to meet their responsibilities. This finger-pointing is certainly a role for the new ERC to play.

While Egeland has been great at bringing attention to northern Uganda, there are questions of where the humanitarian advocacy stops and political engagement begins. Egeland received criticism for recently meeting with the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, a war criminal indicted by the International Criminal Court. Mediation and peace negotiations are certainly tasks for the UN, but should the ERC be playing such a role, instead of the political wing of the UN?

### ***For Whom Does the ERC Speak?***

Related to this point, candidates should also provide their views on whether they feel the ERC should act as a spokesperson for the broader humanitarian community. Does the ERC's leadership role give the person a right to speak on behalf of this community?

*continued on page 11*

## CAR: LOST IN THE MIDST OF BIGGER CRISES

**A** little country in the heart of Africa surrounded by huge crises: the Central African Republic (CAR). CAR is not often spoken about in humanitarian circles, even though humanitarian needs go unmet in the country. How is it that a country bigger than France can be neglected when there is a potential crisis emerging and the situation will only worsen if the humanitarian response is not stepped up?

Central African Republic has seen a serious increase in the number of people being displaced inside the country since the beginning of the year: from 50,000 to an estimated 150,000. There are some 50,000 Central African refugees in Chad and an estimated 30,000 more in Cameroon, according to recent UNHCR reports. The humanitarian response in CAR, however, has hardly been commensurate with the numbers of people that are being displaced and living in fear. CAR seems to be easily forgotten when it has neighbours like Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, which are all in the midst of their own humanitarian crises.

Over recent months, fighting between government forces and armed groups has been increasing in the northern parts of CAR. In the north-east, armed groups had taken over a number of towns, some of which in recent days have subsequently been bombed by French military planes in support of the Central African government. There have been rumours that the armed men were backed by the Sudanese, a charge that has been denied. In the north-west, another armed group and government forces have been engaged in fighting. The Central African government has received offers of support from the Chadian government in this area. As a result, the north-west has a mix of armed men in the area, including bandits (*coupeurs de route*) that terrorise villages from time to time.

Hundreds of houses have been systematically burned in the north-west. The population fled when their villages were attacked and much of the population is too frightened to move back to their homes. Large numbers are now living in the forest in fear, with some returning to their villages during the day, but fleeing as soon as they hear the sound of an oncoming vehicle. The people who do come out eventually to speak with you are living in a palatable state of

fear, with the worry that they will be revisited by more armed men, given that they have undergone atrocities. Parents are worried about sending their children to school, saying “we are scared that they will be attacked again.”

### ***Need for More Analysis***

One of the biggest challenges with being able to truly understand the situation in CAR is the lack of definitive analysis. There has been a dearth of political analysis of the situation and only a limited number of reports on the human rights violations. The human rights component of the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in CAR (BONUCA) has failed to adequately monitor the human rights situation in the north of the country, where there are ongoing human rights violations. To date, very few human rights NGOs have taken the time to research the atrocities that have occurred. Barely any governments seem to have CAR on their radar screens.

***Large numbers are now living in the forest in fear, with some returning to their villages during the day, but fleeing as soon as they hear the sound of an oncoming vehicle.***

### ***Too Little Presence***

This lack of attention, however, is one that is contributing to an inadequate humanitarian response. Even before there were humanitarian needs, there was a development crisis. CAR falls sixth from the bottom of the 2006 Human Development Index. Yet, the number of development NGOs – particularly international ones – is extremely limited. Both COOPI and the local Caritas have had a long-standing presence in the country and have been responding to the humanitarian situation, partly with the support of UN agencies.

The only international (non-UN) humanitarian actors that have been responding to this latest wave of displacement have been the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) (with four sections). The Central African Red Cross has also been responding and now has support from the French Red Cross. Action contre la Faim has started up some programmes and two American NGOs are said to be beginning.

*see over*

## IN THE NEWS

### CAR: Lost in the Midst of Bigger Crises

*continued from previous page*

#### **Why Was the HC Pool Not Used?**

The UN is also responding, but the shift from a development mode to an emergency one has been shockingly slow. There was no UN Resident Coordinator (RC) in the country for eight months, and the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) was an agency head who was appointed *ad interim*. The appointment of the new RC/HC this summer has helped to improve coordination efforts. Whatever procedures held up the UN's appointment process for such a crucial post must be reviewed to ensure that such a situation does not occur again. There was a pool of Humanitarian Coordinators available as of 30 March 2006, which included the current RC/HC.

What caused the delay in making an appointment when there were clear humanitarian needs in the country and why did OCHA not move more quickly to use the HC pool?

***Perhaps all countries that have unmet needs should become cluster roll-out countries in 2007 to take advantage of the attention on clusters?***

#### **Ensuring Access**

The ability of humanitarian agencies to respond has been hampered in recent weeks with their movements being restricted by the government to areas where fighting is said to be occurring. There is a need for the authorities to allow humanitarian organisations unhindered access to be able to respond to needs. Without access to affected populations, it becomes impossible to provide a humanitarian response. Other governments could play an important role in sending a strong message to the Central African government about its responsibility to allow impartial humanitarian organisations access to affected populations.

#### **Responding to Needs?**

The humanitarian imperative and global impartiality do not exist in relation to CAR. For all the talk of impartiality, the reality for too many humanitarian actors is that humanitarian needs alone do not necessitate a response. The same concern can be applied to donors. Good Humanitarian

Donorship Principle Six commits donors to "Allocate humanitarian funding in proportion to needs..." The reality in CAR, and in other neglected crises, is that Principle 6 has been forgotten.

The response from several NGOs to the report of a November international mission to CAR<sup>3</sup> has highlighted one weakness of the humanitarian system: the ability for many to respond rapidly to a humanitarian situation is too reliant on donor and media attention. In situations like the tsunami, NGOs seemingly had little choice but to respond, given the spotlight on the situation. The result was that too many NGOs jumped into the response. In neglected situations, the impetus to start up operations is much less. NGOs find it more

challenging to start up a humanitarian programme in a country where they do not have a presence. With media and donor attention on a situation, money flows more quickly, making starting up operations easier.

#### **Getting Neglected Emergencies on the Map**

So how can countries, like CAR, be put on the map to get past this major flaw in the humanitarian system? A cynical point of view would suggest that "clusterising" the country would be one way. The efforts by the UN to reform the humanitarian system over the last year have meant that much of the attention has been on cluster roll-out countries. This disproportionate focus has come to the detriment of other countries, where humanitarian needs also exist. Perhaps all countries that have unmet needs should become cluster roll-out countries in 2007 to take advantage of the attention on clusters?

#### **The Collaborative Approach at Work**

To the credit of the new HC and the country team, the collaborative approach to internal displacement has been applied in CAR. The introduction of the cluster approach was seen by many as a response to the lack of application of the collaborative approach. Yet even without clusters, UNHCR has stepped up to take on IDP protection in CAR. The Humanitarian Community Partnership Team in CAR has decided that "the most important issues [in

*continued on page 11*

<sup>3</sup>The report of the international mission to the Central African Republic (4-11 November), which included UN agencies, a donor (Sweden), and an NGO representative (from the ICVA Secretariat) is available at <<http://www.icva.ch/doc00001965.doc>>.

## OPINION

# HUMANITARIAN RECONFIGURATION

By Elizabeth Ferris

As readers of ICVA's *Talk Back* will know, the issue of humanitarian reform has been hotly discussed over the past year and a half. Clusters have been introduced and "rolled out" in different countries. Many new working groups and sub-groups have been established. Numerous papers have been written and dozens – if not hundreds – of meetings have been convened. New terminology has been developed (e.g. "provider of last resort"), funding mechanisms have been revised and efforts are underway to strengthen the position of Humanitarian Coordinators. It is, indeed, a time of change in the way humanitarian work is organised and coordinated in the field. While there are many promising aspects of these reform initiatives, it is perhaps too early to tell whether they will have a significant impact on women, men, and children whose lives have been shattered by war or natural disasters.

In addition to the changes taking place in the humanitarian response system, new possibilities have opened up in the configuration of actors who shape international humanitarian policy. In the past, the UN took the lead and other actors – principally NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RC/RC) Movement – either followed along or opted out and continued to carry out their own programmes. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), for example, is made up of all the UN agencies working on humanitarian issues, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the World Bank, and three NGO consortia: ICVA, InterAction, and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR). While non-UN actors are included in the IASC, it is fair to say that the agenda of the IASC meetings is largely set by the UN side. It is also fair to say that when the NGO consortia have brought issues to the IASC table, these have been positively received.

And yet the reality on the ground is very different. A few of the large international NGOs have annual

budgets that are far greater than those of UN agencies. The national societies of the RC/RC Movement play a unique role in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The work of national and local NGOs is vital in immediate humanitarian response; studies have shown, for example, that most of those rescued after natural disasters are saved by local – not international – groups. And when security deteriorates and international staff are evacuated, local NGOs remain behind and try to carry on with their work.

Jan Egeland, the outgoing Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), recognised that humanitarian reform would be incomplete unless the larger humanitarian community became part of this process. He realised that a more thorough dialogue on how to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action was needed with them and so co-convened and co-chaired such a dialogue between the UN, NGOs, and the RC/RC Movement in July 2006. This meeting discussed options of working together in new ways.

Today, there are unprecedented opportunities for NGOs and the RC/RC Movement not only to influence international humanitarian policy, but to re-shape the way that decisions are made – to "re-configure" the international humanitarian community. For example, I can imagine a system that builds on the positive experiences of the IASC, but which is based on three equal pillars: the UN, the RC/RC Movement, and NGOs. Such a system would recognise the unique perspectives of each of the three pillars and would be grounded in respect for the contributions that each of the three pillars brings. The time is ripe for the non-UN actors to step forward and seize the initiative. As one with deep roots in the NGO community, I offer the following five bits of advice to NGOs seeking to engage more deeply with the humanitarian reform initiatives.

1. Don't be shy. NGOs have much to offer to humanitarian policy discussions. NGOs are far from perfect and have their own individual and collective

*see over*

## Humanitarian Reconfiguration

*continued from previous page*

problems, but they bring wonderful gifts to the international humanitarian community. Specifically, they bring passion and commitment rooted in their on-the-ground work with people in need of assistance. They bring critical analytical perspectives, creativity, and flexibility – all of which are sorely needed by the UN agencies.

I urge NGOs to take the initiative and suggest ways of improving the effectiveness of humanitarian action. NGOs have far more to offer than simply responding to, or criticising, UN initiatives.

2. Keep your identity. NGOs don't have to compete on UN terms or act/speak like UN bureaucrats in order to be effective. NGOs don't have to arrange meetings where the principals sit up front, while their (usually more knowledgeable) staff sit in the second tier of seats and take notes. NGOs have a distinctive, informal, and usually less-hierarchical style of work than the UN is used to. But the UN needs to be challenged, not only on the substance of humanitarian policy, but on its ways of working.

3. Get the broadest possible constituency involved. At the international level, NGOs lose credibility if the consortia don't speak on their behalf. The consortia need constant feedback from the field and particularly from national NGOs. But the reality is that present humanitarian policy discussions seem distant and abstract from those working with life-and-death issues in the field. NGO staff engaged in running programmes have little patience with the jargon and the working groups that have been created in the past year. And yet, their input into these discussions is essential. All three NGO consortia have tried to solicit such input, but they need to struggle with finding more creative ways of engaging NGOs who are not "in the loop."

4. Devote energy to ensuring the participation of Southern/Eastern NGOs in the global discussions. Everyone recognises that this participation is crucial,

but it is difficult to organise in a manner that goes beyond tokenism. One problem is that while an international NGO representative may be able to speak knowledgeably about Azerbaijan, Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, few national NGOs have this range of experience. However, they are usually much more knowledgeable about their own country situations than international NGOs and are closer to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and other people in need of humanitarian assistance.

One possibility of engaging Southern/Eastern NGOs would be to look at existing regional NGO networks, such as the Middle East Council of Churches, which

***While non-UN actors are included in the IASC, it is fair to say that the agenda of the IASC meetings is largely set by the UN side.***

has humanitarian programmes throughout the region. Another possibility is to support new or existing regional NGO networks. While a number of such networks exist, they tend to be perpetually struggling for funds. Another alternative is to structure

the agenda of global meetings to focus on particular country situations where Southern/Eastern NGOs can make meaningful contributions.

5. Work towards a united NGO voice. If NGOs really want to have an impact on international humanitarian policy, they need to speak with a united voice. But developing common NGO positions is difficult when NGOs' ability to access funds from donors depends on their ability to emphasise their uniqueness from other NGOs and the UN. But NGOs will have a far greater impact in humanitarian policy discussions when they work together.

This is a wonderful time for NGOs not only to influence humanitarian policy, but also to "reconfigure" the international humanitarian policy arena. I fervently hope that you seize the initiative and that you don't become "UN-ised" in the process. ♦

*\* Elizabeth Ferris is a Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. She previously worked on humanitarian issues with the World Council of Churches and served as the Chair of ICVA from 2003-2006.*

## IN THE NEWS

### Selecting the Next UN Humanitarian Chief: The Worst Recruiting Crisis?

*continued from page 6*

Recently, Egeland found himself in discussion with one of the largest NGOs working in Darfur, Sudan when he welcomed the agreement on the hybrid peacekeeping force, which would be deployed by the African Union, together with the UN. Given the Sudanese government's continued resistance to such a force, the NGO maintained that the ERC's position was putting at risk the security of all humanitarian staff on the ground. The perception of too close an association with the UN's peacekeeping efforts in Darfur might make these staff even more vulnerable to retaliation from forces backed by the Khartoum-based government. Clearly, this issue touches on the more fundamental relationship of NGOs with the UN, should the latter continue to walk the path of UN coherence and integrated missions.

Advocacy should not be solely left to the ERC, but should be part and parcel of the work of all of OCHA's staff. There is a concern as to how seriously the rest of OCHA takes that advocacy role. On IDPs, for example, OCHA was a very poor advocate until an inter-agency division on IDPs was housed in OCHA. Now that division is folding back into OCHA, but what has changed in OCHA to ensure that it will take IDP advocacy more seriously?

#### ***Takers for One of the Toughest Jobs Around?***

The post of ERC is probably one the most unforgiving jobs in the humanitarian world. Not only is the person expected to raise the profile of humanitarian situations, but the person is also expected to help ensure coordination among a group of actors that is far from homogeneous. There is also the task of managing OCHA and making sure that it can be present in humanitarian crises, even though it is not supposed to be an operational entity.

In the 1990s, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, made UNHCR the *de facto* lead UN humanitarian agency through its massive expansion and high profile responses. As OCHA's Ogata in this decade, Jan Egeland has managed to put OCHA on the map. Egeland's successor will have to continue to promote the image of OCHA and ensure that it does not face the same deterioration in image that UNHCR subsequently underwent. Given the range of the challenges facing the position, a person with the right profile is essential. Hearing what the candidates have to say for themselves will hopefully help in finding the best fit. ♦

\* *Candidates interested in the position of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) should send their submissions to [talkback@icva.ch](mailto:talkback@icva.ch) by 8 January 2007. Any questions should be directed to same address.*

## IN THE NEWS

### CAR: Lost in the Midst of Bigger Crises

*continued from page 8*

the cluster approach] are...clear leadership and accountability regarding humanitarian response, including clarity on the 'provider of last resort,'" but kept the name sector.<sup>4</sup> Should such collaboration in response – done without even being in the cluster spotlight – not be rewarded by donors with increased funds?

#### ***Why Such Neglect?***

The most preoccupying question is, how is it that a country can become so neglected? What is it that

condemns the Central African Republic to being ignored by the international community? The recent mission by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) may bring more attention to CAR, but the outcomes and follow-up remain to be seen. Perhaps the most disturbing question of all, however, is how does the international humanitarian community answer for the fact that humanitarian needs are going unmet? For all the efforts at reforming the humanitarian system, we still have a great deal of work to do, so long as situations like CAR continue to exist where humanitarian needs remain and humanitarian organisations cannot respond in an adequate manner. ♦

<sup>4</sup>Footnote 3 in the 2007 Coordinated Aid Programme (CAP).

## OPINION

### Protection: A Good Idea Gone too Far?

*continued from page 14*

that offer IDPs protection. The Principles have had the twin impacts of providing a much clearer basis for the protection of IDPs, as well as raising awareness of both their plight and extensive numbers.

Since those early days, attitudes have changed and protection has become an important, some might even say fashionable, component of humanitarian interventions. Protection is becoming more mainstreamed, in much the same way as gender equality in programming. The most obvious manifestation of this new approach to protection has been seen in the humanitarian response to the civil war in Darfur, Sudan where armed conflict between rebel groups and government forces has resulted in the death of some 200,000 civilians and the displacement of a further 2 million. The humanitarian response in Darfur has been unique for

***The demand for protection officers, particularly for NGOs, is itself possibly having a deleterious effect on the protection of civilians***

the large number of NGO protection officers operating in the field. The United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) earlier this year counted 75 protection officers deployed or ready to be deployed, which did not take into account ICRC and UNHCR staff.

#### ***Are Protection Officers Improving the Situation?***

The question, however, is: has this new and enhanced approach to protection with large numbers of protection officers in the field actually improved the protection of civilian who are victims of disaster? Despite the enormous investment by agencies and their donors, it would appear that this enhanced protection effort has had little impact to date and there is a possibility that some actions, and even the very presence of some protection officers, may have placed civilian victims of armed conflict in greater danger than might have been the case had they not been deployed in the first place.

The demand for protection officers, particularly for NGOs, is itself possibly having a deleterious effect on the protection of civilians. NGOs and other

agencies admit that it is very difficult to find qualified and experienced personnel. Those trained by UNHCR are unlikely to move to the NGO sector due to the consequential reduction in earnings. ICRC's protection staff are so specialised that their skills do not necessarily translate well into the NGO sector. NGOs are thus forced to employ international and human rights law graduates who, while having an excellent theoretical knowledge, have little or no field experience. Consequently, they often lack anything other than a superficial understanding of the complex context into which they are deployed. Their lack of field experience also makes them poor judges of what is, and is not, possible in a given context.

#### ***More Practical Protection Efforts Needed?***

The impact of such hiring is illustrated by the fact that quite junior protection officers in Darfur were to be found writing criticisms of the mandate of peacekeepers while ignoring (or not noticing) the fact that women waiting for a food distribution were often left for many hours in the sun with no shelter or water. These protection officers also failed to notice the difficulties those same women experienced trying to move 25kg bags of food, along with difficult to carry commodities, such as oil in open containers, back to their shelters while trying to control a couple of children. The result, more often than not, was that the women would lose all or some of their food to the less desirable elements hanging around the distribution site.

While interventions at this very practical level are not glamorous, nor are they particularly intellectually stimulating, they can make a very positive impact on a person's life. By the same token, protection officers were less often seen interacting with the people in camps or other gatherings, preferring the comfort and safety of large four-wheel drive vehicles or of their offices and laptop computers. Interaction was often limited to meetings with like-minded individuals, which may not even have included all other agencies or any peacekeepers.

#### ***Public Advocacy - Better Meeting Rights?***

The expansion of protection has also coincided with

*see next page*

**Protection: A Good Idea Gone too Far?**

*continued from previous page*

the rights-based approach to humanitarian assistance. As with many such concepts, the basic premise is sound. A person who is disadvantaged or made vulnerable by conflict or natural disaster should not have to rely on charity for survival. That person has rights and those rights should be fulfilled. So far, so good. A corollary of this rights-based approach has been a huge expansion in advocacy activities. Again, in itself, no bad thing. However, there has been a tendency for some agencies to reduce their assistance activities in order to be better resourced to call upon the local authorities or the international community to respect the rights of beneficiaries.

It was said, not so long ago, of one well-known NGO that they would rather “address the Security Council than dig a latrine.” Again, far more intellectually stimulating. When governments are confronted with well-structured advocacy arguments about their failures that they do not like, the result in the end may be that needs and rights may actually be less well-served than if the advocacy arguments had not been made in the first place. The advocacy is also more often directed at the international community, thus providing visibility in the NGO’s country of origin rather than at a local authority, which would not get as much attention at home.

***Protection on the Cheap***

The shift towards increasing protection by the humanitarian community also risks the blurring of lines between donors and their agendas and humanitarian assistance. Rather than a government considering the political intervention that might be required to bring peace and security to a region, a much cheaper option might be the funding of a few civilian protection officers who bring the appearance of doing something, but who may or may not provide any security or protection.

In the past, humanitarian NGOs have been at pains to maintain their independence not only from donors, but also from human rights NGOs. The

principle behind this decision was to maintain political independence, impartiality, and neutrality and thus maintain access to all vulnerable populations at risk. More recently, this principle has been put aside. It is now difficult to distinguish between human rights NGOs, whose principal tasks are the reporting of human rights violations and advocating for compliance to human rights law, and humanitarian NGOs whose principal task should be assistance to those in need, albeit delivered with an awareness of the wider context, including protection factors. The increasing interest on the part of humanitarian NGOs in broader protection may be the result of human rights NGOs inadequately addressing protection issues in humanitarian contexts.

***The increasing interest on the part of humanitarian NGOs in broader protection may be the result of human rights NGOs inadequately addressing protection issues in humanitarian contexts***

It is of the utmost importance that humanitarians understand protection and organise their interventions in such a manner as to provide the maximum protection and the least harm to those made vulnerable. Currently, however, there is a risk that methodologies in vogue are not achieving the objectives intended and may be even increasing exposure of the most vulnerable to risk.

A substantial evaluation of methodologies and impact is needed to ensure that protection interventions are achieving the desired ends. It is also important that protection officers are deployed with sufficient training and experience to ensure that they do not cause harm. Finally, humanitarian NGOs also need to examine their methodologies and their motives. They must ensure that they are working towards the goals set out in their mission statements to donors – individual, private, and institutional donors – to avoid potentially being “used” to achieve different means. Without such reflections and debates in the NGO community, there is a risk that the attempts to carry out humanitarian programmes with a protection lens will lead to even less protection than before. ♦

*\* Robbie Thomson is an Independent Consultant and former Population Movements Adviser at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).*

## PROTECTION: A GOOD IDEA GONE TOO FAR?

By Robbie Thomson

**T**he debates that started in the 1990s on the role of humanitarian workers on protection have gone through various stages, perhaps culminating in the situation seen in Darfur, Sudan earlier this year with dozens of NGO “protection officers” being seen throughout the region. Criticism was levelled against some NGOs that they were too caught up “doing protection” instead of providing essential life-saving services, like ensuring adequate water. Are we clear in the NGO community about how much protection an NGO “protection officer” can actually provide? The criticisms of the role of NGO protection officers give cause for reflection in the NGO community on what are the roles – and, importantly, limits – for NGOs in protection.

***Criticism was levelled against some NGOs that they were too caught up “doing protection” instead of providing essential life-saving services***

In late 1998, the programme managers and heads of office of a large humanitarian organisation were discussing a case study in a workshop. They were asked what should happen if the leaders of a hypothetical village requested that humanitarian workers delay their round of distributions and stay overnight in the village because of an undefined threat from another village. Thirty-three out of the 35 participants said it was none of their business and they should move on in order to continue their “humanitarian” activities. Protection of the civilian population was considered the preserve of especially mandated agencies, the best known of which are ICRC and UNHCR, which respectively have obligations derived from the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Refugee Convention of 1951.

### ***Defining Protection***

As a consequence of this attitude, many humanitarians began to question such a limited approach to protection and the segregation of protection and assistance in humanitarian interventions. An early initiative included the *Reach Out Refugee Protection Training Project*, which looked at the role of NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RC/RC) Movement in protecting refugees. By this time (1999), a series of workshops run by

ICRC culminated in the well-known – although considered, at the time of drafting, rather inadequate – description of the concept of protection:

*...all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law. Human rights and humanitarian organisations must conduct these activities in an impartial manner (not on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, language or gender).*

There was also, at this time, a growing awareness of the disparity in the provision of services to internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are dependent on their own governments for protection, as opposed to refugees who enjoy international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In 1998, Francis Deng, the then Representative of the Secretary-General for IDPs, was instrumental in developing *The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, a normative framework summarising the principles

*continued on page 12*

### **Subscribe to *Talk Back***

ICVA has been producing *Talk Back* since April 1999. *Talk Back* is primarily distributed via e-mail and is also available on the ICVA website: [www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch). Articles are written with information gathered from various sources, including from member agencies and partners.

To be added to the *Talk Back* e-mail distribution list, please send an e-mail to [talkback@icva.ch](mailto:talkback@icva.ch) with the message:

subscribe

Comments are welcome: [talkback@icva.ch](mailto:talkback@icva.ch).

ICVA Secretariat  
26-28, avenue Giuseppe-Motta  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 (0) 22 950 9600  
Fax: +41 (0) 22 950 9609  
[secretariat@icva.ch](mailto:secretariat@icva.ch)  
[www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)