
Synthesis Report

Review of the engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process

Executive summary



Based on five country studies

Afghanistan
Democratic Republic of Congo
Ethiopia
Sudan
Zimbabwe

Commissioned by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

Executive summary

The Synthesis Report: Review of the engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process analyses the current state of global humanitarian reform efforts from an NGO perspective.¹ It is based on a series of mapping studies carried out between November 2008 and February 2009 that looked at humanitarian reform in five different countries: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Lessons from other contexts were included in order to strengthen the analysis and provide an overview of humanitarian reform.

Many of the findings of the mapping studies are not new to those who have been following the UN-led humanitarian reform. They do, however, provide field-based evidence to support previously expressed views and emphasise the areas where improvements must be made. The synthesis report is intended both to provide a constructive, evidence-based critique of the state of reform and to set out clear recommendations and ways forward in finding solutions to the weaknesses and challenges inherent in the humanitarian community. Many of these challenges existed well before the reforms, and they still confront us today.

The research was commissioned by a consortium formed by six NGOs – ActionAid, CAFOD, CARE, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam and Save the Children – together with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) as part of the three-year NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project, funded by DfID. The project aims to strengthen local, national and international humanitarian NGO voices in influencing policy debates and field processes related to the humanitarian reform and to propose solutions so that humanitarian response can better meet the needs of affected populations. The synthesis report represents a baseline for the project. Future papers will report on progress.

Background to the UN-led humanitarian reform

The impetus behind current global reform efforts can be traced to the poor performance of the international community's response to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Sudan in 2004. The then Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Jan Egeland, commissioned the Humanitarian Response Review, which made 36 concrete recommendations for improving humanitarian response. Some of these recommendations formed the bedrock of the UN's humanitarian reform initiative, rolled out in 2005, which was originally conceived as having three 'pillars':

- Improved humanitarian leadership (through Humanitarian Coordinators);
- Better coordination of humanitarian action (through the cluster approach); and
- Faster, more predictable and equitable humanitarian funding.

¹ The full report and the individual mapping studies are available at www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html

A fourth element – more effective partnerships among humanitarian actors – was belatedly added following the adoption of the Principles of Partnership by the Global Humanitarian Platform in July 2007². The limited focus of the reform also ignored accountability to affected populations, which remains underrepresented in the UN-led reform discussions. Another major flaw in the reform's inception was that it focused on the role of international humanitarian actors and ignored that of national and local actors.

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project and the initial mapping studies have focused on UN-led reform initiatives to a significant extent. However, the Project and the synthesis report also seek to present a more holistic picture of humanitarian action and how it needs to change by drawing on wider experiences, including lessons learnt from previous reform initiatives by bilateral donors and the NGO sector itself.

Interlinked elements of humanitarian reform

The mapping studies emphasised the interlinked nature of the different elements of humanitarian reform, and found that the individual elements of reform work best when all elements are working in concert. For example, the studies found that when one element – such as leadership – is weak, the other elements of reform face negative consequences and humanitarian response suffers. Conversely, strong leadership can ensure effective clusters that address humanitarian needs and can ensure that pooled funds are used strategically according to priority of need.

Patchy progress

While the mapping studies found that there has been progress in some of the above areas of humanitarian reform, that progress has been patchy.

Financing

Financing is the element of the humanitarian reform that has seen the greatest progress with the creation of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), although this element was probably the one that has demanded the least amount of effort by the UN compared with the other elements. At the same time, however, there remain challenges to get CERF funding to NGOs, which carry out the bulk of humanitarian work, in a timely manner. There are also challenges with the other “reformed” humanitarian financing elements: Common Humanitarian Funds (CHF), Emergency Response Funds (ERFs) and Humanitarian Response Funds (HRFs). One of the biggest concerns is the lack of transparency concerning the destination of these funds and whether they are allocated on the basis of need alone or on the basis of other considerations.

Leadership

The research particularly found gaps in humanitarian leadership. In four out of the five study countries, strong and experienced humanitarian leadership has been lacking. The UN has continued to appoint unqualified Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) who do not adequately understand humanitarian action; who underestimate the importance of NGOs; who do not understand the critical importance of partnership; and who do not understand how even small amounts of funding can have a strategic impact in humanitarian response. The country studies illustrate the conflict between the Resident Coordinator (RC) and HC roles very clearly: interviewees gave instances of where they felt humanitarian issues were sidelined because they were subsumed by RC considerations. There is a need to ensure that stronger, more effective leaders with humanitarian experience are appointed to the pivotal HC position, as well as to lead clusters, particularly at the country level. Without such effective leadership, other elements of the reform process – such as coordination, funding and partnership – are adversely affected.

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² www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org

Accountability and partnership

As a matter of priority, clusters need to devote much more time and attention to finding ways to ensure accountability to affected populations, as well as ensuring that all cluster participants are treated as genuine partners. The mapping studies found that involvement of NGOs in reform processes has been inconsistent. In many cases, both international and national/local NGOs are only vaguely aware of the workings of humanitarian reform. In some global clusters, several NGOs' efforts to engage at their inception were rebuffed or given a frosty reception from the UN agencies involved. While this situation has now improved, it has taken time for some NGOs to regain an appetite for engagement.

Where NGOs do engage with clusters, they often feel overwhelmed by meetings, they do not feel respected as equal partners and they do not see reform grounded in accountability to crisis-affected communities. While many NGOs will engage in clusters at the global level, they are finding that in several country situations, their staff continue to be frustrated by the inefficiency and inequality demonstrated in many clusters. Some NGOs see the value in co-leading/co-facilitating/co-chairing clusters, but what that role entails requires clarification. What is more, the added responsibility of co-leadership brings with it the need for resources to fulfil that role, which will require donor support.

Involving local and national NGOs

As noted above, the original focus of the reform on the international community was to the detriment of national and local actors. In conflict situations, the involvement of governments represents an additional set of challenges for humanitarian actors, who seek to respond to need wherever it occurs on an impartial basis. The UN-led reform efforts, with their technical and procedural focus, have so far failed to deal with these kinds of challenges in a convincing fashion. Local and national NGOs continue to have difficulties in accessing funds or meaningfully participating in coordination mechanisms. HCs and cluster leads have a role to play in supporting local and national NGOs, but their participation must also be facilitated by their international NGO partners. Donors, if they are serious about following through on the Good Humanitarian Donorship principle of supporting local capacities should also play a pivotal role in finding ways to better support the role of local and national NGOs in the reform processes, whether in clusters or in terms of accessing pooled funds.³ There are still questions about what role (if any) clusters should play in allocating funding. While such funding responsibilities may work well in some clusters, in other circumstances there is a perception that priority is given to the cluster lead agency's projects. There is also concern that cluster lead agencies source funds with the aim of sub-contracting to NGOs who have already put forward projects for funding, thereby unnecessarily increasing the administrative costs.

3 Principle 8 Principles of Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship 17 June 2003. www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/background.asp

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Moving forward

A striking feature of the mapping studies is that they found no hard evidence that UN-centred humanitarian reforms have improved the provision of humanitarian response thus far. The failure to establish benchmarks for overall system performance, as recommended in the original Humanitarian Response Review, as well as the failure to integrate accountability into the reform process, does make it hard to gauge the true impact of the reforms on affected populations. Nevertheless, the fact that the reform is designed to address acknowledged failings in humanitarian response suggests that it has the potential to make a marked difference. It is to be hoped that the second phase of the cluster evaluation will provide specific evidence of this impact.

NGOs are the largest group of actors involved in humanitarian response. Their engagement with the reform process is crucial if their own concerns about humanitarian leadership, the speed and transparency of humanitarian financing, accountability and other issues are to be addressed by the system. NGO engagement, where appropriate, should result in a less technocratic debate on reform, leading to a greater focus on principles and values. From an NGO perspective, reform efforts must be assessed according to their implications for humanitarian principles (such as independence and impartiality in conflict situations) and values (such as the commitment to increasing accountability to crisis-affected populations). At the same time, in situations of conflict or where the national government is a party to the conflict or is violating the rights of segments of their own populations, NGO independence must be respected. A context-based balance of cooperation, based on the established Principles of Partnership, must be struck.

The mapping studies provide a picture of the situation in each country, which will allow further analyses in the future that may (or may not) indicate progress with the various reform mechanisms over the coming years. Whilst we recognise that some of the recommendations made in this report may swim against the prevailing tide, we believe their implementation would result in better outcomes for crisis-affected populations. The challenge for the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project over the next two years is to advocate for the full implementation of humanitarian reform to deliver better outcomes to crisis-affected populations. If it can be demonstrated that the reforms contribute to improving response, then an increase in the effective involvement of NGOs in humanitarian reform will follow. The Project will look for ways to improve the different elements of the humanitarian reform process. However, if the work of the Project over the coming years finds that certain elements cannot be fixed as the reform is currently configured, we will be bold in making recommendations for change.

"The ultimate test for humanitarian reform will be the extent to which it improves the lot of crisis-affected people, rather than whether it streamlines the international humanitarian system"

Finally, it is incumbent on all humanitarian actors to re-focus on impact – to ensure that are we saving more lives, preventing suffering and maintaining human dignity among those affected by natural or human-made disasters. The ultimate test for humanitarian reform will be the extent to which it improves the lot of crisis-affected people, rather than whether it streamlines the international humanitarian system.

Recommendations

Leadership

- 1 The ERC should apply Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) standards for the appointment of HCs and only appoint people with substantial humanitarian experience and should ensure that monitoring mechanisms in the HC Compacts for assessing the performance and quality of Humanitarian Coordinators' leadership are effectively applied.
- 2 UN agencies in the IASC should abandon the double-hatted RC/HC model as the norm and separate the roles to allow for strong humanitarian leadership.
- 3 The ERC, UN agencies, global cluster leads and donors should ensure clusters have dedicated cluster leadership; accountability of the cluster lead to the HC; and a collaborative approach following the Principles of Partnership.

Coordination

- 4 The role of co-leads or co-chairs of clusters at the field level needs to be clarified and donors should ensure financial support for NGO cluster co-leads or co-chairs.
- 5 By the end of 2010, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, together with Humanitarian Coordinators and the IASC must ensure that Humanitarian Country Teams are formed and involve NGOs in a meaningful way, in line with the Principles of Partnership.
- 6 International NGOs and UN agencies should identify ways to better involve their national partners in humanitarian coordination and reform mechanisms to promote more effective humanitarian responses.
- 7 Donors should increase their engagement with the humanitarian reform process at the country level to provide more consistent support.
- 8 Through their position on UN agencies' executive boards, donors should hold UN agencies to account for applying the Principles of Partnership as endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007, as a means of improving the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms and the participation of local, national and international NGOs.

Accountability

- 9 HCs, Humanitarian Country Teams, clusters and donors should ensure that funding procedures enable aid agencies to consult with, and respond to, feedback from crisis-affected communities, as well as ensuring projects reflect their priorities.
- 10 International NGOs and the main accountability initiatives should work closely with UN actors to improve accountability and transparency to crisis-affected populations within humanitarian reform mechanisms, and advocate for the replication of good models.

Funding

- 11 Donors should ensure flexibility and diversity in funding mechanisms, especially pooled funds, so as to facilitate access by NGOs – particularly local and national NGOs.
- 12 Like UN agencies, international NGOs should be transparent about documenting onward funding to national or local NGOs and should provide adequate overhead costs.
- 13 By the end of 2010, UN agencies receiving bi-lateral funds or donor funding via the CERF and pooled funds should be required by donors to provide evidence of the speed and transparency with which funding is passed through to NGOs.
- 14 UN agencies should standardise their procedures for funding NGOs to reduce transaction costs so as to increase the access of national NGOs to these funds and to avoid the negotiation of overhead costs on a case-by-case basis.
- 15 Direct bilateral donor funding to NGOs should also be reformed to promote adequacy, responsiveness and timeliness. In particular, flexible and predictable funding should be provided to build NGO humanitarian capacity over the longer-term and enable speedy response in fast-breaking emergencies – neither of which are comparative advantages of the UN pooled funds.

The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project aims to strengthen the effective engagement of local, national and international humanitarian NGOs in reformed humanitarian financing and coordination mechanisms at global and country levels. The project, which is funded by DfID, aims to fortify the voices of NGOs in influencing policy debates and field processes related to humanitarian reform and to propose solutions so that humanitarian response can better meet the needs of affected populations. A consortium of six NGOs are part of the project – ActionAid, CAFOD, CARE, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam and Save the Children, together with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). The project runs for three years until October 2011.

For further information contact annie.street@actionaid.org or visit the project website on www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html

The Synthesis Report review of engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process is based on five country studies – Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe – conducted by Tasneem Mowjee of Development Initiatives, Antonio Donini of Feinstein International Center, and Ralf Otto and John Cosgrave of Channel Research. The writing of the synthesis report was overseen by the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project Manager, Anne Street. Extensive inputs were provided by Aimee Ansari, Kitty Arie, John Cosgrave, Tasneem Mowjee, Howard Mollett, Clare Smith, Manisha Thomas and Dan Tyler. The views expressed in the report and the policy recommendations presented represent the consolidated position of the consortium member agencies of the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project.* For further information on the research methodology used in the five mapping studies refer to the full synthesis report, available on www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html

*The report and policy recommendations presented do not, however, reflect the views of all ICVA members.

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CAFOD
JUST ONE WORLD



ActionAid International
Postnet Suite 248
Private bag X31
Saxonwold 2132
Johannesburg
South Africa

CAFOD
Romero Close
Stockwell Road
London
SW9 9TY
United Kingdom

Care International UK
10-13 Rushworth Street
London
SE1 0RB
United Kingdom

**International Council
of Voluntary Agencies**
26-28 avenue Giuseppe-Motta
1202 Geneva
Switzerland



IRC - UK
11 Gower Street
London
WC1E 6HB
United Kingdom

Oxfam GB
Oxfam House
John Smith Drive
Oxford
OX4 2JY
United Kingdom

Save the Children UK
1 St John's Lane
London
EC1M 4AR
United Kingdom