Humanitarian reform and new institutional responses

by Dennis McNamara

In 1998, in their groundbreaking book *Masses in Flight*, Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng noted the weakness of inter-agency coordination, lack of clear institutional responsibility for IDPs and uneven response to their needs. Has anything changed?

The short answer to this is yes. The more accurate answer is yes – in the last year or so, in quite dramatic terms – but with some way still to go. The sorts of deficiencies identified by Cohen and Deng which plagued past international responses will, we hope, soon be much less apparent.

The institutional response to internal displacement has long been characterised as a 'collaborative' one involving a broad range of UN and non-UN, governmental and non-governmental actors working in a transparent and cooperative manner to address the needs of IDPs. It is a response that depends on effective leadership and the presence of actors with the necessary expertise, capacity and resources to meet the different needs of the displaced. It requires the establishment of structures to ensure effective communication and transparent decision making, adequate resources to guarantee a comprehensive response (emergency as well as longer-term solutions and recovery needs), avoiding gaps and overlaps and clear lines of responsibility and accountability. And it must take account of the broader humanitarian context and the need to also address the needs of other vulnerable individuals, groups and communities.

Revitalising the collaborative response

Implementation of the collaborative response has not been without its problems. Various efforts have been made to overcome them. In 1997 the UN assigned overall responsibility for coordinating the protection and assistance of the internally displaced (those described as 'falling through the gaps') to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), the senior UN humanitarian official. This was followed by increased and regular focus on internal displacement in the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance which brings together the key UN and non-UN partners.[1] In December 1999 the IASC adopted a policy expressly for the protection of IDPs that sought to spell out the process for implementing the collaborative response, both at headquarters and in the field.

Such developments notwithstanding, there was ongoing criticism of the collaborative response, most memorably perhaps from the then US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke. In response, the IASC established a Senior Network on Internal Displacement which recommended establishment of a distinct inter-agency entity charged with providing technical advice and support at both headquarters and the field in order to facilitate improved implementation of the collaborative response. In January 2002 this resulted in the establishment within the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)[2] of the Internal Displacement Unit – re-named in July 2004 as the Internal Displacement Division (IDD).[3]

The Unit undertook two initiatives in 2003 – a Protection Survey carried out in association with the Brookings Project on Internal Displacement[4] and the IDP Response Matrix (a survey to determine who was doing what, where and why).[5] These found

significant problems remained in the implementation of the collaborative response. The studies identified the need for increased accountability among both Humanitarian and Resident Coordinators (HCs and/or RCs) – the in-country UN officials charged with coordinating the UN's response to crises of internal displacement – and among the different operational agencies involved. The approach of country teams to assessment and strategy making required improvement. The decision-making process within country teams leading to a division of labour needed to be more transparent and predictable. In response, a set of practical tools was developed in the form of an IASC Policy Package adopted in September 2004.[6]

Beyond tweaking to fundamental reform

Although these different initiatives to strengthen the collaborative response resulted in varying degrees of success, ongoing efforts by the IDD to promote implementation of the collaborative response and improve protection and assistance for IDPs in eight identified priority countries revealed that weaknesses and gaps remained. There was particular concern about the absence of predictable leadership and accountability in key sectors or areas of response. Guidance was not being implemented effectively, agencies continued to pick and choose areas of involvement and HCs were frequently unable to identify reliable actors in key sectors. This led to ad hoc and under-resourced responses. Analysis from the priority countries identified particular problems in the areas of camp management, emergency shelter, return, reintegration and recovery and the cross-cutting issue of protection.

In June 2005 the IDD tabled these concerns at the IASC Working Group – a forum for heads of the emergency programmes of the IASC agencies.

We recommended that agreement be reached at the institutional level on assigning specific agency accountability for these 'problem' sectors. The same concerns fed into the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) commissioned by the ERC, Jan Egeland, in response to deficiencies in the international response to the Darfur crisis. The HRR set out to assess the humanitarian response capacities of the UN, NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and other key humanitarian actors including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and to identify gaps. The HRR was tasked to identify factors that have hindered the speed and effectiveness of the humanitarian response and to ensure that steps were taken to improve the timeliness and impact of future interventions.[7]

The HRR found that in certain sectors or areas of activity it was difficult to mobilise adequate resources, material inputs and sufficient levels of expertise in the timeframe appropriate to the needs of the crisis. Nine clusters of particular concern were identified by the HRR, including those identified by IDD: camp coordination and management; emergency shelter; telecommunications; health; logistics; nutrition; protection; early recovery; and water and sanitation.

Moved forward by active leadership from Jan Egeland, the IASC undertook a substantial reform of the humanitarian response system. The reform was not confined to IDPs but sought to address issues related to more adequate, timely and flexible humanitarian financing, in particular through a revitalised Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) approved by the General Assembly in December 2005.[8] It also sought to strengthen humanitarian coordination and leadership by improving the Humanitarian Coordinator system. While both these aspects of the reform will have an impact on the response to IDP crises, the reform's emphasis on more predictable and sufficient humanitarian response capacity through the application of the so-called 'cluster approach' is particularly significant.

The IASC established Working Groups for each of the nine clusters identified by the HRR in order to: discuss designating a lead agency for each cluster on a global basis; outline overall cluster requirements and the corresponding roles and responsibilities in the cluster and for the cluster lead; develop recommendations for improving the predictability, speed and effectiveness of the response in the sector; and undertake a preliminary mapping of the current response capacities and gaps.

The IASC agreed in September to the designation of a lead agency for each of the clusters where critical gaps had been identified. Of particular importance to the response to internal displacement, this included the designation of UNHCR as cluster lead for protection, emergency shelter and camp management and coordination in situations of complex emergencies and UNDP for early recovery. In disaster situations, camp coordination and camp management were the responsibility of the IOM and emergency shelter rests with IFRC. Protection in disaster settings and in other situations requiring a protection response would be decided through consultation among the three UN protection-mandated agencies (UNHCR, OHCHR and UNICEF) on a case-by-case basis, with one of the three taking the lead in a given context.

The cluster approach is essentially about transforming a 'may respond' into a 'must respond' attitude. It is about achieving more strategic responses and improved prioritisation of available resources by clarifying the division of labour among organisations, better defining their roles and responsibilities within the different sectors of the response and providing the HC with a 'first port of call' and 'provider of last resort'. The approach is currently being rolled out in four countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda. It was also activated in respect of new emergency situations, namely, Pakistan (following the earthquake in October 2005), Indonesia and Lebanon.

The cluster approach may not constitute as radical a reform as, for instance, the establishment of a new UN agency with a specific mandate for protecting and assisting IDPs.

However, its potential for fostering a more predictable, accountable, timely and ultimately more effective international response to the needs of the internally displaced should not be underestimated. Initial signs in the field are encouraging. UNHCR's increased engagement in the protection of displaced populations is apparent in Uganda and DRC, countries where its involvement had previously been almost exclusively focused on refugees.

Will the cluster approach work?

Serious challenges remain before we can expect to see real results from the cluster approach:[9]

- Governments, particularly donors, must adequately fund the humanitarian reform and meet the significant additional costs at global level and at field level – where such key areas as camp coordination, protection, HC induction and training have often been neglected.

- The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and NGOs need to recognise this as a genuine effort by the UN family to reach out, to become more predictable players and to engage in genuine partnerships with partner organisations on the front line of the response.

- UN agencies must rise to the biggest challenge: taking up these new responsibilities and delivering on them. This will require a significant cultural shift for many of the major UN agencies, including improved accountability and a greater effort to closely collaborate and cooperate with all partners.

We have come a long way. However, only through meeting these remaining challenges will the humanitarian community be in a position to provide precisely the sort of response that many millions of people, displaced and otherwise, struggling for survival in appalling conditions in disasters and emergencies around the globe, both deserve and should expect. Only then will we have really addressed

what Roberta Cohen once described as the "unconscionable situation" in which IDPs cannot expect predictable responses from the international community while refugees in similar situations almost automatically receive protection and assistance.

Dennis McNamara is director of the Internal Displacement Division, *OCHA and Special Advisor on Internal Displacement to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator. Email: mcnamara@un.org*

1. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc
2. http://ochaonline.un.org
3. www.reliefweb.int/idp
4. www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/protection_survey.htm
5. www.reliefweb.int/idp/docs/references/MatrixProp.pdf
6. www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/LHON-68TERC/$FILE/Policy_Package_IASC_Sept_2004.pdf?OpenElement
7. www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/EVOD-6FUDKN?OpenDocument
8. http://ochaonline.un.org/webpage.asp?Page=2101
9. See also T Morris 'UNHCR, IDPs and clusters', FMR25 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2531.pdf