

Newly recognised humanitarian actors

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'New' humanitarian leaders are growing in profile, impact and capacity. They need to be recognised as equals by the international humanitarian community.

The multiple parallel humanitarian crises of 2011-12 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have challenged the traditional humanitarian system because of constraints of access, adaptation and funding. At the same time, 'non-traditional' actors have had a great impact in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen by being close in space and time. They have filled a gap by acting earlier than the international community and having better links into the local community and to informal governance structures. The same is true in Somalia.

A traditional model of internationally mandated humanitarian action depends on interest in a disaster where humanitarian governance and funding are, i.e. in the global North. It assumes a weak local or regional humanitarian community (in terms of scale, principles and coordination). Early in 2011, the situation in Libya belied this. In the east of the country, as well as on the borders with Egypt and Tunisia, local communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) were the first to respond to the needs of displaced people. Egyptian NGOs followed, organising convoys to Benghazi and elsewhere, while local humanitarian committees in Libya, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab Medical Union produced regular situation reports weeks before those of the traditional response system.

Regionally, the humanitarian departments of the League of Arab States (LAS) and the OIC have grown in resources and impact. National NGOs are also becoming more visible, after being stifled under autocratic regimes. Egyptian NGOs are working more internationally, with organisations like the Arab Medical Union and the Food Bank responding in Libya, Somalia and Syria. NGOs from the Gulf (particularly Qatar and the UAE) and Turkey are also increasingly active both in MENA and outside it.

The international community needs to show commitment to these evolving actors, supporting them on their own terms. They need to be recognised because of their access, legitimacy and connections. This means building trust, supporting capacity and encouraging cooperation. Additionally such partnerships may help to break down misplaced suspicions and promote humanitarian and development work as a neutral area for building trust between communities.

It is time to deepen partnership between the UN, LAS and OIC, each of which has different skills,

constituencies and access. This is happening in joint meetings and assessment visits (for example about Syria). As part of this, the regional bodies need to discuss mechanisms of coordination supported by all, including governments and NGOs. Structures like the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) would certainly benefit from involving and recognising the new actors. Collectively, they should have a seat on the IASC in the same way that other NGO groups have seats. Another way to demonstrate trust – and maximise effectiveness – would be for western governments to provide direct funding to more Islamic NGOs.

International NGOs sometimes have better access to those in need, more experience and different funding sources. Their impact on the ground and in galvanising support in donor countries is clear. Nevertheless, local NGOs need to be seen as equals and donors should do more to support systemic CSO capacity and connections. There also needs to be a coming together as peers. One of the perceived barriers is that the traditional and the 'newly recognised' humanitarian communities treat accountability and humanitarian principles differently. It is not enough to ask why one humanitarian community does not have the same statement of values as another; we need to understand the organisations and their values.

It remains to be seen if the extreme situation during the first year of the Arab Spring will continue to challenge the regional humanitarian architecture – but it seems likely. Together, we need to find better ways of addressing the crises in Syria, Somalia, the Sahel, Yemen and elsewhere.

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The Humanitarian Forum was set up in 2005 as a network of key humanitarian and development organisations from Muslim donor and recipient countries, the West and the multilateral system. It aims to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of aid by addressing identified gaps between humanitarian communities through training, dialogue and cooperation, working internationally and in partner countries. The Humanitarian Forum has trained hundreds of civil society organisations (CSOs) working in or for eastern Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

Frontline Manual on rules of armed conflict

In response to allegations of misconduct by Libyan dissident forces during the conflict, Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) asked a newly formed group of expatriate Libyan lawyers, called Lawyers for Justice in Libya (www.libyanjustice.org), to advise on the applicable rules of the law of armed conflict. The resulting Frontline Manual was launched by the NTC in May 2011

and distributed in various forms, including sending extracts as text messages on mobile phones.

English: www.libyanjustice.org/downloads/FinalGuidelines.pdf
Arabic: www.libyanjustice.org/downloads/Arabic%20Guidelines.pdf
For more information see www.ejiltalk.org/operationalising-the-law-of-armed-conflict-for-dissident-forces-in-libya/