A new approach to old problems: the Solutions Alliance

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Over the last three years, the Solutions Alliance has gradually emerged as a multi-stakeholder initiative to overcome the so-called humanitarian-development divide.

The question of how to engage the development sector – actors, ideas and resources – in responses to refugee and IDP situations is not new. There is already a history of initiatives aiming to overcome the humanitarian-development divide in order to empower displaced populations, strengthen their resilience and harness their capacities.

However, while the theme is old, the Solutions Alliance's approach to achieving these goals is attempting something new.[1] Its aims to reconceive displacement as potentially a win-win opportunity for hosts, donors and displaced people. The underlying premise is that displaced people can become agents of change and development – for themselves, their own countries and the communities that host them.

Local and global

The model begins with a focus on the national level. Specific countries with a particular commitment to promoting self-reliance opportunities for refugees are selected as 'champions' and the starting point for National Groups. These groups include a range of national and local actors capable of working towards operational change on the ground. They seek to empower the country in each case to fully include displaced populations in national development plans, to build evidence and conduct joint analysis, to develop solutions strategies and operations that address the specifics of their national situation within such frameworks, and to draw on the legitimacy and support provided by the Alliance thereby benefitting from being connected to a global network of actors.

So far four **National Groups** have emerged, all in Africa: Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania, and Somali refugees (with a focus on Kenya). These National Groups have outlined their work plans, focusing on clearly defined challenges, including supporting pioneering naturalisation processes within Tanzania and Zambia, enhancing self-

reliance and resilience in Uganda, and improving synergies between refugee return and internal displacement in Somalia.

Alongside the National Groups, **Thematic Groups** have been constituted comprising a global support network committed to offering a resource to the National Groups. These serve as a potential source of expertise, further networks and good practice, from which situation-specific strategies can draw. The first three of these are: the **Private Sector Group**, which will engage business actors and work with National Groups to connect them with business (local small and medium-sized businesses as well as international companies); the **Rule of Law Group**, which will consider regulatory barriers to progressive solutions and document rule of law lessons and achievements; and the **Research, Data and Performance Management Group**, which will offer access to existing research, promote relevant new research and support shared analysis to inform joint strategy development.

The Alliance's particular mechanism for achieving change is therefore to connect the field and global levels of this multi-stakeholder network. It brings together host and donor governments, international organisations, civil society, business and academia. Each of these can add value in context-specific situations through concrete, innovative actions and through advocacy for communities affected by displacement. Different countries have unique histories and challenges, and in each the roles of humanitarian, development and private sector actors will vary significantly.

The Alliance itself

Although the Alliance is still emerging, a number of elements of the process are innovative and promising. First, its focus on and willingness to reward countries as 'champions' for including the displaced in national development plans and supporting self-reliance. Second, its creation of a genuinely multi-stakeholder approach. Third, its focus on supporting concrete, operational change at the national level through connecting the local to a global support network.

The activities have involved a process of iterative learning, and at a Roundtable in February 2016 a significant amount of clarity emerged on what the Solutions Alliance is, and what makes it a potentially original approach to forced migration governance.[2] It aims to transform internal cultures in the humanitarian and development fields and to incentivise structures, systems and procedures, based on recognising a range of systemic challenges that hinder our ability to bring together the two fields of work.

The interest and engagement of the champions depend on their governments perceiving a value to participating in the initiative. Meanwhile, the support capacity of Thematic Groups also depends upon access to funding. So far the only resources the Alliance can command are the voluntary commitments of others – donors, business and academia.

The Alliance is still in the process of defining itself. Nevertheless, the evolution of the Alliance model over the last three years suggests it has the capacity to resolve the question of how to locate itself on the spectrum between network and institution. On the one hand, as a network it is intended to be loose, dynamic and informal. On the other hand, it requires institutional capacity and resources in order to act. It still lacks the resources to directly support the work of the National and Thematic Groups and this in turn creates a challenge in terms of managing expectations, for both host governments and those active in the global network.

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1. www.solutionsalliance.org

2. This article draws in part upon the Summary Statement from the 2016 Solutions Alliance Roundtable. http://tinyurl.com/SolutionsAllRoundtableSummary