

speaker's corner



Who should drive humanitarian responses?

by Nick Cater

From refugee flows to earthquake relief, it is invariably local groups which are on the humanitarian frontline. Should international agencies reinvent themselves as solidarity and advocacy networks and start letting Southern NGOs take the lead?

Grateful for fully-funded appeals and gushing media coverage, hundreds of international agencies have descended on tsunami-affected countries.¹ This is despite the fact that in the main the region has functioning governments, military forces and emergency services, active Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, extensive faith networks and countless local NGOs and community groups.

It is part of the standard rhetoric of international aid agencies that they have long-standing local partners. It is an indictment of past practice and lack of trust that so few felt able simply to send their partners some of the cash that flowed so speedily into their coffers. When expatriate staff flew in, they found indigenous organisations, temples, churches, mosques, local businesses and diaspora-funded do-gooders getting to work almost everywhere.

From Sudan to Sri Lanka, international aid appears caught in a time warp, unable to notice the fundamental changes underway in the skills, capacities and aspirations of the rapidly expanding number of local and regional NGOs. The latter are eager to play their full role in disasters, development and advocacy and are only held back by a lack of sustained funding and resultant difficulties in retaining trained staff due to higher salaries on offer elsewhere. Even in Africa, where once

international agencies might have argued that there was a dearth of indigenous NGOs, civil society is growing fast and taking on tasks ranging from AIDS awareness to agricultural extension advice. African NGOs now have experience in running refugee camps, providing psychosocial counselling, administering feeding programmes and much more.

African NGO symposium

While the inter-governmental initiative on good humanitarian donorship launched in Stockholm in 2003 seems to be making limited progress², representatives of hundreds of African NGOs gathered in December 2004 in Addis Ababa to discuss their future. They came at the invitation of the African Union and one of the continent's leading indigenous relief agencies, Africa Humanitarian Action (AHA). Founded in the wake of the Rwanda genocide by Dr Dawit Zawde, a former President of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, AHA now has offices, trustees and supporters across the continent.

In a positive sign that some donors and major agencies are listening to the concerns of grassroots organisations, the Addis Ababa symposium was supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Swedish International Development Agency, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the International Planned Parenthood Federation and UNHCR.

The meeting agreed to establish a Centre for Humanitarian Action as an African-led think tank, research centre and information exchange on issues around humanitarian and natural disasters. It intends to facilitate communication between African humanitarian agencies and their international counterparts, advise African NGOs on how to mobilise new and additional resources, and work to enhance good governance and management within Africa's humanitarian sector.

Many delegates expressed a deep sense of frustration at the foot-dragging reluctance of the North to allow African NGOs the resources to get on with the job to which they are committed. The final resolution urged donors to channel at least 25% of humanitarian aid through local NGOs, with a minimum of 10% of grants for overheads rather than the unsustainable 5% often on offer from UNHCR and other funders.

The proliferation of international aid agencies and the emergence of new donors - with sets of complex reporting requirements to add to the existing burden of recipient NGOs - is denying emerging civil society the space, funding and staff to thrive and grow. Chances of delivering local, appropriate, immediate and cost-effective assistance for displaced people are being lost. There is an almost predatory link between the South's calamities and Northern agencies' need for a 'good disaster' to grab media attention and funding for their salaries, perks, plane tickets, hotels, four-wheel drives, satphones and interpreters.

It is clearly in everyone's interest to have a fully-funded, well functioning

and sustainable local frontline for humanitarian action. Local NGOs must be allowed to take over the driving seat of aid. Some are already developing their own capacity to generate domestic and international funds via commercial enterprises, direct grants, payments for outsourced state welfare services and cross-border Internet-based philanthropy. Local agencies need significantly more funding, some of which can come by diverting it away from Northern aid agencies. The latter can then pursue a supportive fundraising and advocacy role for their frontline partners in the way that many faith-based networks are already doing.

Civil society in the South is demanding the opportunity to take on more responsibility. In the words of Dawit Zawde: "Today's international aid system is skewed in favour of the Northern agenda and cannot respond adequately to the priorities of organisations in the South. Africa has long been depicted as a hopeless zone of conflict, famine and displacement that lacks capacity to respond adequately to crisis. This perception supports an aid paradigm that marginalises and erodes local capacity, casting African actors as sub-contractors to their international counterparts. Tackling the crises, conflicts and disasters in Africa

should be, first and foremost, the responsibility of Africans."

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1. This theme will be explored at greater length in the forthcoming special FMR supplement on the tsunami response, due out July.

2. www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/ecosoc6072.doc.htm