

# Challenges of collective humanitarian response in Sri Lanka

by Firzan Hashim

**Grappling with how to respond to both conflict and tsunami-induced displacement, Sri Lanka is an ideal testing ground for the principles of humanitarian partnership which are at the heart of the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP).**

Set up in July 2006, the GHP brings together the three pillars of the humanitarian community – NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and the UN – to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian action. The GHP seeks to promote partnership on the basis of five principles: equality; transparency; a results-oriented approach; responsibility and complementarity.<sup>1</sup>

Laudable as these principles are, many Sri Lankan NGOs are suspicious. Most local NGOs are at the mercy of INGOs and they feel that the GHP will alienate them further, solidifying the role of a privileged elite group of humanitarian response agencies with access to funding. Local agencies are struggling for the right of local people and field actors to make decisions in a climate shaped by interference, bureaucracy, inflexibility and big brother attitudes. They fear the GHP will introduce enhanced and burdensome rules and regulations to access funding. Some INGOs working in Sri Lanka are also wary that the UN wants to bring them further under their control.

There is confusion about the principle of equality. Would local and international NGOs who deliver services with vigour and vitality be recognised and appreciated or will they be sidelined? Agencies not directly involved in relief and development – particularly those focused on human rights – wonder how they will fit in and retain independence. Will they be able to express their views without being dictated to by the government or

having to achieve consensus from the humanitarian community?

Many doubt whether the GHP will necessarily lead to more timely and effective humanitarian response. The last twelve months in Sri Lanka have been some of the most turbulent in its history, with increases in killings, abductions, assassinations, artillery mortar exchange, aerial bombardments, combatant casualties, suicide bombings and disappearances. There has been a series of bloody attacks on humanitarian workers, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has blatantly violated humanitarian principles by forcing aid workers to undergo military training. Recent military operations have displaced many people. There have been many occasions where local NGOs and some INGOs have gained access to such areas to provide relief to the trapped and destitute even before the government has issued a clearance certificate testifying that areas have been cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance. The UN is constrained by its security procedures from doing so, often resulting in delayed access for those NGOs dependent on UN support. Should such hesitation become contagious, NGOs would lose their response flexibility – a worrying prospect considering the government agencies' slow and ponderous response to displacement.

However, there are encouraging developments as a result of the humanitarian reform process. The three humanitarian families are now jointly represented at

high-level government meetings in Sri Lanka where humanitarian issues are discussed by a newly-formed Consultative Committee for Humanitarian Assistance (CCHA). The international community is represented by the US, UK and EU ambassadors, the humanitarian sector by the UN heads of agencies and NGOs by the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA). Sub-Committees of the CCHA have been established to focus on logistics and essential services, resettlement, welfare, health, education and livelihoods. An effective collation and dissemination mechanism is in place to receive and provide information at the field level.

There is no doubt that effective cooperation between humanitarian workers is of paramount importance. However, principles of partnership need to be thoroughly understood, accepted and publicised by the heads of agencies. To achieve GHP goals we need sincerity and commitment to engaging local organisations and allowing them to retain their independence and their ability to robustly pursue their objectives within the framework of collective humanitarian response.

*Firzan Hashim (depexecdir@cha.lk) is the Deputy Executive Director of the Consortium for Humanitarian Action (www.humanitarian-srilanka.org), a humanitarian service provider and membership organisation of Sri Lankan civil society organisations. This article is based on interviews with member organisations. Firzan Hashim was a participant at the July 2007 meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform in Geneva.*

1. For further information about the GHP see [www.icva.ch/ghp.html](http://www.icva.ch/ghp.html) and the article by Elizabeth Ferris on pages 6-8.