

Humanitarian action: a Western-dominated enterprise in need of change

by John Holmes

‘Reform’ is a loaded word. No matter what the line of work or whether it’s in the public or private sector, it can mean different things to different people.

For those who believe in it, it’s about fixing things and improving on them. For the sceptics, it’s about changing things for the sake of change, or replacing one slightly dysfunctional system with another equally dysfunctional one. For those opposed to it, it’s about replacing systems that work (in spite of all their faults and weaknesses) with inappropriate ones that are bound to fail because they have been dreamt up by people in ivory towers who have little real understanding of the situation on the ground.

So it is with humanitarian reform: you have the believers, the sceptics and the opponents. Fortunately, the vast majority of humanitarian practitioners believe in the need for change and adaptation. They recognise the need to improve the way humanitarian organisations do business. They are all too aware of the continuing proliferation and sometimes fragmentation of humanitarian actors and the problems that arise when there is a lack of operational capacity, planning, predictability and coordination. They have seen what happens when some categories of people (such as the internally displaced) are not dealt with in a systematic way or when particular sectors receive inadequate attention. They are all painfully aware of the failings that we have seen in recent years in places like the Congo, Darfur, Liberia and northern Uganda.

The package of humanitarian reforms put forward by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)¹ in 2005 and 2006 is ambitious and far-reaching. It falls into three main areas: first, achieving more adequate,

flexible and timely humanitarian financing; second, strengthening the ‘Humanitarian Coordinator’ system; and third, ensuring more systematic and predictable attention to all the main sectors of response, in what has come to be known as the ‘Cluster Approach’.² Underpinning all this is the need to strengthen our interface with governments and to forge stronger partnerships amongst humanitarian actors – particularly between UN and non-UN actors.

As with any reform process, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. So the question now is whether or not the reforms are working. Are they making things better? An in-depth evaluation is currently underway but the results are not yet available. What we can say now is that implementation of the reforms has been in some respects slower than we had initially hoped, but that we are already seeing improvements in a number of areas.

The new Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)³ has provided more than US\$ 500 million during its first 18 months to help kick-start programmes in new emergencies and to fund projects in under-funded humanitarian operations. Other innovative funding mechanisms such as local pooled funds are also being tested. A new training programme for Humanitarian Coordinators is being developed and relations between the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinators are being strengthened. We are also in the process of diversifying the pool of Humanitarian Coordinators to include more women as well as more people from the South and from outside the UN. Meanwhile

the Cluster Approach has helped to ensure more standardised and predictable responses in a number of emergencies. For example, in the Lebanon emergency in 2006 lead agencies were designated for all sectors within the first 48 hours of the onset of the crisis. In many previous emergencies it took months, if not years, to do so.

But while there has been progress in some areas, clearly we have a lot still to do. In some countries, humanitarian actors continue to lack sufficient confidence in the Humanitarian Coordinators who lead the response. We know we need better Humanitarian Coordinators but this will take time. In the case of the CERF, there are a number of administrative problems that we need to overcome, including ways of ensuring that NGOs have adequate access to these funds (even if it is not direct access) and to reduce costs when money is channelled through UN agencies to NGOs. In the case of the Cluster Approach, we need to ensure that global cluster leads⁴ honour the commitments they have made and that clusters continue to build up their capacities.

Cluster Approach

The Cluster Approach is perhaps the most far-reaching of all the reforms. It is about raising standards and ensuring greater predictability, accountability and partnership in all sectors. It requires moving away from the narrow focus on agency mandates of the past to a broader focus on sectors, with genuinely inclusive sectoral groups (‘clusters’) working under clearly designated cluster leads. This more structured approach should enable international actors to be a better partner for governments, who have primary responsibility for leading humanitarian responses in their countries. It

provides governments with a clear counterpart within the international humanitarian community for each of the main sectors or areas of humanitarian response.

The Cluster Approach requires a fundamental shift in cultures and mindsets, with cluster leads working as 'facilitators' within their respective clusters and also being available to be the 'provider of last resort' where this is needed. We still need to invest a lot of time and energy in training organisations to be good cluster leads, and in training individual staff to be good cluster coordinators. This will take time and we should

at the global level by a specific organisation, designated as the global cluster lead. Over the past two years, these cluster leads have worked with their partners to build stockpiles and pool resources at the global level, to agree on common operational standards and procedures, and to provide support to governments in affected countries in coordinating emergency response within their sectors. Donor governments have invested over \$50 million over the past two years to build this extra global response capacity.

To go back to where I began, 'reform' is a loaded word for some. Nearly

leads and clusters in general to carry out their activities. In other words, the reform programme is now becoming simply the way we do business. We also need to think beyond the package of reforms that were agreed by the IASC in 2005-06. The Independent Evaluation of Humanitarian Response Capacity carried out in 2005⁵ made a number of recommendations on which we have yet to act and of which we must not lose sight.

Finally, the Global Humanitarian Platform, which is not an IASC initiative per se but which has the full support of the IASC, is a useful forum for re-examining the whole question of partnership.

International humanitarian response is still a Western-dominated enterprise and one which urgently needs to be adapted to reflect the realities of the 21st century. In particular, we need to recognise the many new Southern NGOs and the fact that many NGOs now dwarf UN agencies in terms of operational capacity, budget and size. The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) – an initiative flowing from a July 2006 dialogue between the UN and NGOs⁶ – provides

A refugee family in Chad carrying their belongings after their makeshift shelter was flooded.



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not be too impatient in looking for quick results. But neither should we tolerate complacency. There is no reason to put off until tomorrow what we can start doing today.

The Cluster Approach is not just about improving sectoral coordination at the country level; it is also about building up global humanitarian response capacity, particularly in areas where we often saw gaps in the past. As a result of the Cluster Approach, there are now globally accessible, centrally managed emergency stockpiles and other resources that governments can call on to complement their own response. Resources for a given sector (such as emergency shelter) are managed

two years into the IASC humanitarian reform process, I think the time has come to stop talking about reform and to simply concentrate on making the most effective use of all the instruments and mechanisms that we now have at our disposal. Humanitarian Coordinators have clear terms of reference and we must hold them properly accountable for complying with these. The CERF provides an excellent mechanism for funding vital programmes at the start of new emergencies and in neglected crises and we need to continue to maximise its use. The broad focus on sectors and clusters, rather than on individual agency mandates, is here to stay and we need to continue to strengthen the capacities of cluster

us with a unique opportunity for further dialogue amongst a wide range of humanitarian actors on these and other issues.

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1. IASC is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc

2. See previous FMR articles: www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2531.pdf and www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/BrookingsSpecial/06.pdf

3. <http://cerf.un.org>

4. For a list of global cluster lead agencies, see: <http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=217>

5. www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2005/ocha-gen-02sep.pdf

6. www.icva.ch/ghp.html