

Humanitarian reform: a view from CAR

by Toby Lanzer

As the Humanitarian Coordinator in the Central African Republic (CAR), it is my job to ensure that the UN and humanitarian organisations work together to meet needs as efficiently as we can.

The intensity of the debate around humanitarian reform is heartening. It is good to know that the challenges that we face in the field on a daily basis – such as scarce or belated funding and gaps in the humanitarian response and coordination – are being discussed at headquarters and in capitals around the world. The reform process can harmonise approaches to humanitarian action, tighten relations between headquarters and the field and build on best practice. We need to embrace the reform process and give it all we have got.

In this article, I would like to explain how we are putting in place the main elements of humanitarian reform

in CAR – funding, partnerships, coordination and strengthened leadership – and lessons that might be learned from the experience so far.

Funding

Money may or may not ‘make the world go round’ but humanitarian response is impossible without it. This has been noted often, and was an integral part of the deliberations giving birth to Good Humanitarian Donorship¹, and shortly thereafter to the overhaul and conversion of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)² from a revolving (loan) to a response (grant-making) fund. In CAR the CERF has helped boost overall humanitarian funding

by nearly 17% in 2006-07 and has been a catalyst for rapid response.

In CAR we became aware very quickly that NGOs are disadvantaged by not being able to apply to the CERF. But they can benefit. In CAR’s capital, Bangui, UNDP applied for funding on behalf of NGOs and managed its receipt and disbursement. NGOs have told me that the process is working. At the same time, we have created a specific fund, known as the Emergency Response Fund or ERF, designed to cover NGO start-up costs and to cover gaps in response. Four donors have pooled \$3.5 million into the ERF, which can disburse up to \$250,000 in a matter of days, based on a one-page project proposal. CERF and ERF proposals are vetted by clusters before being submitted to the Humanitarian Coordinator for approval. As such, projects have the



A displaced girl in a temporary school near Paoua, CAR, opened by UNICEF and COOPI (Cooperazione Internazionale) in the bush as families are too afraid to send their children back to their home villages, August 2007.

The leader of a small group of IDPs near Paoua, in the north of CAR, August 2007



UNHCR/Nicolas Rost

dual role of meeting critical needs and reinforcing coordination.

The CERF and ERF have been crucial to our work. Without them we would not have been able to deliver the food aid needed to see the displaced people in CAR through the 'hunger gap' between harvests. We would also not have been able to deliver seeds and tools to protect the million people who have been affected by the conflict in CAR from missing another harvest. With this funding we have been enabled to undertake a comprehensive study of the situation and needs of the displaced population, which will dramatically improve our understanding and analysis of the emergency at hand.

Partnerships

Despite the different mandates and cultures of humanitarian organisations, and there are many,

we are bound by our common, stated purpose: to provide succour to people struck by violence or natural disasters, based on the well-founded principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. In essence, we all share a common responsibility to do what we profess. Whether we work for Médecins Sans Frontières, the International Committee of the Red Cross or a UN agency, the universal and timeless principles espoused by international humanitarian law, and our responsibility to abide by them, bind us. Of course there are difficulties in working together; different organisational cultures, sources of funding and bureaucratic politics often hamper the extent to which organisations collaborate. Yet, it really should be possible to work together while respecting our diverse approaches to our task. In CAR, we have established a common forum for discussing the political and

security context, assessing people's needs, elaborating sector priorities and defining a strategy to meet them. The forum, which we call the Humanitarian and Development Partnership Team (HDPT),³ is informal and based on equality and mutual respect. Our weekly meetings have clear agendas, presentations by different organisations, clear outputs and, perhaps best of all, never last longer than an hour. And for anyone who does not wish to raise an issue or who cannot make the meeting, my door is open for bilateral meetings.

Clusters should be a rather straightforward issue but have suffered from too much discussion and too many reports. I am concerned that words are overtaking action. The Cluster Approach, just like the sector approach that preceded it in the field, is about much more than 'information sharing'. That is just

the start for the goal is a predictable and accountable humanitarian response in all sectors and, on an inter-cluster basis, to make sure that all needs are addressed. What is so hard about that? Regular and well-organised interaction between the key organisations working in the same areas of humanitarian response is possible provided we can address recurring obstacles – competition, egos and poorly-run meetings.

Before rolling out the Cluster Approach in CAR, we took time to review precisely what we expect from cluster leads and cluster participants. More work on this remains, and we review progress regularly. The essence, however, is clear: making sure that people in need get the right protection and assistance, on time. For cluster leads, the notion of ‘provider of last resort’ can be daunting, especially in an environment like CAR where funding remains relatively scarce and insecurity hampers access. A key challenge for me as HC is to give cluster leads the support they may need to assume their tasks.

Leadership

Raising the quality of Humanitarian Coordinators is vital to improved coordination. The IASC is creating a pool of qualified and pre-approved Humanitarian Coordinators to be deployed in the event of a breaking emergency or, if present in a country already, be appointed without delay.⁴ Just before being appointed the UN Resident Coordinator in CAR in June 2006, I was included in the pool of Humanitarian Coordinators. The pool had not yet been used and it was after my arrival in CAR that I was asked to become Humanitarian Coordinator. In the case of CAR, being Resident Coordinator (for development) and Humanitarian Coordinator makes perfect sense for several reasons. First, non-UN entities (whether the government, donors, the Red Cross or NGOs) have a one-stop shop when looking for the ‘head of the UN agencies’. Second, in this particular setting the link between humanitarian action and development is strong. Working to meet urgent needs in a deteriorating humanitarian situation, without losing sight of the big development picture, is a central feature of the job. Ensuring both must surely be less complicated if the same person is in charge of each

aspect. If the RC is in charge of UN staff safety and security, it makes sense being the HC as it is precisely the staff engaged in humanitarian action that are most at risk.

There can be problems in being RC and HC. First and foremost, the inherent tension between UN development work where ‘government comes first’ on the one hand, and humanitarian action which is ‘people-based’ on the other. In the case of CAR, this tension does not pose a major challenge. Close working relations and much advocacy have helped address the issue. Second, humanitarian coordination is not something that can be done ‘on the side’ of other tasks. It is a full-time job. This means, of course, that an RC-HC has two full-time jobs. (Or, in my case, three for I am also the UNDP Resident Representative.)

HCs need direct support, which to some extent they get from OCHA. RCs are supported by the UN Development Group (UNDG)⁵. In cases where an RC becomes HC, and is also the UNDP Resident Representative, that responsibility really needs to be handed over to a UNDP country director. It is not only a question of how many jobs one man or woman can do simultaneously but also a question of neutrality. A coordinator, I believe, should not manage an agency which implements programmes, and which therefore has vested interests, on a day-to-day basis. Strong UNDG support for the RC and OCHA support for the HC are indispensable. If that support is given, I am convinced that we will see more and more HCs that make a real difference to the efficiency of humanitarian operations. And, eventually, in some settings we could consider putting aside the ‘resident’ and ‘humanitarian’ distinction, and have the ‘coordinator’ supported by integrated UNDG-OCHA offices. Such a move would also enhance efficiency.

Local buy-in to reform

Humanitarian reform needs to be implemented in close concert with national authorities. This is particularly true in countries like CAR where humanitarian needs are so closely inter-twined with underdevelopment. Maintaining a strong link with the national counterpart is important for two

reasons. First, to ensure that we do not forget that it is essentially the government’s responsibility to protect and serve its citizens, and that humanitarian action is short-term help. Second, because humanitarian action should be linked with recovery efforts, which, in CAR’s case, will inevitably feed into the government’s plans for the long-term development of the country. As one step towards achieving this aim, we are integrating information management on humanitarian and development issues. Working from the Ministry of Planning, the information management team will create a single system for tracking both development cooperation and humanitarian action. This is not a ‘sell-out’ but a ‘buy-in’ and it is our hope that this will contribute to the sustainability of the humanitarian work we do in CAR. As the proud wearer of both the Resident Coordinator and the Humanitarian Coordinator hats, ensuring such continuity is high on my agenda.

I am very pleased to see how NGOs, the Red Cross, UN agencies, donors and the government have welcomed humanitarian reform. None of us has been charmed by reform for reform’s sake but, while respecting the independence and mandates of each institution, we are working together, better. This is bound to help the most important people in the equation. We must not allow the reform process to become another bureaucratic layer, with pointless meetings or added layers of paperwork. Heavy reporting mechanisms and inflexible implementation of initiatives must be shunned if humanitarian reform is to catch on and stick. Most of this hinges on aid agencies, and in CAR we’re making progress. However, money is crucial. This remains a hurdle for us here, and we count on donors to help us overcome it.

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1. www.goodhumanitariananddonorship.org
2. <http://cerf.un.org>
3. www.hdptcar.net
4. See article by Claire Messina on page 23
5. www.undg.org