

Strengthening the Humanitarian Coordinator system

by Claire Messina

Humanitarian Coordinators are – or should be – the pivot around which field coordination of humanitarian action revolves. How can we ensure this is always the case?

Calls to improve the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) system have been heard since its inception. Yet for a while the ‘HC strengthening’ pillar of humanitarian reform lagged behind, mainly due to the lack of an institutional home for it within OCHA. This changed recently, with the establishment of a dedicated unit in OCHA Geneva.

We humanitarian actors want HCs to be among the best and brightest in our community; we want them to mirror our diversity in terms of gender, geographical origins and organisation of origin; we want them to be well-trained; we want them to be provided with opportunities to learn from their peers; and we want them to be evaluated on a regular basis.

We also need to clarify when we want an HC, how we want to select them, what we want HCs to do, how we want to support them and how we want to hold them accountable. Last but not least, if we are serious about strengthening the HC system, we – UN agencies and NGOs – must provide HCs with the support they need to perform their job.

We should not focus solely on HCs. Time and again, we see Resident Coordinators struggling to cope with humanitarian emergencies without having the right experience and support. Most disasters are small-scale, localised events that do not lead to the appointment of an HC. It is therefore essential that RCs are equipped to prepare for and coordinate emergency responses.

Plans

We plan to identify individuals who have the potential to become HCs and develop career paths for them. Someone with an NGO background, for instance, could be placed for a few

months in a UN agency or in OCHA to familiarise him/herself with the way the UN functions. Conversely, someone with a purely UN background would be placed in an NGO to understand better how NGOs work. Affirmative action measures could be devised to give priority – at similar levels of competence – to women and individuals from the South. All candidates would be sponsored for the Resident Coordinator Assessment, a skills-based test that is a prerequisite for being considered for RC positions. (Since most HCs are also RCs, it has de facto become a prerequisite for HC positions as well.) If successful, these individuals would be placed in a pool from which candidates for RC/HC positions would be drawn. All these steps would be taken collectively by an inter-agency panel under the auspices of the IASC – with the proviso that, ultimately, the prerogative of designating HCs rests with the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

We also plan to revamp the format of the annual HC Retreat to allow for peer-to-peer exchanges of experience and best practices. Thematic workshops will be organised for groups of concerned HCs on issues such as protection, IDPs, transition and civil-military relations.

For RCs working in disaster-prone countries, we have started holding regional workshops on humanitarian coordination to familiarise them with the role they are expected to play in a humanitarian emergency and to let them know about all the tools and services that are available to them. The first workshop was held in Thailand in October.

OCHA will draft policy papers on key issues relating to humanitarian coordination, based on consultations with IASC member agencies and RCs/HCs themselves, and submit

them to the IASC for approval. Issues will include the selection of HCs (we are particularly concerned to ensure transparency and the involvement of all main humanitarian actors – including NGOs – in the selection of HCs); HC support structures in the field; and HCs’ role in new funding mechanisms. The Terms of Reference of HCs will also be revised as the current ones are outdated, excessively lengthy and lack any sense of priorities.

The interface between the HC and RC systems is critical, given that the joint RC/HC model has become the preferred option. Yet the role played by the humanitarian community in RC selection, induction, training, appraisal and broader systemic issues is not commensurate to its stake in the system. We will therefore need to step up our engagement in RC system processes.

To help HCs identify and focus on priorities, a ‘compact’ will be developed between John Holmes (Emergency Relief Coordinator, ERC) and each HC. This sort of personal contract will also provide a documented basis for mutual accountability: of the HC to the ERC, and of the ERC – and, through him, of OCHA and IASC member agencies – to the HC.

Strengthening the HC system is a long-term endeavour that will take several years to come to fruition. It is the collective responsibility of all IASC member agencies to make it happen. An ‘HC Group’ has been established under the aegis of the IASC and a workplan drawn up. Implementation has begun.

HCs do not belong to OCHA, or even to the UN: they belong to all humanitarian actors. Let us work together to help them do their job better.

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