

Reform in focus: the IFRC perspective

by Robert Mister

Significant effort and resources have been devoted to the humanitarian reform process to date but it remains unclear as to whether it will result in a significant impact on the lives of the vulnerable people with whom and for whom the Federation works.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) takes part in many of the inter-agency groups that are developing or refining aspects of the reform process and actively participates in a number of the global clusters. For example, it has taken an active role in the OCHA-led Task Team looking at the activation and function of the clusters, the Humanitarian Coordination System Strengthening Project and the wider discussions taking place within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

In 2005 the Federation was asked by Jan Egeland, then UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, to lead the cluster for emergency shelter following natural disasters. Following extensive discussions with national societies, the Federation agreed to take on a role as convener rather than leader of the cluster. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Federation and OCHA specifies that the IFRC will be convener but will not act as a provider of last resort, nor will it be accountable to the Emergency Relief Coordinator. At the country level it designates the Federation rather than the national society to be convener. The Federation has argued for these exclusions from the normal cluster leadership role in order to maintain the Red Cross and Red Crescent Fundamental Principles, particularly impartiality, neutrality and independence.

The International Federation continues to work with UN agencies – through the IASC – on humanitarian reform, particularly the Cluster Approach. The Federation recognises that reform was greatly needed and that the process is

beginning to show results. A number of areas, however, are still in need of reform. There remains a serious gap in humanitarian financing, beyond the CERF, with a need for more predictable and more flexible funding that can be made rapidly available to non-UN agencies and local organisations such as Red Cross or Red Crescent national societies and NGOs.

IFRC recognises the importance of, and is committed to, a process of humanitarian reform that will bring real benefits to vulnerable people affected by natural disaster. We see the need for effective coordination among all stakeholders in a way that promotes the complementary roles of the various humanitarian agencies, avoids duplication and gaps and, as a result, maximises the impact of the Federation's response. But we also recognise that more needs to be done to further develop effective partnership at a country level between the various humanitarian stakeholders. Effective country-level coordination after a disaster needs to include the national society, the Federation and/or the ICRC, if they are playing a key or significant role in the response or with preparedness and risk reduction measures. A coordination mechanism that excludes organisations, whether they are national authorities or the national Red Cross or Red Crescent society, cannot be an effective mechanism.

The focus of current humanitarian reform has been on international assistance. More attention needs to be paid to improving national preparedness and contingency planning, particularly for natural disasters, with the full involvement of

national authorities, the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent, NGOs and civil society. Further work is also required by the UN and the international community to strengthen local, national and regional capacities for disaster management.

The International Federation stresses the need to enhance the ability of local communities, civil society and the Red Cross and Red Crescent to deal not only with response but also with extreme vulnerability. This may be the most viable way of reducing the number of deaths, injuries, illnesses and overall impact of disasters, diseases and public health emergencies at a time when climate change threatens increasing humanitarian crises. It is for this reason that the International Federation has worked with OCHA



Floods,
Kenya, 2006.

and UNDP to ensure that the IASC develops plans to provide a more risk-informed humanitarian approach. It is also why we stress that global spending on preparedness and risk reduction must be increased dramatically if we are to make real inroads and significantly reduce the impact of future disasters.

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