

Neglect of the third pillar

by Manisha Thomas

The UN-led humanitarian reform is described as having three pillars: clusters, financing and the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) system. Unfortunately the HC pillar has been given the least attention – despite the central role of the HC in humanitarian response – and only recently received dedicated support from OCHA for a longer-term strategy.

Two key components of the HC pillar of reform – the HC pool and improving the appointment process of HCs – need to be moved forward by the UN, and particularly by OCHA under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This is vital if this pillar is to prove its value, particularly to the NGO community.

The managers of the pool of HCs identified a number of pre-approved UN and non-UN staff who would be ready for deployment in case of a humanitarian crisis. Several NGO candidates were approved for the HC pool, with most preferring to serve as dedicated HCs, not as both Resident Coordinators (RCs) and HCs, so as to focus on humanitarian action. The HC function is, after all, meant to apply to the broader humanitarian community, while the RC function is a UN one.

It is unfortunate that to date only one non-UN person has come through the pool to be deployed as an HC – to Uganda in early 2007. Due to a number of complicating factors, the posting eventually had to be withdrawn. The Uganda experience should not, however, be used as the litmus test for deploying non-UN HCs from the pool. That situation was unique and the lessons identified should be put to use in another non-UN deployment from the pool. Right now, however, the formula of combining the RC and HC functions in one person continues to be the UN's modus operandi, with the result that some NGOs are questioning whether the UN even wants non-UN candidates to become stand-alone HCs.

Having a separate HC, who is not also the RC, would allow for more dedicated leadership of the humanitarian response. When a

person has too many hats to wear, there is a risk that they will have insufficient time to lead efficient and inclusive coordination mechanisms to achieve an effective humanitarian response. There are, of course, examples constantly cited of HCs who wear several hats and can still lead effective humanitarian responses. Two have contributed articles to this issue of FMR.¹ The cases of these exemplary RCs/HCs are, however, few and far between and the ability to juggle their different roles always seems to come down to unique skills and personalities. The support functions provided by OCHA and UNDP for the HC and RC functions, respectively, are also essential in allowing good candidates to be able to better perform their jobs.

The appointment process of HCs – and the way in which more of the exemplary HCs can be identified (whether for a dedicated HC or combined RC/HC position) – continues to be shrouded in mystery. One of the criticisms from the NGO community for years has been that too often RCs, with little (or no) humanitarian experience, are also appointed as HCs. Certain leadership qualities may be shared between the RC and HC functions but in a humanitarian response understanding the basics of humanitarian action is essential. The UN agencies negotiate over who can be put forward as HCs for each country before the question ever reaches the Inter-Agency Standing Committee which is supposed to be consulted by the ERC for HC appointments. The ERC continues to propose HC candidates already agreed by the UN, with the hope that the non-UN representatives will not object to the person – even if s/he has limited humanitarian experience. When

objections are noted, the follow-up by the UN has been minimal.

Until the UN makes the process by which HCs are proposed and appointed more transparent – including with clear criteria measuring the person's ability to lead a humanitarian response in an inclusive manner – and more responsive to non-UN concerns, there will continue to be questions around the HC system.

One other area where more work needs to be done is in terms of the accountability of HCs. A first step is being taken with the proposed 'compacts' between the ERC and HCs. This agreement, of sorts, should be based on discussions with various humanitarian actors (including national and international NGOs in the country), which would then help the HC to identify priorities and the support required of the ERC and OCHA. The compact would provide a means of mutual accountability between the HC and the ERC. How that accountability will extend to the broader humanitarian community needs to be clarified.

HCs play too important a role in the reform process and the overall humanitarian response for this pillar of reform not to be put centre stage. If the HC function is truly meant to apply to the broader humanitarian community, then the UN needs to ensure that the HC pool is used for non-UN deployments and that the processes around the HC system are more transparent and inclusive of the non-UN humanitarian community. Otherwise, there is the risk that this pillar of reform will continue to exist more in name than in reality.

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1. See articles by Ross Mountain and Toby Lanzer.