

Towards a stronger humanitarian response system

by Jan Egeland

Recent humanitarian emergency operations have often fallen short of their goals. For many years we have discussed the need for change. The time for change is now.

The Indian Ocean tsunami disaster and the Darfur crisis compelled me to commission an independent study to evaluate the humanitarian response system. The findings of the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR)¹ spoke loud and clear: while, over the years, we had managed to save millions of lives, our response system was plagued by severe gaps. The needs of the internally displaced were often the first to fall between the cracks. The UN Secretary-General's report *In Larger Freedom*² recognised this fact and called for the strengthening of the inter-agency operational response to the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced persons.

Against the backdrop of this reform mandate, the UN, NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement have been working over the past three months, through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)³, to strengthen the following inter-related elements: first, the humanitarian response capacity; second, humanitarian coordination; and third, humanitarian financing. We are confident that the significantly upgraded response system will be operational by early 2006.

The overall aim of the reform is to improve the predictability, timeliness and effectiveness of the response to

humanitarian crises, strengthening existing collaborative approaches within a system characterised by enhanced accountability. Our hope is that the response will be improved for all affected populations, particularly the internally displaced, in sectors where critical gaps have been identified, both in situations of complex emergency and natural disaster.

A major weakness in responding to internal displacement crises has been the absence of clear operational accountability and leadership in key sectors. These have included camp coordination and management; emergency shelter; water and sanitation; nutrition; and the cross-cutting areas of reintegration and recovery and protection. As a result, agencies have often been reluctant in many displacement crises to take on responsibilities relating to the internally displaced that do not strictly fall within their core mandates. The

HRR has also highlighted the urgent need for additional human capacity to strengthen the pool of existing and readily deployable expertise.

To address this problem we have moved towards a clear allocation of leadership for various sectors, designating an agency lead for each of the sectors or 'clusters' where systemic and critical gaps exist. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been asked by the IASC to accept the managerial lead and responsibility for camp coordination and management, emergency shelter and the protection of internally displaced persons in situations of armed conflict. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has been asked to take the lead on early recovery while UNICEF will lead on water and sanitation. In practical terms, the cluster leader is responsible for mapping needs, planning, monitoring, coordination and reporting. It acts as the first port of call and provider of last resort. Cluster lead responsibility also involves accepting operational/management accountability and working towards

Jan Egeland talking to IDPs at a camp near Hargeisa, Somalia.



the overall strengthening of capacity in the sector, i.e. through building strong stand-by partnerships with other international organisations, NGOs and regional and local authorities.

Managing the collaborative approach to internal displacement and agency responsibility and accountability, however, ultimately depends on the abilities and leadership of Humanitarian Coordinators. Improved selection procedures, a larger pool of experienced Humanitarian Coordinators with strong humanitarian experience (including from our NGO partners), expanded training and greater delegated authority in such areas as prioritisation and needs mapping will help strengthen humanitarian coordination.

Finally, swift and predictable humanitarian action requires timelier humanitarian funding. Readily available funds to jump-start our emergency operations help save lives. Darfur is a case in point. By April 2004, Darfur had become the number one humanitarian crisis in the headlines and the Security Council discussed Darfur regularly. In May, the Government of Sudan lifted most access restrictions, thanks to increased international pressure. However, newfound access did not produce an immediate increase in humanitarian assistance given the long delay in receipt of funds. The funding gap did not narrow substantially until September, leaving more than one million internally displaced persons waiting for basic assistance. Once adequate funds were available in August 2004, the humanitarian system swiftly built up some 12,000 humanitarian staff and dramatically increased assistance in all sectors. As a result, mortality rates dipped below emergency thresholds between August 2004 and May 2005.

The current system of transforming donor pledges against humanitarian appeals into actual funds for operations is too slow. The inability to provide at least life-saving assistance in the most critical sectors within the early days of an emergency exacerbates humanitarian suffering, costs lives and leads to loss of credibility with beneficiaries. As a global community we must and can do better.



Jan Egeland with IDP children, Uganda.

For this reason, the UN Secretary-General in his reform report has proposed upgrading the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF)⁴, the \$50 million loan facility established in 1991 that has become too small in the age of large-scale operations. The upgraded CERF will include a \$450m grant component to offer UN humanitarian organisations instant funds to jump-start operations when a new disaster strikes and to inject equity into the system for forgotten emergencies. The expanded emergency fund was endorsed by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the 2005 World Summit Declaration⁵. Also, during the World Summit some 30 governments voiced their support and pledged \$175 million in new additional funds as an initial instalment to the CERF. Once approved by the UN General Assembly in November of this year, the Fund will be operational in January 2006.

The current reform shows that responding to the needs of the internally displaced is well beyond the capacity of any single agency. A collaborative response is required, one that pulls together and maximises the comparative advantages of government officials, UN agencies, international organisations and international and local NGOs.

Yet this system cannot work without the leadership and coordination needed to manage the response, the operational capacity necessary to

respond to the needs of the displaced and the resources required to fund the response. Cumulative weaknesses in all of these areas have led to the failures on the ground that we all know too well. Hence, it requires strengthening of all the above-mentioned elements to successfully improve our response to IDPs and vulnerable populations more broadly.

Internally displaced persons remain the most vulnerable of groups – uprooted, dispossessed, traumatised and often forgotten or neglected. As part of the wider UN reform agenda, we must seize the current momentum and jointly build a stronger humanitarian system, one that is able to respond swiftly, more timely and predictably – in the interest of the tens of millions of IDPs and other vulnerable people whose only hope to reclaim their lives, livelihoods and dignity we often embody.

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