



Minutes Roundtable



Humanitarian NGOs in a changing world: How do we adapt?

Monday March 15th 2010, 17:30 – 19:30

Mr Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, President of VOICE, welcomed the audience and described this event as the introduction of an Anglo-Saxon discussion to the “old continent” of Europe. ALNAP and HFP are actively involved in the study of the humanitarian system. The future has already begun and what was done in the past will affect the future. To better work in the future, better data and a vision about the future are needed.

Ms Schick, VOICE Director presented the Humanitarian Futures Programme as an innovative project gathering policy-makers, scientists and practitioners and aiming at making humanitarian organisations more agile and adaptive.

Dr. Randolph Kent stressed the need for those organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities to begin to prepare now for a future in which the types, dimensions and dynamics of crisis drivers will change exponentially. He noted the important message arising out of ALNAP’s recent report, *The State of the Humanitarian System*, which suggested that while the system has improved “its own internal mechanics and performance...it has remained deficient in some big picture requirements for effectiveness.”

In noting the changing nature of humanitarian challenges, he also emphasised that through closer and more systematic engagement and “dialogue” with the social and natural sciences opportunities to mitigate such challenges should become more evident.

One has, however, to acknowledge in the first instance the challenges. One will have to accept that new types of crisis drivers are in the offing. For example, possibly linked to climate change, the storage of radioactive materials will erode more quickly and leaks will affect the water supply and agricultural lands in various parts of Central Asia and possibly beyond. The meaning of crisis response will be totally different when individuals will be affected by such leakages and will need assistance for many years to come. In South Asia, melting ice and declining recharge rates in the Himalayas will result in a combination of human and natural actions that will leave hundreds of millions of people exposed to complex crisis drivers. And the prospect of the collapse of cybernetic systems could leave significant portions of the globe paralysed when it comes to infrastructure and livelihoods. The challenge for humanitarian agencies will be to see how they would be able to prepare and respond to the implications of these and other types of threats.

The dimensions of humanitarian crises can no longer be seen as the domain of “the hapless South”, but – as evidenced by the 2004 Hurricane Katrina – increasingly global. The resource margins that for the past fifty years made the North seem less vulnerable to the full impact of humanitarian crises will most likely decline. When it comes to the dynamics of future crises, humanitarian organisations will be faced with crises that are “synchronous,” namely, that reflect the collapse of significant portions of economic and political systems. Crises in the future will increasingly be simultaneous. In other words, several major crises will happen at the same time. And crises of the future will be sequential, or, “cascading” – one crisis triggering a series of others.

The humanitarian environment, too, may change the ways that humanitarian organisations will work. Humanitarian assistance will become increasingly political and politicised as crisis drivers expose economic and structural weaknesses of states. The assumption that humanitarian principles are universal may also be challenged in a globalised world that is at the same time increasingly “local”, increasingly aware of cultural and historical differences. With such prospects in mind, governments will be more inclined to choose who they feel to be appropriate relief organisations -- be they commercial organisations or organisations that are inclined to support governments’ views.

Bearing such challenges in mind, organisations with humanitarian roles and responsibilities will have to test their *futures capacities*. They will have to become more anticipatory, more

willing to speculate about *what might be*. They will have to be more adaptive, that is to say, they will have to update their strategies more regularly in light of rapidly changing operational environments. Organisations of the future will also have to be more collaborative. They will have to enhance their own and their collective capacities by engaging consistently and coherently with an ever widening range of actors, including scientists, those from the commercial sector, from the Diaspora and from "non-state actors". Finally, organisations of the future will have to focus on innovation, on new and more effective approaches for crisis prevention, preparedness and response. They will have to develop a capacity to identify, prioritise and implement innovations and practices that will fulfil the historic responsibility and role of humanitarian organisations, namely, to save life.

After a brief introduction by Ms. **Kathrin Schick**, Mr **John Mitchell** and **Paul Harvey** presented the pilot study from ALNAP entitled -*The State of the Humanitarian System*-.

Mr. Mitchell exposed the methodology used and the context of the report. One key objective of ALNAP is to improve system-wide humanitarian performance. The writing of the report created several methodological challenges; the need for identifying available data, the lack of data on impact and on global needs, gaps in the understanding of affected populations and the absence of a precedent for assessing system wide humanitarian performance.

The humanitarian system can be divided into a formal and an informal system. The formal system is composed of the providers, the implementers and the recipients of humanitarian aid. The informal system includes neglected actors such as the military, the affected governments or the local humanitarian system. The study is based on existing data, literature reviews complemented by interviews with 500 key humanitarian actors.

Paul Harvey then described the humanitarian system and presented the main findings of the report.

The aid worker population has increased by 6% each year over the last 10 years. Today, the number of humanitarian field staff is estimated to be 210 800, without taking into account aid workers from local NGOs. Even if the resources of the system vary according to the sources consulted, the reality must be between \$ billion 7 and \$ billion 18.

The criteria used to assess the performance of the system are the OECD-DAC criteria – relevance/appropriateness, connectedness, coherence, coverage, efficiency and effectiveness – complemented by other established standards such as the Sphere Project and/or the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership standards. The main findings of the report are:

- *Coverage* : Funding is increasing and coverage is more equitable across sectors and emergencies – because of the new pooled funding mechanisms. Access is declining due to insecurity and/or governmental restrictions ;
- There is a universal perception of insufficiency because the humanitarian system is inconsistent. Funding is still insufficient especially in protracted crises but, at the same time, there is a pressure to spend in some high profile crises ;
- *Relevance/Appropriateness* : even if new innovations are occurring, improvements in assessment and prioritisation need to be taken further;
- *Effectiveness*: the timeliness of aid delivery is improving but there are still problems in handing over to local authorities. Coordination has improved through the clusters but leadership is still lacking. A growing emphasis has been put on Disaster Risk Reduction. More should be done in terms of monitoring and of staff development;
- *Connectedness*: Even if more emphasis has been put on capacity building, international actors often adopt a top-down approach which undermines capacity building at local level. The optimism about accountability should lead to concrete changes. It is also noted that complaints mechanisms have helped to develop more careful and respectful relations with beneficiaries;
- *Efficiency*: efficiency tends to be overlooked and a chronic under-investment in capacities is noted. Corruption is a neglected issue and more efforts should be made in terms of coordination which is worth its costs.
- *Coherence*: More collective steps are needed to ensure a principled approach to humanitarian aid and to advocate for respect for the humanitarian principles. A focus on key cross cutting issues – such as gender, disability – is lacking and aid agencies seem confused about what protection means.

Overall the system has improved its performance. Aid makes a difference in enabling affected people to survive during and recover after a crisis. However, while progress has been made some aspects are still insufficient.

As a conclusion, Mr. **John Mitchell** emphasized the key next steps for this initiative. This report could be considered as a baseline for future assessments of the sector. In the future impact assessments and beneficiary surveys will be needed to improve the quality of the report. As weaknesses and barriers in the humanitarian system are now identified, shared goals can be easily created. This report also intends to show the importance of dealing with unmet needs and to enable the humanitarian system to be more self-assured.

Discussion

Following the presentations, several questions were raised about methodological issues, especially about the future integration of impact assessment and beneficiaries' opinions, about the hierarchy of the criteria selected for the evaluation and about the potential creation of a disaggregated index. Mr Mitchell thinks impact assessment and beneficiary opinions are very important but that more data are needed to integrate them in the report. Therefore, this report can not be considered as a full baseline because these elements are crucial. In a concept note developed three years before the project, the creation of a disaggregated index was proposed but refused. Concerning the weighting of criteria, this was an interesting but complex issue because information about how to weigh and calibrated data was lacking. To give the system the time to change, the report will be issued first every two years and then every three years. New criteria and a balance score card approach will be introduced. More evaluation will be used and more interviews will be undertaken. In the future, the challenge will be to monitor the progress of a changing system against the same unchanged baseline.

Regarding the recommendations to the humanitarian sector, Randolph Kent pointed out that the sector is risk-averse in terms of innovative thinking. It needs to develop new channels of dialogue to build coalitions outside of its traditional alliances. It is also worthwhile to clearly define what is needed, innovation will then follow.

Concerning the future challenges that humanitarian actors will have to face, the main issue will be the behaviour of assertive governments restricting access to their populations. John Mitchell pointed out three categories of reaction. Following the Chinese earthquake, the national government dealt with the crisis alone. On the contrary in Darfour, the response is extensively international. The response to the earthquake in Pakistan was a hybrid model with a combination of local and international efforts.

Questioned about what are the crises NGOs are expected to respond to, Randolph Kent suggested that the real issue is to make a greater effort to understand the sources of vulnerability and how these may be reduced -- now and in the future.

Concerning the need for UN strategic leadership and coordination, Randolph Kent believes that the UN needs to assume greater leadership when it comes to preparing for *humanitarian futures*. It needs to be a stronger advocate for identifying longer-term humanitarian threats and ways to address them. It needs to play a more prominent role in promoting more innovative approaches to crisis prevention, preparedness and response.

A question was raised about the instruments donors could use to be sure that their money will be spent efficiently. Paul Harvey argued that there are means for donors to know and that they have to ask the questions, aid agencies will not do it for them.

Concerning the coordination and relations between humanitarian and military actors, Paul Harvey pointed out that there are good reasons why international military involvement in humanitarian assistance does not happen more frequently. Such military engagement should be avoided, especially if they are part of the conflict. Randolph Kent believed that one will have to think very carefully about the role of the military when it comes to dealing with the types of crises that the future may hold. The military has considerable capacities that can enhance humanitarian preparedness and response. Beyond logistics, lift capabilities and in some instances protecting civilians trapped in conflict areas, the military may also be useful to assist conventional humanitarian organisations in strategic development, in strengthening surge capacities and in organisational transformation. This is a very challenging area, because in various ways humanitarians and the military do not share the same culture nor the same language. Some crises have become military campaigns and governments are

spending more on their military to increase its disaster response capacity. However, sometimes national military can be very useful in natural disasters (eg China, India).

In addition he noted that armed conflicts have become more and more unconventional. Therefore, NGOs will be increasingly forced to work with groups with which they normally do not work, (eg Hezbollah).

Asked about the contribution of Southern NGOs to the programme, Randolph Kent answered that the HFP worked with a wide range of NGOs, including NGOs that are mainly southern-based and those that have a more international focus. HFP is interested in working with any humanitarian organisation that wants to see if it has the requisite capacities to meet the challenges of the future.