

Event report

Humanitarian NGOs – something to celebrate?

*Tuesday May 22, 2012 18.00 – 20.00
Fondation Universitaire, rue d'Egmont 11, 1000 Brussels*

VOICE is 20 years in 2012; the network's anniversary offered a chance to reflect on the role of humanitarian NGOs in the past and future. What has been their contribution to the evolving humanitarian sector? What challenges should they expect in the years ahead, and how can they best prepare for these? VOICE asked three leading scholars and practitioners to share their expert views on the issue.

Speakers:

- Dr. Florika Fink-Hooijer, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Georgieva
- Prof. Thea Hilhorst, Chair of Disaster Studies, Wageningen University
- Dr. Hugo Slim, Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict at the University of Oxford

The event was chaired by Dr. Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, VOICE President

The Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Georgieva, **Dr. Florika Fink-Hooijer** opened her speech by analyzing the operational achievements enabled through the close partnership between ECHO and NGOs. She noted it is no coincidence that both VOICE and ECHO turn 20 this year; a testimony of a long and close partnership that has made a difference for millions throughout the world. Dr. Fink-Hooijer pointed out that the EU as the world's largest humanitarian donor needs strong partners to deliver humanitarian aid in a principled, timely and efficient way the more as half of ECHO's humanitarian assistance is implemented by NGOs. The partnership has also been strong in terms of common policy achievements, most prominent being the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid which enshrines the principled approach to humanitarian assistance as a global benchmark.

Dr. Fink-Hooijer continued by an analysis of key challenges in the implementing environment of humanitarian aid to which ECHO has to respond and adapt: more intense and frequent natural disasters, more armed conflicts and fragility and a tendency to politicize and militarize humanitarian aid ... At the same time it has become increasingly difficult to reach those in need due to problems of access. These challenges are combined with Europe's current severe fiscal austerity which put humanitarian resources under pressure. Dr. Fink-Hooijer told the audience that ECHO is adapting to this changing landscape, and will undergo further change, for example:

- ECHO now has a broader set of tools to respond to emergencies, namely by combining civil protection assets with humanitarian donorship
- ECHO must focus on efficiency, impact and visibility of its operations to demonstrate value added not the least in order to secure humanitarian funding also in the future.
- ECHO will engage differently with its development partners to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development and to build resilience in order to avoid countries to relapse into crisis.
- ECHO will invest in diplomacy outreach towards the new donors, advocate for more respect of IHL and principles and explore the possibility of private-public partnerships.

According to the second panelist **Prof. Thea Hilhorst**, one of the biggest changes in the humanitarian sector in the last 20 years has been the great increase in the number of lives saved in humanitarian emergencies. As an example Hilhorst mentioned the latest famine in the Horn of Africa in 2011. The Horn was hit by the worst drought in 60 years which led to famine conditions in some parts of the region but nevertheless, considering the region as a whole, caused only very few excess deaths. What remains as a challenge for the humanitarian community, and what will be increasingly important for the next 20 years, is saving societies and livelihoods. Prof. Hilhorst highlighted that now the humanitarian sector should move from saving lives to saving societies. To achieve this, improvements in the following areas are of particular importance:

- The role of local institutions: 20 years ago humanitarians assumed that in crises all institutions somehow stopped working. It is now understood that in reality, even in times of crises, people seek to continue their normal way of life, even though some institutions may obviously break down. The

humanitarian community has to become better at taking local institutions into account and building their response on them, recognizing the important role they play.

- The role of local civil society: Similarly, local NGOs should be considered more than a helping hand; they should have a real voice in actively defining and finding solutions to the crisis they are facing.
- Linking Relief Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD): LRRD requires a lot more focus in the future. Currently it is too often considered to be something one does after the crises as a separate activity. But it should in fact be integrated to the humanitarian response from the first day on. NGOs and ECHO have really been champions on this.

The evening's final panelist, **Dr. Hugo Slim** focused on the added value of humanitarian NGOs, the progress achieved in the sector in the last 20 years and the challenges ahead. In his view the key value of NGOs is that they are the 3rd force alongside governments and international organizations in international society. NGOs are a forum of release of civic energy and a channel for that energy. If international NGOs are doing their job well they also support the 4th force, national local NGOs, civil society and local governments. In addition NGOs are guarding an important civic space for people's movement when societies are closing down, and they function as value bearers – with humanitarian NGOs correspondingly acting as bearers of humanitarian values. All too often in criticizing NGOs it is easy to forget what extraordinary positive effect they have brought, all the lives they have saved and changed.

Moving to the topic of progress achieved, Dr. Slim pointed out that in the past 20 years the provision of humanitarian assistance in war and disasters has changed a lot, and in general we have achieved 'better wars'.

- Humanitarian aid now reaches all the corners of the world which was not the case 20 years ago – the humanitarian space has in fact expanded.
- Humanitarian aid has also become normative; it is almost universally accepted that aid is part of international society's action.
- Moreover, the professionalism of the sector has gone up, there are plenty of new technologies in use. New approaches and issues have found their way into humanitarian assistance including market-based approaches, women's reproductive health, protection and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

At the same time a lot of challenges remain. The three main challenges in the next 20 years will be the politization of aid; organizational challenges (including proliferation of players which is a challenge for coordination), and lastly moving to a post-colonial future where humanitarian organizations are no longer seen as part of a colonial tradition.

Discussion:

Some of the recent developments in the humanitarian sector touched upon during the panelists' speeches raised concern among the audience with regards to the future of humanitarian principles. As humanitarians are increasingly expanding their mandate and reaching to areas outside their traditional core focus, where will that leave the humanitarian principles?

The panelists were unanimous in agreeing that the humanitarian principles are still very important – they secure access to the affected populations. Compromising principles would mean losing access - if not in the crisis at hand then potentially in future crises. Looking from the outside, strict adherence to principles is not always easy to understand. For example, there were discussions on sending in military and compromising principles in Libya, and by adhering to principles in cases like this, humanitarians are sometimes accused of being too principled and hindering the saving of lives. Unfortunately the pressure to abandon them is only likely to increase as media brings the images from crises from all over the world to the general public which is quick to demand action from the international community.

Principles are also a practical tool. What happens to principles in practice is that people contextualize them and may not always use them as they were meant to be used. But they are still important and should not be underestimated as they provide us a language and a benchmark. Many humanitarians would consider that they are the practical expression of these principles; they may not read them every day but they are still giving assistance according to these principles.

Continuing with the theme of principles, it was pointed out that the EU's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department, DG ECHO, is part of the overall political body of the European Union. How can DG ECHO make sure that EU's geopolitical interests will not put aside ECHO's needs-based approach?

Dr. Florika Fink-Hooijer reminded the audience that ECHO functions as an independent service, inside the Commission. In the relationship between ECHO and EEAS, communication is key. In the Sahel,

ECHO's response is e.g. based on humanitarian needs, but of course ECHO also looks at the bigger picture of the causes of the crisis as they affect access (e.g. arms and militia spill over from Libya). ECHO has also for instance to be able to explain what kind of impact 'humanitarian corridors' may have in Syria on humanitarian access and assistance when cooperating with other actors such as the EEAS

Another much discussed topic was on new donors as in the last years many new donors have joined the humanitarian donor community. What kind of implications does the appearance of new donors have for more traditional donors who are strong on principles? How can we take the new donors better on board and move from asking for funds rather to improved cooperation?

Panelists considered that new donors have potential to bring new interesting ways of working with them e.g. linking up with local authorities and thinking that can tie in better with economic considerations. In general humanitarian assistance has to be a profoundly plural activity where everyone can give humanitarian assistance as long as they stick to the principles, especially impartiality. However it was also pointed out that politics is in fact not something outside humanitarian assistance but that there is in fact micro politics in every single step we take as humanitarians. Needs assessment, for example, is not just a technical exercise. Recognizing this and allowing these kinds of controversies to exist, could be a major step forward.

With the increasing number of humanitarian actors on the ground, a growing number of disasters and focus on efficiency, another issue that warranted a lot of attention was accreditation. Could the creation of an accreditation system ensure adherence to humanitarian principles?

The idea of an accreditation system got only cautious support from the panel – other approaches were also identified to ensure good quality humanitarian aid. The problem with an accreditation system is how to make it workable. Accreditation requires formal criteria but the formal criteria are not always the criteria that best measure quality humanitarian assistance. In fact, strong monitoring and feedback mechanism can do a lot for the quality of humanitarian assistance. This is not to say that accreditation is worthless but that strong monitoring is much more important. An ombudsman approach could be another option to address quality. Under such an approach, ombudsmen would look at humanitarian response both on their own initiative and in response to grievance; this would have been a more 'light touch' approach to professionalism and accreditation. The audience was reminded that ECHO has already a sort of an accreditation system – the Framework Partnership Agreement. ECHO is currently looking at partner differentiation as one size may not fit all. An NGO might not be able to serve in all situations but they might have that niche that others do not have and this should be taken into account in recognizing the partnership.

To close the event the panelists were asked to name some of the biggest challenges the sector is facing in the next 20 years. Having adequate funding also in the future was identified as one of them. In the current economic climate, it is increasingly difficult to justify spending money on humanitarian aid abroad when the public is focused on activities that generate growth in Europe. In terms of looking at events that would cause the biggest challenges to humanitarians, global continental war and mega-disaster in an urban setting were mentioned. No matter what the scenario, we are going to need an international humanitarian response capacity also in the future as no country can prepare by itself for every single disaster. We also need to keep the humanitarian community open to new actors. But where does that leave the traditional European approach in 20 years time? The future model will likely be a different combination of actors from the one we see today, and NGOs should consider their role in this.