

Working differently to end need regional humanitarian roundtable & workshops

Bratislava, November 14, 2016

Summary

VOICE and MVRO organised a humanitarian regional roundtable and workshops in Slovakia. 53 participants from Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Belgium and Switzerland contributed to the day's event. In a keynote speech, the Director of the Slovak Foreign Ministry for Humanitarian and Development assistance emphasised his country's commitment to advancing the discussion on bridging the humanitarian-development divide during their EU Council Presidency, and the need for political will to implement many of the challenges highlighted in the Agenda for Change. Later, two panel discussions on the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and Grand Bargain took place.

The discussion on the WHS revealed that NGOs in the region had little involvement in the preparation towards the WHS, but felt there were some useful outcomes, particularly in the Grand Bargain, that they expect to help shape national policy, dialogue and practice. They noted some similarities in how their countries had responded to the European migration crisis resulting in an increase of their countries' bilateral official development assistance (ODA) and contribution to humanitarian assistance. However further alignment of funding and strategy would be necessary. NGOs noted the negative impact political considerations on funding decisions could have on the safe delivery of assistance. Regarding European policy, the discussion showed a commitment to take forward the elements that make up the Agenda for Humanity, piece by piece. NGOs felt regret for the lack of leadership or a monitoring or indicators framework to incentivise and make sure there is accountable progress, particularly needed due to many challenges in the implementation. Participants were recommended to look at their member states' (MS) commitments on [the PACT](#), and to ensure an annual multi-stakeholder stock taking exercise at national level.

On the Grand Bargain, the emphasis was on challenges to be addressed in humanitarian financing, especially as regards the administrative and funding conditions from donors for humanitarian assistance. NRC presented the outcome of [their report](#) which highlights the hours spent on duplicating/overlapping reporting processes, terminology and cost structures. NGOs highlighted own good and bad practices in this regard. ECHO reiterated its commitment to the Grand Bargain, while a representative from the Slovakian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) highlighted the difficulties the comprehensive nature of the Grand Bargain represents for a small and new donor.

The afternoon participative workshops were on **writing humanitarian proposals** and **working in consortia**. The VOICE secretariat, and staff from People In Need, Save the Children and Norwegian Refugee Council facilitated these discussions drawing from experience within their own organisations.

Keynote introduction

Michal Mlynar – Director General, Slovakian MFA

Referring to his personal commitment to humanitarian assistance and the work being done by NGOs in the field in South Sudan, Syria and other crises, Mr Mlynar reflected that after the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) 'business as usual' is not good enough. While there's no one-size-fits-all approach, a paradigm shift is needed especially in donors' response to protracted crises. Access remains an issue that requires further attention. However, the responsibility for this and other issues contributing to escalating humanitarian needs lies with political leaders; humanitarian aid is more than a technical issue.

Bridging the gap between humanitarian aid and development is one of the priorities of the Presidency and one pillar of the Grand Bargain. Prevention and preparedness are also crucial. He underlined the need to commit to new ways of working together. For example, over the long term the inclusion of local actors, the private sector and new forms of collaboration with development banks would be important. He concluded by reflecting that NGOs are key implementers in the field, and the partnership between donors and NGOs should be further strengthened.

Beyond the World Humanitarian Summit: What does it mean for your country?

Chair: Celia Cranfield, VOICE

Ms Cranfield introduced the WHS process, gave an outline of the Agenda for Humanity and encouraged participants to consult the commitments made by their government in the online commitments platform, [the PACT](#).

Beata Lipovska, Chair of the EU member states working group on humanitarian affairs and food assistance (COHAFA) for the Slovak EU presidency

Giving an overview of Member States (MS) reflections on the WHS, she underlined that humanitarian aid alone cannot address root causes, and reduce humanitarian needs. Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding operations are all needed, while increased political commitment to prevent and resolve conflicts is urgent. MS see the 'Grand Bargain' as the most concrete outcome of the WHS. Through COHAFA, elements of the WHS are being taken forward, such as through a roundtable on cash and discussions on education in emergencies.

The challenge of next steps lies with the WHS pitfalls: with no indicators, the UN Secretary General's report does not provide a clear road map to ensure accountability. The EU MS call for UN engagement to monitor implementation of all commitments made. A high level stocktaking meeting was announced for in the next years.

Priorities for Slovakia lie with its WHS commitments: to the 5 core responsibilities, to double the level of funds for humanitarian aid and to simplify administrative burdens for implementing actors.

Kathrin Schick, VOICE

VOICE [gave an overview of political, operational and process priorities that lie ahead](#). VOICE recommends NGOs to seek a multi-stakeholder discussion at national level in relation to humanitarian aid issues by the 1st anniversary of the WHS (May 2017). Ms Schick highlighted that for MS, the WHS provides an opportunity to write or revise their humanitarian strategy through a multi-

stakeholder approach, and to ensure that the national budget is aligned with the strategy and provides predictability of national support for humanitarian partners.

She highlighted that at EU level, the development sector should engage earlier and better in protracted crises, in line with the recent 'Lives in Dignity' communication and that reflections are ongoing on the role of the private sector. See [here, reports of two interesting roundtables](#) organised in Brussels.

Marek Stys, People in Need (PiN)

In the Czech Republic (CR), the WHS and the European migration debate had followed years of ODA stagnation. Now, CR is tripling its ODA pledge and investing in EU funding mechanisms linked to migration such as the 'Madad fund'. This is additional to the ODA commitments. The portion of the aid budget going to humanitarian aid is set to double.

Czech NGOs were sceptical of the WHS but acknowledge that it helped shift the government's perspective. Thanks to the 'Grand Bargain', discussions on multiyear funding and investment in DRR have begun. The government's position on cash and support to local actors is still unclear. With a larger budget, CR should be able to implement its humanitarian aid (HA) strategy better. For PiN there's never been so much funding available. There is now a need to work more efficiently – with this additional funding. NGOs need to work with donors to increase partnership; flexibility (increased use of cash modalities); ensure predictability and longer term funding, and work more on prevention.

However, looking at concrete cases like Donetsk or Aleppo justifies NGOs' scepticism. Conflict prevention, access, and security issues are not being addressed. They remain challenges: for PiN 80% of assistance is delivered in protracted crisis or conflict affected areas and increasingly has to be managed remotely (e.g. Syria or Iraq).

He observed donors shifting to a more political approach and called on donors to retain a needs-based approach. For example, for 2017 ECHO has made less funding available to crises beyond the Middle East than previously. He asked whether ECHO would, in future, maintain its position as global needs-based donor.

Daniel Kaba, ADRA Slovakia and MVRO Board

Like their Czech counterparts, Slovak NGOs did not engage with the WHS. Mr Kaba explained that until the end of 2015 there was no vision or law in Slovakia for humanitarian aid; making 2016 the first year NGOs could apply for funding for humanitarian action. While ODA has increased against the backdrop of the migration crisis, the political narrative is unchanged. Seeing a positive trend in the bilateral and multilateral engagement of Slovakia (with still disproportionately high ratio of around 80% of total ODA in favour of multilateral aid), including with EU trust funds, Mr Kaba noted that there were six priority countries for humanitarian aid (Ukraine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and South Sudan) and 9 other countries (Kenya, Afghanistan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina), but wondered if it was strategic to have this many countries for this level of budget. Despite the recent law, it is unclear how the government can react in case of a significant natural disaster in a country not on the list.

He regretted the lack of a consistent and structured dialogue between NGOs and the government and felt prioritisation within the humanitarian portfolio would be supported by this. Slovak NGOs are also not clear on the requirements in relation to 'national components' such as whether or not the physical presence of Slovak staff or products is required in the field. From the discussions and

commitments launched by the WHS he saw potential to improve the multi-stakeholder dialogue and perhaps move towards a framework partnership type agreement with the Slovak government.

In the exchange with the audience, participants raised their concerns about dwindling funding for humanitarian assistance in Ukraine, the need to differentiate between local and international private sector actors in humanitarian action and questions regarding Slovakia's implementation of its commitments.

In their concluding remarks, the panel expressed the following priorities for progress in humanitarian assistance in the year to come: better inclusion of women and girls, partnership dialogue with the Slovak government for a more strategic approach, each EUMS to implement at least one concrete commitment, donors to ensure a needs-based approach and an end to the stalemate in the UN Security Council.



Figure 1-left to right: D.Kaba, B. Lipovska, C.Cranfield, K. Schick, M. Stys - VOICE MVRO regional roundtable, November 2016

Grand Bargain: Timely response through simplified administrative requirements

Chair: Nils Rocklin, Save the Children

He introduced the panel giving an overview of the 'Grand Bargain'. He underlined that the agenda to simplify donors' administrative conditions which was a core issue being discussed on the panel, had already been identified as a key issue in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid in 2007.

Kate McGrane, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

She presented the report of a study conducted by [NRC](#) in 2015, researching the requirements of its top 9 donors looking at their impact on financial, procurement and project cycle management. Findings of the study identified key recurring conditions having a significant impact on NRC's

missions. The 3 main areas of impact were lack of harmonised: i) reporting standards or templates (both narrative and financial), ii) cost structures and iii) terminology. If financial reports were the same, NRC alone could save 11,000 hours work per year. If the definitions of administrative support were the same NRC could save 29,000 hours work per year.

NRC highlights that the balance of risks being taken on by donors and implementing agencies should be addressed. For example, while NGOs are pushed by donors to work more in high-risk areas, in the case of a warehouse being looted, NRC loses twice: first the stock, then the reimbursement for the stolen stock to the donor. Or, in the case of counter-terrorism clauses in a contract that might require a waiver in order for the organisation to operate properly, this would require on average, per contract, 40 hours' negotiation on average.

NRC is committed to pursue an evidence based approach to advocacy on this issue, for example through the ICVA ['less paper more aid'](#) project and an upcoming GPPI study on reporting formats.

Grzegorz Gruca, Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH)

Like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Poland is increasing its aid funding which will be doubled this year, and is expected to triple in 2017. Similarly, the Middle East is the main area where money will be allocated, alongside Ukraine. In terms of the way the funding is used and the Grand Bargain priorities, NGOs still face challenges especially in relation to multiyear funding and unclear requirements in relation to humanitarian education and visibility . Concretely, NGOs sign a multiyear programme but get funding for the first year. Depending on that year's results, the second year will be disbursed. This is progress, but unsatisfactory given its unpredictability and creates gaps between the activities funded. NGOs understand that the conditions are related to the budget allocation coming from the annual reserve under the Ministry of Interior so they are advocating for the aid budget to fall under the foreign ministry's responsibility. PAH is also concerned about the risks they can take with the funding and ensuring a needs-based approach. Currently the MFA is not willing to use public funds for operations in Syria for example.

Maria Sliacka, Slovak NGO platform MVRO

In Slovakia during this first year of calls for proposals, there was about €20,000 available for each project. The priority was for Syria and surrounding countries. However, this raised questions about why choose this now after five years of conflict and humanitarian need? In practical terms then, soon after first contracts had been signed, the Interior Ministry asked NGOs to support in the delivery of government aid, putting NGOs at risk as they had not yet had a chance to establish their security procedures there.

Administratively, Slovakia had made a good start by simplifying the excel sheet for budgets (compared with development programmes). She identified a need to increase the speed of the contracting phase to give NGOs the ability to react faster. The process around this first call for proposal took up to four months and not effective for humanitarian assistance. The dialogue and relationship is considered good by the NGO platform but since within the ministry there is little understanding and little expertise of humanitarian operations in the field, the dialogue is difficult.

Moving beyond the Slovak context, she underlined that across multiple donors, the administrative difficulties extend from the format of reporting, through the format of distribution lists, to language and translations, and joint assessments. Moreover, in her experience political considerations extend beyond the choice of priority countries into the needs assessment (e.g. in different actors' influence on needs assessment in Ukraine).

She also underlined areas for NGOs to make improvements. For example, in Ukraine it was more cost effective to buy than to rent a truck, but by the time the HQ approved the decision, the distribution had ended.

In the exchange with the audience an ECHO representative from Geneva underlined that the GB is seen as a unique opportunity to improve efficiency. ECHO is interested in NGOs' perspectives on flexible funding and multi-year funding. The EU is undertaking a comprehensive review process with a view to multiannual funding, harmonised reporting, reduced earmarking through pilots in specific countries. ECHO also has a role in the facilitation group of the Grand Bargain, together with the World Food Programme, SCHR, UN Women, IFRC and EU, Switzerland.

Save the Children emphasised the long history of VOICE and the FPA Watch Group in identifying areas too improve efficiency. [VOICE's study](#) shows that there is a need to look at the wider spectrum of administrative requirements from proposal writing to audits. Joint planning: should also be linked to complementarity of financing streams, such as how to connect ECHO and DEVCO grants, using best practices.

NRC expressed its expectation that commitments trickle down to implementing actors (being INGO and local NGOs). PAH agreed with NRC that risk sharing was required from donors. For example, currently the risks in relation to cash programming in Syria are high when you look at it from a future audit perspective, but donors are reluctant to discuss this.

A representative of the Slovakian MFA underlined that for a small and new donor the administrative requirements are quite simple. But the requirements and commitments of the Grand Bargain were beyond their scope – and should rather be an ambition for them over the next 10 years.

The audience also discussed the European FPA being used at MS level, and possibilities to rely on ECHO tools and templates.



Figure 2- Panel 2, left to right: G. Gruca, K. McGrane, N. Rocklin, M. Sliacka VOICE MVRO Regional roundtable November 2016

In their concluding remarks the panellists highlighted that:

- due focus should be given to the financial aspects (not only narrative) in relation to harmonisation of reporting format.
- plenty of work for NGOs lay ahead, particularly to negotiate better with donors, develop standards and perhaps promote the FPA and ECHO formats at national level.
- concrete implementation was now urgently required
- the Grand Bargain should be reflected in the next FPA negotiation with ECHO.

Workshops:



VOICE members People in Need, Save the Children, NRC and the VOICE secretariat facilitated two participatory learning workshops for participants, on ‘how to write a good humanitarian proposal’ and ‘working in consortia’.

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction.



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