



VOICE Event – World Humanitarian Summit: What’s in it for NGOs?

Brussels, 24 November 2014

This VOICE event, a panel discussion chaired by Kathrin Schick, VOICE Director, focused on the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), particularly on the “Europe & Others” Consultation to be held in Budapest, 3-4 February 2015 and **the involvement of NGOs in the WHS process**.

The panel was formed by Nan Buzard, Executive Director, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), Barbara Jackson, Humanitarian Director, CARE International, Tamás Orosz, Humanitarian Aid Officer, Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vincent Taillandier, Operations Director, Action Contre la Faim – France. Speakers’ bios are available in the [programme](#).

The broader context of the WHS and humanitarian reform was discussed, and NGOs’ concerns regarding the governance of the WHS consultation process were raised. On the content side, NGOs focussed primarily on humanitarian effectiveness especially the Principles of Partnership and the inclusion of local actors in the humanitarian system, and on conflict, especially in relation to humanitarian principles and security of aid workers. There was agreement that NGOs should engage strongly in the process and that this was an opportunity to raise key issues of concern to all.

The **uniqueness of this Regional Consultation**, given the number of major donors, implementing INGOs and also recipients, plus the fact that humanitarian principles were largely formulated and developed in the region, makes it one of the most significant in the whole WHS process. The high attendance (just over 120 participants) shows that NGOs are interested in the first ever WHS. However, they wonder how to make sure they will be heard, given the **extent and complexity of the preparatory process**.

The work done so far by the Regional Steering Committee was explained briefly. A first Webinar was organized on 21 November to launch the Europe & Others online consultation and the 4 thematic papers to guide the consultation were expected online¹ as soon as possible. The list of participants for Budapest is also expected to be finalized soon; VOICE and InterAction are working for INGOs to be well represented. So far 30 seats have been allocated for INGOs; both networks are thus focusing on ensuring the attendance of a wide diversity of NGOs.

The overall process is **challenging** for NGOs, as well as for Member States that have not yet progressed far in their preparation. There is no common position yet and there is no EU Communication foreseen ahead of the Budapest conference. Most EU Member States want to avoid a duplication of work with the UN and are in listening mode – this could be an opportunity for NGOs to make themselves heard. About one third of the NGOs who attended the event are already engaged in the process, others find it difficult to dedicate energy and resources while operations are so challenging. NGOs from Germany, Netherlands and Ireland presented their national initiatives, underlining that for all of them preparing for the WHS is quite a long and slow process.

The organizations which have attended previous Regional Consultations commented on their disappointment both regarding participation/access and outcomes – although they agreed that in Japan the consultation was better organized. However, the main challenge for NGOs is how to **prioritize** among the many issues under discussion. One suggestion was that a role NGOs could play

¹ The briefing notes developed by the RSG for this consultation are now available online : http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_eog

is enabling policy makers to improve by integrating key cross-cutting issues such as gender (in particular amplified gender markers) and climate change.

Both panellists and participants raised concerns related to the **governance of the process**, i.e. who is making the choices/decisions, selecting the points/key issues and deciding on participants attending the regional consultations, who sees the WHS documents, and how are the online consultations valued/weighted? For instance, apparently, the issue of the politicization of humanitarian aid was taken out of some of the WHS documents. Participants asked for the issue of transparency to be raised with UN OCHA and expect a commitment to NGOs' inclusion throughout the process. On their side NGOs should monitor the documents coming out of the process to make sure that their positions and concerns are reflected.

The **purpose of the WHS** was also questioned; 25 years after the UN Resolution 46/182 established the international humanitarian system, considering the number of initiatives developed so far, is the intention of the UN to reinvigorate and reaffirm its lead? Or has the UN Reform and the Transformative Agenda been insufficient to really improve coordination, transparency and funding, requiring a new step forward? Does the UN feel its mandate challenged by the current redistribution of powers happening everywhere? How far is the UN willing to go in questioning the humanitarian system as it works currently, in revisiting coordination mechanisms and agreeing on the need for context-driven diversity?

The panellists insisted that the WHS has to be seen as a process addressing our **collective responsibility** to improve the global humanitarian response. Although "transformation has been in the air" for years, expectations should not be too high in terms of immediate outcomes and no final UN document coming at the end of the Summit would bring the needed changes at once. However, the WHS process is perceived as an **opportunity for NGOs** to promote their strengths and concerns. As regards Europe, it is an opportunity to promote the European Consensus and lobby Member States to nourish and engage in the debates. Some participants highlighted that the "Europe & Others" consultation – the US being under "Others" – should not be lecturing the rest of the world.

In terms of the **content** of the consultations, the main issues raised by the panellists throughout the discussion were about reactivating the humanitarian principles in practical terms – discussing "principled action" –, and creating the conditions for beneficiaries to express their voice including through increased ownership by local actors.

The most complicated and burning issue is **conflicts**. This issue is often avoided, and panellists felt the Transformative Agenda had not solved this. Integrated missions are controversial and alternative options should be investigated. Whereas it is clear that differentiated responses will be required in the future, the question remains on who will lead them, the UN or regional organizations. It was raised that the **Humanitarian Principles** are sometimes perceived as "Northern concepts". Still, there is a need for debate, even among Northern actors, as regards awareness and respect of those principles including their relevance to practical humanitarian aid delivery, in particular in conflict contexts. When humanitarian principles are discussed with partners in the field, this brings reality and practical needs back to the forefront and shows that compliance is not always respected or fully feasible. It was also said that humanitarian principles are concepts that required further explanation locally with local cultures. In order to develop a more inclusive and collaborative humanitarian system, values and principles have to be discussed with and understood by all partners. Under theme 4, "Serving the needs of people in conflict", it was stressed that the discussion should also extend to the security and protection of humanitarian aid workers.

Promoting the Principles of Partnership through the WHS process was seen as a very positive collective contribution that NGOs could bring forward together. The idea to further promote the Principles of Partnership with the UN, was proposed as something global for NGOs/civil society/networks, wherever from, to come together over when seeking increased effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Some foresaw the certification debate popping up in this context.

Bringing the voices of local partners, local ownership and regional leadership are definitely key issues for this Summit. Whereas the Europe & Others Consultation is expected to also have an “inward look”, it is clear that the WHS documents emphasize the **inclusion of Southern local actors** in the humanitarian system. New actors are growing and willing to enter the system. “Populations want to do the work themselves”, a panellist said. However, as the present system largely works with a top-down approach and most of the money comes from Northern donors, a shift in mind-set is needed in order for national and international actors to work together for an effective and inclusive response. To achieve inclusiveness and interoperability in the humanitarian system, coordination mechanisms will need to accommodate much more diversity. The WHS is an opportunity to address this question, acknowledging the need for thinking differently with partners, to strongly engage them in decision making and shift balances of power.

The provocative title of this VOICE Event allowed for a frank and open discussion, ending up with a reformulation: “**What could NGOs bring to the WHS?**” Panellists concluded that the WHS creates a momentum to consider a **post-2016 process** reshaping the future humanitarian system. A success would be for all NGOs to engage.

VOICE Director strongly encouraged NGOs to give their inputs now, if NGOs collectively are to make their mark on the process. As regards the **European Union**, ECHO and the Member States’ positions towards Istanbul will be clarified after the conference in Budapest. VOICE will continue engaging with a view to the EU and MS roles in the WHS.

This report was prepared by the VOICE Secretariat with support of Cécile Muller.

<p>VOICE (<i>Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies</i>) is a network representing 82 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster risk reduction. It represents and promotes the values and specific features of humanitarian NGOs.</p>	 <p>Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection</p> <p><i>This document covers humanitarian aid activities implemented with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.</i></p>
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