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VOICE-VENRO
European
humanitarian
NGO Roundtable

EVENT REPORT

27 September 2018

Introduction

Inez Kipfer-Didavi welcomed participants on behalf of the **VENRO Board**. Some highlights from her introductory remarks include:

- The need for stronger German engagement on EU issues from policy through to funding
- The challenging current environment, referring to issues such as rising populism, Brexit, shrinking civil society space, questioning of solidarity and the EU's long-term budget discussion (MFF).
- NGOs' appreciation for both the German Foreign Ministry and the European Commission's Department for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) which are both steadfast in defending humanitarian principles and for their dedicated work on the Grand Bargain.

The **VOICE President Dominic Crowley** made a speech on challenges for the sector as he sees them, including:

- The scale of needs, which are dramatic and the corresponding shortfalls in response and funding
- Challenges to operating models, and responses that potentially threaten delivery of principled aid (e.g. nexus, integrated approaches...)
- Political context likely to delay and bring uncertainty to EU funding .
- Questioning and even criminalisation of civil society responses to human suffering (e.g. Aquarius search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean) and the similarly chilling effect on civil society activity brought by a counter-terrorism environment .
- General perceptions of NGOs .

He concluded 'we do a lot, and well' and should focus on evidence of the positive impact of aid, show NGOs' added value in the delivery of assistance and strengthen our collective voice.

VOICE and VENRO co-hosted a 1 day roundtable in Berlin with 51 participants for a day's plenary discussions on priorities for humanitarian aid in 2018/2019 and the humanitarian-development nexus as well as some workshops.



Panel 1: priorities for humanitarian aid in 2018/2019

In this panel discussion, chaired by Kathrin Schick, VOICE Director, Chiara Gariazzo, from the European Commission, Michael Ahrens, from the German Foreign Ministry, and Inez Kipfer-Didavi, from VENRO outlined some of the key issues under discussion and development in the year to come. The discussion was wide ranging with keen interest from the audience.

Ms Gariazzo's speech included:

- The new FPA (**Framework Partnership Agreement**), highlighting ECHO's commitment to its partnership with NGOs and a new strategic vision to further develop a programmatic partnership with some humanitarian actors.
- The importance of the next **Multiannual Financial Framework** discussions for securing a bigger budget for humanitarian aid
- The need within the EU humanitarian budget, in the context of the overall challenge of global large-scale migration, to **balance the response to humanitarian needs** in the EU's neighbourhood and in protracted crises, with emerging and escalating crises
- ECHO's new (yet to be adopted) **civil protection mechanism: RescEU**.
- Working within the **humanitarian-development nexus**: including an interest in joint assessments, protecting the principled approach, and defining who does what and when. ECHO believes it and its partners can do more on conflict sensitivity but underlined that humanitarian aid is not subordinate to political priorities or security objectives. The needs based approach always comes first.
- Progress on the **Grand Bargain**, and the need for a compromise on all sides: e.g. simplification from donors, moves to joint assessments, transparency and results from agencies. Finally, she concluded that the new EU financial regulation does create some



opportunities to translate the Grand Bargain into the new FPA, but the exercise is not necessarily easy.

Mr Ahrens highlighted the following:

- The opportunity for German actors to stand back and **reflect on their European engagement** is too rare.
- **Forgotten crises** are a common priority between the EU and Germany.
- In Germany, the **ministry and NGOs are working jointly**, including on the public image of aid (media outreach).
- In the context of the **Grand Bargain**, he would welcome the EU joining the reporting pilot, and spoke of the differences in legal framework between Germany and EU for multi-year funding and programming. He hoped that the MFF and new financial regulation might provide some opportunities to improve on this.
- For **localisation**, the pooled funds, which are needs-based, are a critical structure for Germany. But the commitment goes beyond the quantitative financing contribution to also address qualitative support to local and national actors. They had recently undertaken some field trips to see how best to address support to NGOs rather than how much/what to support them with.

Inez Kipfer-Didavi shared her reflections on:

- The different impacts different approaches to **accountability** can have; between accountability to taxpayers and to affected people, NGOs are being pulled in different directions.
- The **nexus** is an opportunity to find real complementarities between development, peacebuilding and humanitarian, but the differences in approaches on funding remain very challenging.
- Adding to Mr Ahrens' points on **localisation**, she highlighted some of the concrete steps and difficulties, such as overhead costs, that there are in delivering the localisation agenda. At the last coordination meeting between the ministry and German NGOs, the discussion had turned to how to engage with local processes, including using locally managed humanitarian funds. She underlined the challenge that counter-terrorism measures can put to delivering the localisation agenda.

A rich and wide ranging dynamic **Q&A** followed which covered:

- Nexus pilots and Somalia.
- Ensuring space for small, medium and big NGO partners with Germany and ECHO.
- Whether our focus as a sector should be on our strength, saving lives, or on fixing systems through processes like the Grand Bargain? Or does simplifying the system help us focus our efforts?
- Capacity building needs of NGOs.
- Geographical priorities: e.g. Ensuring capacity to respond in Syria and Iraq, but also in Yemen, Chad, Sudan... balancing the funding to ensure funding for forgotten crises, such as CAR.

- The influence of political commitments to humanitarian assistance to specific crises on budget allocations and the tools the EU has to balance this (such as INFORM, fragility index...) to have needs based funding.
- Syria and options for funding some recovery/resilience activities.
- The challenge of 'safeguarding' and donor coordination in preparation for the DfID hosted Summit in October.

Ms Schick concluded calling for:

- Everyone to **vote** in the EP elections
- **Germany's support** for the European Commission's proposal for humanitarian assistance in the **MFF**
- More **German NGO and MFA engagement at EU level** with VOICE and ECHO.



Panel 2: the humanitarian-development Nexus

This panel was chaired by **Vincent Stehli, VOICE Board member and operational director of Acción contra el hambre** who gave a historical overview of the EU's efforts to better bridge the gap between humanitarian and development activities, including the LRRD concept, the different resilience Communications and the global momentum created by the World Humanitarian Summit, such as the nexus concept and the UN's new way of working. He asked if this integrated approach is a threat to humanitarian space, or an opportunity to put humanitarian principles back on the table? Will it help to better serve conflict affected people? Quoting from the VOICE 2018 policy resolution on the nexus, he underlined the need for NGO involvement, a community resilience approach, and putting people's needs at the heart of the concept.

Ms Birte Hald, DRC representative in Brussels, highlighted what the nexus approach contributes for an organisation working with forcibly displaced people and the challenges that it had with donors, and with the EU specifically at this time. She put forward recommendations on how the nexus should be shaped.

She said that in the context of **protracted crises and average displacement lasting more than 20 years**, DRC works on emergency aid, durable solutions and root causes. This means they try to support displaced people's basic rights and strengthen their capacity for self-reliance, while also concurrently supporting host communities' capacity to sustainably host displaced people and the duty bearers' (usually state or local authority) ability to deliver basic social services. The nexus needs to bridge these gaps.

Using the example of trucking water into communities that would be better served by a water supply system in Uganda, she explained that **funding can be an obstacle or an enabler to a nexus approach**, because DRC cannot do this with donors' money. She asked that donors allow for more long-term thinking in aid, to have a sustainable development impact. Predictability, long-term partnership and innovative solutions are needed.



Politicisation of aid is also a challenge: the EU trust funds for example have allowed longer-term responses and been positive for DRC's nexus activities, but they have been geared towards migration management and the key European political objective of stemming migration to Europe. This has diverted funding from poverty eradication, and undermined the political will from host and partner states. The EU should be more coherent in its policy and funding.

Humanitarian principles are also put under pressure by any activities that aim at closer cooperation and joint analysis and planning with multiple (including political and potentially security) actors. In order to preserve humanitarian's neutrality, impartiality and independence, DRC would urge for: i) humanitarian funding to be ring-fenced, ii) the impact of the nexus to be measured in terms of refugee protection, iii) that context and conflict analysis be independent, unconditional and based on needs, and iv) that the EU should draw on NGOs' knowledge and ties with communities.

Mr Peter Felten, head of humanitarian assistance division, German Foreign Ministry, reflected on the conceptual side of the nexus, especially its peace dimension, he shared a member state view on the EU nexus pilots, and he introduced the German Somalia nexus pilot.

Confirming that EU ministers had approved a **de-facto 'triple' nexus approach at EU level**, he underlined that the **third 'peace' dimension** remained to be defined, and thus constituted an opportunity, particularly for those humanitarian civil society actors who were hesitant about the concept, to influence its development. For Germany, peace in the triple nexus meant all civilian measures and activities which could support peace, conflict prevention and stabilisation. For example, it should cover basic infrastructure to enable returns, mediation, reconciliation, and strengthen legitimate governments, but it is not a humanitarian-development-security nexus, therefore does not involve military actors. He said that while humanitarian-development-peace could have separate goals, that did not mean that they had to go in different directions, but that they did need to have some joint analysis and understanding. However, the humanitarian imperative meant that humanitarian planning could not be held up waiting for joint planning. In practice, pilots are crucial to test what this can really mean.

The **EU pilots** show some progress in calling attention to the need for context specificity and the need for better communication between humanitarian, development and peace actors. However, they need to be more inclusive of all humanitarian actors, they need more buy-in on the ground, and the link between the field and Brussels level needs to be strengthened to ensure all EU member states can follow and support the process even if they are not present.

Germany had decided to **pilot in Somalia** because this is where all of its external political, diplomatic, economic and assistance instruments were present. The aim is to improve the collective impact of German engagement in support of Somalia. The focus so far has included a gap analysis of German engagement, working on linking German coordination efforts with international coordination efforts, and how to

ensure the process is not one-off but rather a continuous living process. First conclusions indicate that language and definitions need work – not all actors understand each other, and that the process requires time to succeed and must be spared the pressure of short deliverables.

Mr Mathias Mogge, Secretary General, Welthungerhilfe shared a flavour of the nexus debate in Germany, challenged the humanitarian community to get practical about what the nexus could really mean for the people we serve amid the need for more evidence and a longer-term funding and planning cycle.

In **Germany, NGOs are quite diverse in their view of the nexus**, with some seeing the principles as a barrier for humanitarian assistance in relation to it. The German NGO community has been grappling with linking relief, rehabilitation and development since the 1990s, and been lucky to have some useful funding instruments, such as the transitional assistance fund to help with this. A recent official Spending Review has indicated however that this fund, humanitarian assistance and bilateral development are not linked well enough: more evidence is needed on what really works.



Taking South Sudan as an example, he asked if we, as a humanitarian community, have really looked at this well enough **from the perspective of community resilience of affected populations**. Food distributions have been ongoing for years, but no organisation seems ready to look at other options. WFP and other actors in the system seem afraid to try and buck the system for fear of failure.

Multiannual planning and flexibility is an absolute must for nexus programming, but despite the rhetoric it is clear that the EU as a donor is not ready: contracts are where this becomes clear.

Nonetheless there are contexts where the overwhelming concern will be maintaining a principled approach to ensure affected populations access to assistance, be it in our impartiality and neutrality in the field in Idlib, or maintaining independence and withstanding the pressure of specific donors or governments in other contexts.

In the **discussion with participants**, NGOs showed a particular interest in learning more about the **Somalia pilot**, in **ensuring this debate reaches development actors too**, in **nexus leadership** and in **NGO and partners inclusion**. A number of organisations mentioned not being aware of or involved in nexus discussions despite a significant presence in either EU or German nexus pilot countries. Participants regretted that the nexus work stream was abandoned in the Grand Bargain process, missing an opportunity for leadership, but were encouraged by the EU's approach to implementation of the Lives in Dignity Communication on protracted forced displacement and development. Participants commented that by operationalising a focus on the SDG's 'leave no one behind' approach as well as the humanitarian aim to reach the most vulnerable it should be possible to quantify nexus results. However, some expressed concern that protection would not get enough attention with this approach.

WORKSHOPS

3 parallel workshops were held on administrative barriers to delivery of humanitarian assistance, on operating models and on the Grand Bargain and partnership. *Detailed discussion notes are annexed to this report.*

Note workshop 1: 'Operating and funding models' (VOICE secretariat)

Objective:

- How has the WHS/GB lead to real change in German NGOs' operating and funding models?
- Which donors are supporting this?
- What works, or doesn't?

Facilitators

-Wolfgang Tyderle (CARE Germany Luxembourg, Host)

-Celia Cranfield (VOICE secretariat, rapporteur)

In a wide ranging discussion on whether or not the Agenda for Humanity/World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and Grand Bargain(GB) had driven changes in operating and funding models in Germany and at European level, the group identified a few **positive elements in Germany** that were linked to an enabling environment for change:

- Openness from the foreign ministry
- a positive trend in Multi-Year Planning with annual funding (with concerns about the impact of the Spending Review)
- WHS and GB was an impulse to collectively rethink how to work with local NGOs/partners leading to concrete ideas (new funding pot for local emergency management, capacity building, inclusive fund for persons with disabilities...)
- Germany's transitional aid facility
- Germany does not push specific operating models like consortia

The discussion also identified challenges:

In relation to **localisation** there were questions about both geographical restrictions and requirements for localisation (e.g. CAR). The costs for local implementing organisations are often not covered, such as for strengthening their capacity or administrative overheads. Some of the legal and ethical obligations and implications have not yet been thought through (e.g. in relation to protection against sexual abuse). Donors ask more questions and tend to ask for more paper work when you work with local

actors, showing there is less trust in relation to the quality of operations and their impartiality and independence.

Donor driven changes in operating models were also seen as challenging. They are not always context specific enough (e.g. cash, or consortia) .

Both localisation and donor driven changes are sometimes seen as more 'ideological' than needs driven.

There is a tension between **flexibility and the administrative and legal environment**. Humanitarian stakeholders are moving in policy commitments to more flexibility, while auditors, finance ministers etc are moving towards restrictions and more paperwork. For example, the request for transparency in funding flows while pushing for consortia or localisation is seen as difficult to manage. German legislation is a barrier to translating Multi-year Planning into Multi-Year funding. To avoid risks of double funding audits are increasing. NGOs often already work in a humanitarian-development nexus approach but donors' financing instruments are not adapted/flexible enough to support this.

A number of **good practices and opportunities** were identified: NGOs can proactively reorganise to respond to the drive for efficiency. NGOs can change their own operational models. NGOs can consider useful consortia models that are not donor driven (Dutch Relief Alliance- Start). More can be invested in research and evidence on operating models. Donors and NGOs can challenge the UN on cost transparency, efficiency, effectiveness. The CERF could be opened up to NGO access: this would have a big impact on operating models. NGOs should continue to insist on context specificity.

Note workshop 2: Administrative Barriers

Objective:

- Map current administrative barriers and their influence on effective and principled humanitarian assistance and protection.
- Identify potential possibilities, share experiences and potentially good practices to work with, to reduce and/or overcome administrative barriers.

Facilitators:

- Christian Huber (Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, host)
- Magali Murlon (VOICE, rapporteur)

After a short introduction participants identified a number of administrative barriers for humanitarian NGOs to provide effective and principled humanitarian assistance and protection. Those barriers were clustered as follow:

1. Relationship with national authorities:

increasing challenges to register, to obtain visas and/or work permits, barriers to procurement, increasing taxes, corruption, etc.

This increasingly hostile environment affects NGOs' capacity to access the most vulnerable population and may challenge their capacity to remain neutral and impartial. It also has an impact on their capacity to provide timely humanitarian response, increases the administrative burden and costs at country level, and may affect the quality of aid delivery.

2. Bureaucratization of humanitarian assistance:

Diverging views were shared on this topic. While some are of the view that standardization and the development of indicators contribute to the professionalization of the sector and strengthen aid quality, others express a certain fatigue and concern regarding those developments, which are often judged as too constraining. The push from donors for more indicators and data and globally for more quality assurance (without necessarily recognizing its costs) contribute to limiting an appetite for taking risks and shifting resources from aid delivery to control management. This trend also makes it hard for NGOs to move the localization agenda forward.

3. Excessive (?) Financial accountability:

In light of increasing competition to access funding and the push for more cost efficiency, NGOs point to the disincentives this creates to present honest figures about the real costs of a humanitarian operation - including towards their private donors. While in Germany, NGOs appreciate the recent development regarding administrative fees that are

covered, there's still a demand for having an open conversation about support costs. NGOs are equally worried by the trend towards a *payment by result* approach (and demand for reimbursement when results are not achieved) which may limit their interventions in difficult contexts: NGOs are sometimes no longer taking the risks to operate for financial reasons!

4. Political issues:

Administrative barriers also include issues linked to the political agenda. NGOs highlighted the increasing impact of counter-terrorism and money laundering legislation on humanitarian assistance.

Participants then explored how NGOs are (and could) work towards mitigating the impact of these barriers. Some good practices and relevant suggestions were shared regarding the first and third issues identified above.

1. To increase access and mitigate the impact of administrative barriers at country level, NGOs suggested:

- Increasing negotiation skills via dedicated training
- Seeking legal services
- Leveraging diplomatic and political support (via Member states, the EC, etc)
- Engaging further in collective work and advocacy

2. On the impact of the increasing demand for financial accountability and reduction of support costs, participants proposed:

- Collectively questioning these demands and challenging donors pushing for them
- Maintaining the engagement on the Grand Bargain as this initiative aims to address some of these issues
- Open discussion with donors on risks and bring examples from other sectors

Note workshop 3: Partnerships and the Grand Bargain

Objective:

- Assess current challenges and issue on the localization agenda.
- Exchange on the participation and dynamics of the Grand Bargain in general and individual workstreams

Facilitators:

- Anne Street (CAFOD, host)
- Bodo von Borries (VENRO, rapporteur)

After a short introduction by Anne Street to the current changes in the Grand Bargain architecture and merger of workstreams, the participants turned to Grand Bargain issues of "localization" and "cash".

1. Discussion points on Localization:

- Localization continues to be a debated issue. The common guidelines from the German Foreign Office and NGOs on localization was an important process to have common understanding and objectives. Implementation has just started.
- Local actors are a wider group than local NGOs/CSOs which includes local authorities and the private sector. There are contexts where there still is no natural local partner for international actors.
- Current study on the response in Cox Bazar (Bangladesh): Local actors were overwhelmed and needed international influx but now feel pushed aside. There are tensions between the local and national NGOs who tend to pick up

contracts from INGOs.

- Local NGOs, unlike the national ones, are often not aware of the Grand Bargain commitments
- The German Foreign Office is receiving increasing numbers of funding requests from local actors. So far there is no possibility to finance directly, but these requests should not be turned down and alternatives should be offered. In Germany there will be discussions on a local led community fund in later in 2018. Such a model could present a first alternative. There is the need for more options, in addition to the Start Fund. There are interesting examples to learn from Nepal and Turkey.

2. Discussion Points on Cash:

- There is a very active working group between the German Foreign Office and German NGOs focusing on institutional change and capacity building.
- Cash needs to be more embedded in our ways of working and is an option to choose and should increase flexibility for humanitarian funding in general. Project proposals could be open to define modalities according to changing contexts.



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



VENRO is the umbrella organisation of development and humanitarian aid non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Germany. The Association was founded in 1995 and comprises around 140 organisations.



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