

The Global Humanitarian Platform: opportunity for NGOs?

by Elizabeth Ferris

The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) was created in July 2006 to bring together the three families of the humanitarian community – NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and the UN and related international organisations – to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian action.¹

While often confused with the larger humanitarian reform process – with its clusters, revised funding instrument and plans to strengthen the Humanitarian Coordinator system – the GHP is a stand-alone initiative which seeks to strengthen relationships between the major humanitarian actors. The development of the GHP has its roots in the recognition that the challenges facing those involved in humanitarian response are simply too great for agencies to be able to go it alone.

Until now, the international humanitarian community has been structured around a UN core with non-UN actors on the fringes. The UN has taken the lead and other actors either followed or opted out and continued to carry out their own programmes. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)² is made up of all the UN agencies working on humanitarian issues, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IOM, the World Bank and three NGO consortia: the Geneva-based International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)³, the Washington DC-based InterAction⁴ and the Geneva- and New York-based Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR)⁵. While non-UN actors are included in the IASC, the agenda of IASC meetings is largely UN-centric.

The GHP starts with a different premise: that the international humanitarian community is made up of three equal families. Recognition of

this would be both a radical change for the UN system and an affirmation of the reality that NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement mobilise more resources for humanitarian assistance than the UN, have more field staff and have greater capacity for humanitarian advocacy. Donors are increasingly channelling funds through NGOs who are perceived as more cost-effective and flexible than UN agencies. The two largest governmental donor agencies – the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – each channel between 60-70% of their assistance through NGOs.⁶

In July 2007 leaders of UN agencies, INGOs and consortia, national NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement came together to endorse Principles of Partnership (PoP)⁷ which will form the basis of relationships within and between the three humanitarian families. They agreed to base their partnership on the principles of equality, transparency, a results-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity. They further committed themselves to implement these principles throughout their own organisations and in their relationships with each other.

NGOs are accustomed to criticising UN agencies for their shortcomings but the GHP's success will depend on recognition that the NGO world itself is also in need of transformation.

International INGOs

The large INGOs are major humanitarian players. Fewer than a dozen of them deliver 90% of the funds mobilised by the NGO community.⁸ The five largest INGOs (CARE, Médecins sans Frontières, World Vision, Oxfam and Save the Children) are, in fact, families themselves, with affiliates in different countries. Most have greater annual budgets than UNHCR. They have high professional standards and have been the moving force behind efforts to increase NGO accountability, including accountability to beneficiaries. They have the expertise and the human resources to carry out research and to play a leadership role in the development of policies. They have the ability to generate front-page stories in Western newspapers. INGOs have a seat at the GHP table in their own right⁹ and also through the four NGO consortia in which they participate – InterAction, ICVA, SCHR and the Brussels-based Voluntary Organisations In Cooperation In Emergencies (VOICE)¹⁰ network of European NGOs. Large INGOs have multiple accountabilities – to their own governing bodies, donors and the coalitions of which they are members.

What do the principles of partnership mean for INGOs? In some areas, they work together very well. SCHR, for example, has instituted a system of peer reviews and InterAction does an admirable job in collective advocacy. But they also compete with each other for funds and for visibility. This competition can make it more difficult to apply the principles of transparency and responsibility. The principle of transparency, for example, emphasises the importance of early consultations and sharing of information. While it's fairly easy to share information on current developments or to report on

programmes underway, it's more difficult to move to the next level of sharing plans and strategies while they are being developed. Each INGO has its own strategic plans, both globally and often at the country or regional level as well. While they may share information with each other, they are accountable to their own governing structures, which makes collaborative planning difficult. Given their multiple layers of accountability, to what extent can we talk about INGOs being responsible to each other? How can the big INGOs work on 'results-oriented coordination based on concrete operational capacities' when, in the competitive funding market, they need to emphasise their unique identities?

As they grow and become more professional, they also run the risk of becoming increasingly similar to UN agencies. As the head of one UN agency said in the July 2007 GHP meeting, "I'm worried when I hear the NGOs speak – they sound just like us. Please don't become like us. We need you to remain NGOs." In fact, the large international NGOs probably have more in common with UN agencies than they do with Southern national NGOs. The relationship between INGOs and national NGOs is the biggest challenge facing both NGOs and the future of the GHP.

National NGOs

National NGOs – those that work in one country – are often the first to respond to disaster. They are usually the ones who deliver the food and

pull most of the survivors from the rubble while the international NGOs are getting to the scene or getting supplies and staff to their national affiliates. While INGOs may decide to withdraw from a given country when their priorities change, national NGOs are there for the long haul. National NGOs vary tremendously in size and capacity; while some have only a handful of staff, others employ hundreds of people and have high professional standards.

UNHCR carries out much of its work through national NGOs. In 2007, UNHCR had 550 agreements with 424 national NGOs for a total of \$89.4 million. It had 417 agreements with 151 international NGOs for \$138 million. While UNHCR has far more national NGO partners, much more funding goes to INGOs. And working with national NGOs is a challenge for UNHCR; as one UNHCR staff member told me: "it's as much work to develop and monitor an agreement for \$10,000 with a national NGO as for an agreement for \$1 million with an international NGO. And our monitoring capacity is limited."

National NGOs are recognised as playing an important role in the international humanitarian system and there have been attempts over the years to include them in important humanitarian initiatives, such as UNHCR's Partnership in Action (PARINAC) process started in 1994.¹¹ Several national NGOs participated in the GHP meetings in 2006 and 2007 but their number

was far fewer than that of INGOs. One African participant in this year's GHP meeting recounted that at the meeting in his country to talk about the principles of partnership, there were 27 UN representatives, 26 INGO representatives, three from the Red Cross/Crescent but only one from a national NGO.

When we look at the relationship between national and international NGOs it is clear who wields power – in spite of the rhetoric of NGO solidarity. The larger INGOs have greater financial resources and sometimes sub-contract with national NGOs to carry out certain projects. But international NGOs are also increasing their presence in Southern countries. The number of INGO field offices rose 31% to 39,729 between 1993 and 2003 and this number has surely increased since then.¹² Some major donors now require the field presence of an INGO as a condition for funding. National NGOs complain that, in some cases, INGOs are displacing them from work they have carried out for many years and that they poach their best staff at salaries which national NGOs cannot match. While there are many cases where relations between international and national NGOs are based on mutual respect and complementarity, it is also clear that this partnership is usually an unequal one.

As noted in FMR28,¹³ there is a lot of talk about capacity building of national NGOs but people mean different things by the term and its



Post-tsunami assistance by the European Commission through NGOs, Tamil Nadu, India

implementation has been spotty at best. And there is a darker side to the capacity-building discussion. INGOs may well have a vested interest in keeping the capacity of national NGOs low to avoid even greater competition for funds.

One of the differences between international and national NGOs in terms of participation at the GHP is that while INGO participants can talk knowledgeably about a dozen different country situations, national NGOs are usually very knowledgeable only about their own situation. INGO staff members are at ease with UN jargon, have specialist staff following the complexities of UN reform and can read through the hundreds of online and printed documents being generated by the reform process.

Empowering national NGOs

How can national NGOs play a greater role in the GHP and in humanitarian reform efforts generally? One possibility is to provide more support for national NGO leaders so that they have time to attend international meetings and to read all the documents. These representatives could be involved in the planning process and be supported to participate in GHP follow-up mechanisms. A crash course on UN – and eventually GHP – processes could be organised for national NGOs to enable them to participate effectively. National NGO coordination structures could be supported in countries where they do not exist in order to enable the national NGO participants to represent the broader national NGO community. However, these initiatives would not only be expensive but would also not address the issue that the agenda of the GHP continues to be set by agencies based in the North.

A second option would be to change the GHP itself. The agenda and format of meetings could be changed to enable more substantive contributions from national NGOs. By focusing on a particular country or by meeting in a country affected by conflict, the contributions of national NGOs could be enhanced. However, meeting outside Geneva would run the risk of the GHP losing the participation of its powerful

INGOs and UN agencies. It's one thing to expect the head of a major agency to travel to Geneva for a one-day meeting – quite another to ask him/her to travel to Bogotá. Moreover, focus on a single country would enable NGOs from that country to be more active participants but would not necessarily encourage the participation of national NGOs from other countries or regions.

A third possibility would be to shift the focus of the GHP from meetings between heads of agencies to a field-driven process and to redefine 'field-driven' to ensure that national NGOs have a leading role. Energy would be put into coordination at the local level and leadership given to those NGOs willing and able to take the lead. At the July 2007 meeting of the GHP, it was agreed to establish humanitarian partnership teams at the country level with roughly equal representation from UN and non-UN organisations, including national NGOs. The teams are expected to be co-chaired by a UN representative and a representative of either the NGOs or the Red Cross/Red Crescent, selected by that constituency in the country. The humanitarian partnership teams are intended to be a place for strategic discussions of country-specific humanitarian issues and priorities for collective action, and for ensuring both complementarity and coherence of the humanitarian response.

If the principles of partnership are to re-shape relations between humanitarian actors and to enhance the complementarity and effectiveness of humanitarian action, it makes sense to place the emphasis on the countries where humanitarian response is needed, rather than on annual meetings in Geneva. There seemed to be general support for this view at the July GHP meeting. The establishment of humanitarian partnership teams offers the opportunity not only to reshape relations between UN and non-UN agencies but also for INGOs and national NGOs to transform their relations with each another.

If this transformation is to take place, INGOs must change. If international NGO staff in, say, Colombo, are to become more accountable to other NGO staff in Sri Lanka, they will need encouragement from

their headquarters. INGOs need to expect their staff to collaborate with other NGOs as well as with UN agencies and to hold them accountable for doing so.

It takes time to develop partnerships. Improved coordination requires more meetings between busy people. As participants in the July 2007 meeting recognised, organisational cultures need to change and this requires support from the leaders of humanitarian organisations. It will take time and commitment for change to take place – for UN agencies to recognise that NGOs are not just the implementers of UN-initiated projects and for INGOs to accept national NGOs as equals.

The GHP offers new opportunities for strengthening relationships within the international humanitarian community but there have been many previous efforts to strengthen coordination which have failed. It is all too easy for agency heads to meet in Geneva and make fine sounding declarations. There have to be tangible incentives for collaboration to work. NGOs and UN agencies alike have to feel that their own work is more effective because it is collaborative. For the GHP to make a difference in the lives of refugees, IDPs and others affected by conflicts and natural disasters, a lot more needs to happen.

Elizabeth Ferris (eferris@brookings.edu) is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC and co-director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement (www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/idp.htm).

1. For more information on the GHP, see www.icva.ch/ghp.

2. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc

3. www.icva.ch

4. www.interaction.org

5. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/about/schr.asp

6. Abby Stoddard, *Humanitarian Alert: NGO Information and Its Impact on US Foreign Policy*, Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press, 2006.

7. www.icva.ch/doc00002172.doc

8. Ibid.

9. However, MSF has recently decided not to participate in the GHP.

10. www.ngovoice.org

11. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/partners?id=3bbc5bd7a

12. William Mclean, *Foreign NGOs Map New Route to African Legitimacy*, Reuters, 2005 www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/credib/2005/1009route.htm

13. www.fmreview.org/capacitybuilding.htm