

The IASC Transformative Agenda: Operational Implications for NGOs

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Background and introduction

The “transformative agenda” (TA) is an initiative undertaken within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) since December 2010 to make improvements to the humanitarian reform process, which in 2005 introduced the clusters, established new financing mechanisms, and made an attempt to strengthen humanitarian leadership. The TA is meant to result in more effective coordinated responses that meet the needs of, and are accountable to, affected populations. The process, initiated at the IASC heads of agency (“Principals”) level, was in response to the well-known failings of the humanitarian responses to the Haiti earthquake and the Pakistan floods. Much of the focus of the transformative agenda has been around the response to future large-scale (“Level 3”¹) emergencies. A number of elements of the TA will be applicable to all humanitarian crises, except for refugee situations where UNHCR has the mandate to coordinate the response.

The three NGO consortia that participate in the IASC (ICVA, InterAction, and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response) have been involved in the efforts to develop the TA, based on the input that they received from their memberships. In contributing to the development of the agenda, the consortia have focused on pressing the UN system, especially UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and OCHA, to commit to fundamental changes in the way they do business to improve their impact and accountability. There has been less focus on the operational implications of the TA for NGOs.

At the IASC Principals meeting in New York on April 24, 2012, the NGO consortia representatives agreed that it is essential to initiate discussion within the NGO community on what the TA means for us. A better understanding of and greater commitment to operational changes are needed within the NGO sector in fulfilling our responsibility under the TA. These changes will enhance our credibility and reinforce our advocacy in pushing for what we expect from the UN agencies. This note summarizes the issues in the TA that we think are most relevant for the NGO community. It suggests a number of actions that NGOs can take towards not only engaging more consistently, but also leading within the coordination of the response.

NGO engagement with the TA

In terms of our participation in influencing humanitarian policy and the resultant coordination mechanisms, the NGO community could do more, given their presence, operational capacities, and proximity to affected populations. Of the over \$16 billion expended in 2010 in the humanitarian field, \$7.4 billion were resources of the NGO community.² We need to harness the potential power of our capacities and presence to strengthen our collective voice in global and country-level policy, strategy setting and prioritization.

¹ The “Level 3 (L3)” terminology comes originally from UNICEF, which has used this term to classify emergencies, in order to activate internal protocols and mechanisms for response.

² ALNAP, State of the Humanitarian System 2012

If NGOs are to participate more effectively in humanitarian coordination, NGOs must become more proactive and strategic in our engagement, harmonizing individual organizational priorities with broader perspectives and needs. Our diversity in size, approach, and values is not an obstacle to identifying common concerns and priorities in improving humanitarian response. We should strengthen our representative arrangements in the mechanisms and processes of humanitarian coordination.

Elements of the TA that are relevant for NGOs

Leadership

Participating in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCTs)

In the transformative agenda discussions, the NGO consortia have supported the notion that the Humanitarian [NB: *not* UN] Country Team, including NGO representatives plans and oversees the implementation of a coherent and strategic emergency response. The challenge to the NGO community is to organize itself so that representation arrangements in any given country are consistent and transparent, with NGO staff representing the NGO community, not just their own agency.³ Working out such arrangements, and ensuring good representation and reporting back to the wider community, are clear challenges to NGOs. In addition, there should be greater accountability among agencies participating in the HCT.⁴ NGOs that are part of the HCT will have to ensure they are committed to strengthening the accountability for their participation.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? How do we ensure strong representation and effective engagement by NGOs on HCTs?
- ? What are the responsibilities of NGO representatives participating in HCTs?
- ? What do NGO representatives need in order to be more effective on HCTs? How can NGO consortia (international and country-based) and (individual) NGO offices support this effort?
- ? What role can NGOs play on the HCT to ensure that clusters are represented adequately?
- ? Do we want a more diverse NGO voice on HCTs? If so, how do we achieve this?

Proposed actions:

- Gather more qualitative data on how HCTs function, especially as relates to the NGO community.
- Develop and endorse common criteria/generic terms of reference for NGO representatives on HCTs.
- Ensure NGO staff and NGO coordination bodies at field level are aware of HCT role and responsibilities as defined within the transformative agenda.

Improving the quality of Humanitarian Coordinators

A crucial aspect of the transformative agenda is improving the quality of the Humanitarian Coordinators. As NGO Consortia, we have maintained that extensive experience in the delivery of humanitarian response on the ground is a prerequisite for an HC to be successful. We have also maintained the view that the work on strengthening humanitarian leadership needs to continue. With regards to the pool of Humanitarian Coordinators, for several years OCHA has been managing this pool, intended to be the source for qualified, pre-cleared, eligible candidates for HC positions. Recruitment for the HC Pool generally takes place twice a year and NGO representatives have participated in the selection panel. Applications are invited from the entire humanitarian community, including NGOs. Unfortunately, few NGO candidates have made it all the way through the process and none of them has

³ See <http://www.interaction.org/document/recommendations-hct-representative-agreements>

⁴ OCHA has committed to doing regular reviews of both HC leadership and the operational response at the HCT level. NGOs are able to feed into these processes through direct engagement as well as through providing feedback to consortia representatives.

been operational as an HC until now. However, there is increased pressure from many sides to improve the selection and appointment process. NGOs need to be proactive in encouraging and putting forward qualified (NGO) candidates for the HC Pool.⁵

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? Do NGOs believe that real improvements in the quality of HCs can be achieved without them making serious investments?
- ? Can NGO senior staff be persuaded to put themselves forward and will NGO HQs support this?
- ? How can NGOs build support for the candidature of NGO experienced candidates?
- ? What can NGOs do to assist the talent scouting of quality non-NGO, or former NGO staff to the HC pool?

Proposed actions:

- NGOs continue to advocate for improving the selection and appointment of HCs and for the UN to address the systemic issues surrounding the HC position.
- NGO members select and nominate a senior staff member to the next HC Pool call.
- NGO Consortia, in collaboration and with the support of OCHA, support an independent evaluation of the leadership within coordinated humanitarian responses.
- NGOs advocate for creative solutions, including the creation of more deputy HC positions filled by people who have an NGO background and/or are trusted and respected by NGOs.
- NGO members identify strong current UN staff, which have either prior NGO experience and/or are strong advocates of NGOs, and highlight them for recruiting by OCHA's leadership strengthening unit.
- Develop an evidence-based paper for the IASC on what will convince NGOs to put their best people forward.

Coordination

Participating in the clusters

NGOs deliver the bulk of humanitarian assistance, both with their own funds and as operational partners of donors and UN agencies. As clusters remain the principal tool available for coordinating humanitarian response in non-refugee situations, NGOs are expected to be actively involved. The 'Minimum Commitments for Participants in Clusters'⁶ is the essential framework for NGOs (and other cluster partners). There is a wide range of possible ways to engage in clusters: being an informed member; seconding staff to cluster lead agencies for coordination and technical support; sharing leadership at national or sub-national levels; and promoting inter-cluster coordination.

One of the agreements in the transformative agenda is to ensure that clusters are able to perform their core functions and they do not continue to exist beyond the necessary time frame. The TA also clarifies that clusters should not automatically be put in place in every humanitarian situation. In places where clusters do exist, there needs to be a means for de-activating clusters. Where they are rolled out, clusters should also link with or involve national authorities, as appropriate.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? How can NGO participants engage to ensure coordination structures remain relevant to the response and are inclusive, strategic and accountable?

⁵ See <http://onerresponse.info/Coordination/leadership/Pages/HC%20Pool%20Application.aspx> for required qualifications.

⁶ See the Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at the Country Level (<http://www.interaction.org/document/reference-module-cluster-coordination-country-level>). This outlines the minimum commitments and several other coordination aspects for cluster coordination, including sharing leadership, management arrangements and the core functions of a cluster.

- ? How will the NGO community ensure that it brings substantial and relevant expertise to bear within a coordinated response?
- ? Can we utilize the ‘Minimum Commitments for Participation’ to ensure that the cluster is well run and representational?
- ? Should NGOs make more use of the opportunity to become cluster ‘co-leads’?⁷ Do NGOs understand the purpose and implications of the co-lead role?
- ? How should the NGO community, at the country level, decide on who and how the NGO community is represented in an inter-cluster coordination mechanism?

Proposed actions:

- NGO staff need to understand better what the coordination architecture is supposed to accomplish, and demand that it meets their needs to achieve common goals.
- NGOs must take responsibility for setting the agenda and developing strategies within the clusters (and other coordination mechanisms).
- NGOs need to ensure that clusters have a strong ToR or MoU in place, outlining clearly agreed responsibilities and accountabilities.
- When clusters are found to be lacking, NGOs participating in the clusters must recommend practical improvements to ensure the clusters are strategic.

Inter-Agency Rapid Response Mechanism

An innovation in the transformative agenda is the concept of activating an inter-agency rapid response mechanism (IARRM) within days of a declared major sudden onset emergency. The IARRM will ensure that all agencies have the requisite capacity on standby in accordance with their individual cluster lead and other coordination responsibilities, and that they are able to deploy this effectively and in a timely manner. It will consist of a composite of the individual rapid response capacities of agencies, rather than constituting a stand-alone integrated team, and will work closely with the HC/HCT. It will flow from and build on any existing contingency plans, and will take into account context-specific considerations, such as the coordination structures that are in place in the country, the capacity of the affected state, and security management concerns. There are expectations that NGO leaders will be part of the IARRM, either in their capacity of leading a cluster or as the representative in leading NGO coordination. This NGO coordination role could entail providing support to the NGOs on the ground and/or championing NGO participation in planning and implementation in the initial stages of the response. The latter would be a time-bound role. The challenge to the NGO community is to plan for this contingency and line up individuals who will be able to play this role in particular emergencies and who would be available for the trainings.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? What commitments are NGOs willing to make beforehand to potentially leading a cluster in a new emergency?
- ? If NGOs agree that they need to have an NGO coordination champion as part of the IARRM, what would be the profile and TOR for this individual?
- ? How would this individual be selected? What, if any, is the role of the global consortia in the process?

Proposed actions:

- Collate information on what NGO commitments exist already with clusters at the global level.
- NGOs should discuss how NGOs should be involved with the IARRM and see what pre-agreements may make sense to enable success.

⁷ Terms used to describe sharing leadership vary, with co-lead being one of the most common, see ‘Sharing Leadership’ within the Reference Module, as per footnote 6, for additional information.

- Develop a TOR for the coordination champion role for review by operational NGOs, including propositions for a potential roster.

Accountability to affected populations

In December 2011, the IASC Principals agreed on five commitments⁸ in relation to accountability to affected populations. They include notably the inclusion of affected populations in programme design, implementation and review, the provision of timely, relevant and clear information to communities, and the provision of feedback by affected people on the services and protection offered by IASC organizations, including a feedback and complaints mechanism. While this was initially separate from the transformative agenda, the IASC has agreed that accountability to affected populations is now a core component. NGOs have significant field experiences to offer in this area, and can therefore help embed the commitments made by IASC Principals in humanitarian practices. A number of NGOs have been participating in the IASC task force that is taking this commitment forward and which will carry out pilots.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? What standards and systems are NGOs currently using in order to meet their own commitments to be accountable to affected communities?
- ? How have NGOs embedded these into operational procedures and practices (rather than having accountability as a separate set of principles)?
- ? What concrete actions are NGOs taking to be accountable to communities and how have these improved outcomes for the affected communities and the NGOs themselves?
- ? What is the best way for the NGO community to share its experiences in order to help improve accountability to affected populations?

Proposed actions:

- NGOs should put accountability to affected populations on the agenda of cluster and HCT meetings and support the development of accountability frameworks at the country level. The HCT and clusters could invite experts in accountability to affected populations to assist with the creation of such frameworks.
- The implementation of the accountability framework should be monitored quarterly at cluster meetings and the results communicated to the HC.
- NGOs, both independently and through the consortia, should engage with the IASC Task Force on Accountability to Affected Populations.

Strategic Systems – Program Cycle

Humanitarian Program Cycle

It has been agreed that in the case of new sudden-onset emergencies, the HC (or RC) and the HCT will lead on the development of a strategic plan in consultation with the HCT. The strategic plan will set joint priorities and goals. Tools and methodology⁹ have been developed to put this plan together, which have been field-tested and used in some countries. While there is no question that strengthening the strategic approach is needed in all crises, it remains an open question if this part of the TA on the strategic plan is also applicable to non-L3 crises. Further guidance also needs to be developed in order to ensure cohesion within a coordinated and prioritized strategic approach. Flowing from this exercise

⁸ See <http://www.interaction.org/document/operational-framework-how-ensure-accountability-affected-populations-humanitarian-emergenci>

⁹ The initial strategy will be based on the preliminary scenario definition (PSD) method, which accompanies the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA). See <http://assessments.humanitarianresponse.info/> for more information.

will be additional guidance on how clusters develop sectoral strategies. While NGOs have been involved in these discussions, much of it has remains UN-focused.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? Are we prepared to invest time and energy in working with the UN and others in developing a strategic plan at country-level?
- ? Are we prepared to participate in coordinated MIRA assessments and analyses, and to follow the HCT-provided guidance on strategy?
- ? How can we engage more actively within program cycle development discussions with the UN?

Proposed actions:

- NGOs need to ensure that they have a strong representational voice within the HCT, and that the HCT is a platform where the overall strategic direction of the country programmes is regularly discussed and reflects NGO views and agreed-upon priorities.

Over-arching Implications

If the transformative agenda is to do what it its title says and create transformation in the way the humanitarian community works together, NGOs will also have to recognize and plan for the additional responsibilities and tasks. Additional capacity will be required. If NGOs decide not to participate in an HCT-led coordinated response they need to be to be prepared to provide sound explanations on why they chose to opt out. Reduced donor support or less influence at the coordination table may be among the implications.

Headquarters staff will need to be more aware of what field staff are doing and how they are responding to the challenges of the transformative agenda. While some flexibility will clearly be called for, concerted agency policies and approaches, rather than ad hoc responses, will be desirable. The transformative agenda will demand greater coherence from individual operational NGOs and from the wider NGO community.

Questions to ask ourselves:

- ? How do we maintain our independence, flexibility and speed of response in the face of this changing environment?
- ? What transaction costs, both human and financial, might fuller participation bring?
- ? How can we constructively engage with donors and the IASC to ensure that the system focuses on pragmatic and practical improvements and safeguards against the creation of bureaucratic hindrances to our response?

Proposed actions:

- NGOs need to research and document the costs of participation in the humanitarian architecture so as to not only respond appropriately but also to advocate with donors.

For further information, please contact:

InterAction, www.interaction.org, email pmcilreavy@interaction.org

ICVA, www.icva.ch, email secretariat@icva.ch

SCHR, email SCHR@ifrc.org