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UNIFIED ACROSS THE HUMANITARIAN- DEVELOPMENT SPECTRUM

How NGO fora can best support dialogue, inclusion, and collective action between humanitarian and development NGOs in a principled humanitarian response

INTRODUCTION, SCOPE OF RESEARCH, AND METHODOLOGY

InterAction supports and advocates on behalf of NGO coordination bodies—NGO fora—operating in humanitarian settings worldwide through dedicated NGO Coordination specialists within their Humanitarian Coordination and Practice Team.

The following recommendations were identified via a subset of research in InterAction’s project NGO Collective Action (co-funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation and USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance). The objective of the research is to investigate trends and challenges affecting collective NGO action, negotiations, and advocacy in humanitarian operational environments. This subset of research focuses on the roles that NGO fora play and the strategies they employ to support, expand, and strengthen the dialogue between humanitarian and development NGO stakeholders in a principled humanitarian response.

Today’s reality is that development and humanitarian assistance are often required concurrently, especially in complex environments and protracted crises. And while they need to be complementary, humanitarian and development efforts can have fundamentally different strategies. When states are not accountable to all their people, or are responsible for the harm befalling them, principled humanitarian action must be supported.

From a desk review and key informant interviews with 18 stakeholders from NGO fora and humanitarian donors, five key recommendations have been identified as to how NGO fora can best support dialogue, inclusion, and collective action between humanitarian and development NGOs in a principled humanitarian response. Key informant statements have been anonymized throughout this report due to insecure operating contexts of several of the NGO fora interviewed.

The following recommendations are intended for NGO fora directors and steering committees:

- While encouraging the inclusion of diverse voices within NGO fora membership, ensure that commonalities are frequently highlighted, that the basic operating context is agreed upon, and that the needs of people in affected communities are a fundamental thread woven throughout every conversation, discussion, and debate.

- A culture of change and adjustment should be embedded within a forum’s governance structure from the get-go, enabling smooth adaptation and evolution when the context demands it without risking the abandonment of a forum’s core mandate of promoting humanitarian principles.
- Forum directors should be tasked with—and held accountable for—promoting and upholding the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence to all stakeholders in a response, even while recognizing that forum “red lines” must be collectively defined by forum membership.
- Forum staff, members, and outside supporters should continuously underscore the value of the NGO forum: to bring an independent voice to the response architecture that is free from both monetary and political influence.
- Forum directors, steering committees, and supporters need to identify ways to drive forward a dynamic NGO forum where members are engaged and actively contribute to collective action.

It is worth recognizing that while all NGO fora coordinate members in conflict and natural disaster humanitarian responses for collective action, it is impossible to compare any two fora equally. Every crisis is unique, and each NGO each forum operates differently, with distinct mandates and perspectives informed by their membership and the external context. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to these challenges. The following recommendations are compiled from a wide range of best practices and lessons learnt to guide NGO forum directors and steering committees to achieve greater results for people in need as the forum navigates a shifting humanitarian ecosystem.

DEFINITIONS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO FIRST DEFINE THE “HUMANITARIAN” AND “DEVELOPMENT” NGOS REFERRED TO THROUGHOUT THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS.

HUMANITARIAN NGOS

Humanitarian NGOs are the operational actors responding to a conflict, natural disaster, or other crisis, usually in one or more of the sectors targeted through the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). Critically, their organizational mandates state that they respect/adhere to the four humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, as well as the Red Cross Code of Conduct. Many

humanitarian NGOs are also multi-mandated agencies with longer term programming in sectors such as health, agriculture, microfinance, climate change, and resilience. Their humanitarian and development work may be siloed within their agencies, or they may have integrated teams for more cohesive responses along the humanitarian-development spectrum. Even “pure” humanitarian NGOs evolve with the context, whether by choice or circumstance. One key informant (K.I.) reflected, “Is it even possible for an NGO to be purely humanitarian anymore?”

DEVELOPMENT NGOS

Development NGOs are typically sectoral focused on non-humanitarian areas of work such as human rights, peacebuilding, civil society strengthening, health systems strengthening, and justice. They may be working in the same areas of operation of the response depending on their sector and mandate. In Nexus contexts or where Durable Solutions programming is implemented, development NGOs can also be found working within these frameworks. Additionally, for many development NGOs, respecting the humanitarian principles may be restrictive to their mandates and activities.

NEXUS FORA

For ease of clarity, when an NGO forum has members from both humanitarian and development NGOs, they are referred to as a Nexus forum or Nexus membership, as opposed to a mixed membership, which has been used elsewhere to refer to a forum with both international and national NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS



While encouraging the inclusion of diverse voices within NGO fora membership, ensure that commonalities are frequently highlighted, that the basic operating context is agreed upon, and that the needs of people in affected communities are a fundamental thread woven throughout every conversation, discussion, and debate.

Several donor and forum K.I.s concurred that allowing for distinct voices within a forum membership for constructive debate is not only critical for a well-functioning forum, but for bringing about collective action. However, finding agreed key priorities amongst a diverse group of members can present challenges for forum directors. This is especially true in a Nexus forum, where humanitarian and development NGO members have different mandates and sectoral focus and are not always aligned on humanitarian principles and redlines. In general, there can be competing priorities amongst members, with members acting in their

own self-interest due to competition over limited available funding or redlines defined by a single organization, not grown out of collective agreement.

“Having differing opinions in a forum is a good indicator of a functional forum,” one donor K.I. stated. It is equally critical that forum directors diplomatically manage the different, and at times opposing, voices to reach collective action. Conflict is not necessarily negative, and, indeed, can lead to creative and new strategies, but if disagreements veer into personal territory without a strategic focus, the forum can fragment. One K.I. said, “Too many diverse voices, when not well managed [in a forum] can make things fall apart.” When a forum has a wide range of organizations within its membership, a forum director must rethink how they approach meetings and discussions to capitalize on the range of different voices without losing focus on the ultimate agreed action.

One K.I. suggested that a forum director ask, “What are the fundamental principles bringing the members together?” When fundamental issues align, progress toward strengthened dialogue and a collective voice can begin. For example, if all members agree that people within the affected communities are being denied their entitlements such as access to clean water or rights for women, and NGOs can and should address this gap, then the conversation should start there.

A donor K.I. suggested reframing how a problem is looked at by returning to fundamental questions, such as: “What are the needs, and how do both humanitarian and development NGOs contribute towards those needs?” Once you identify the needs—and center, in every conversation, the populations at need as well as the recognition that every forum member is attempting to serve them—you can start to solve problems together, collectively, with the recognition that no one organization has all the answers.

Another donor K.I. suggested that, in problem-solving meetings, NGOs should stop talking about all the frameworks and architecture the humanitarian system has created. Words such as humanitarian, Nexus, durable solutions, and resilience can mean many different things to many different people and relying on these words alone to communicate practical ideas is often counterproductive. Instead, forum members should talk more about the needs of the people they are aiming to support. Humanitarian and development NGOs should jointly identify the programming solutions required, which often can span the humanitarian-development spectrum—for example, humanitarian response programming such as cash transfers is often coupled with more traditional development programming such as livelihoods support.

Reframing how a forum approaches the conversation and looks for commonalities, instead of focusing on differences, will ultimately support communities by bringing forward a range of more inclusive collective action.



A culture of change and adjustment should be embedded within a forum's governance structure from the get-go, enabling smooth adaptation and evolution when the context demands it without risking the abandonment of a forum's core mandate of promoting humanitarian principles.

The context within which a forum is working can be both enabling and constraining in terms of how NGO fora support dialogue, inclusion, and collective action. While this paper is speaking about fora in humanitarian operating contexts, Nexus, durable solutions, and resilience programming is often implemented in the same areas of operation as humanitarian programming. Humanitarian donor funding is declining in many contexts; according to [OCHA's Global Humanitarian Overview 2022](#), "The 10 most underfunded emergency situations in 2021 received less than half the funding required to meet humanitarian needs." As contexts change and evolve, NGO fora also need to evolve to best serve their members, and ultimately, people in need. A donor K.I. said, "A forum cannot be a blanket formula in all contexts. It needs to adapt to the context and evolve to allow for representation of different voices, needs, and challenges."

For NGO fora, adapting to a changing context can require relatively small adjustments, such as a new working group or a new terms of reference (TOR) for an existing working group, or it can require larger, intrinsic changes. Forum staff and steering committees will need to review their forum's membership composition, operating context, advocacy strategy, and the humanitarian architecture in-country to identify necessary adjustments.

One humanitarian NGO forum undertook a revision process of their membership due to increasing Nexus programming and increasing pressure on all non-government actors. They decided to include development NGOs as observers to strengthen relationships and dialogue between humanitarian and development NGOs.

A second Nexus forum, operating in a country where the humanitarian leadership is promoting a transition away from the full humanitarian architecture set-up, took an adaptive, yet pragmatic approach to their advocacy and external messaging to ensure that they still were able to bring humanitarian needs to the

forefront while also highlighting the growing development-influenced durable solutions programming. In this way, the forum works to embrace both sides of the changing operating context and to emphasize the diversity of interventions meant to support affected communities. To date, they report that this approach has been embraced by their members and is appreciated by external stakeholders. After member consultations, another Nexus forum decided to create a non-humanitarian position within their secretariat to best serve their members implementing increasing Nexus and development programming in their context.

In contrast, another forum that we examined had been operating steadily for a number of years in a development-focused country with periodic acute humanitarian incidents; however, this year, for the first time in over a decade, a widespread humanitarian crisis impacted the entire country. When the crisis began, the forum faced challenges as to how to bring attention to humanitarian needs amidst a wide membership divide on what constituted critical and timely policy. Their solution was to divide position papers into humanitarian and development thematic areas, with alignment between the sections. This approach still enabled the promotion of principled advocacy while ensuring that development actors also had room to push their points. It was met with approval by members.

The adaptation of a forum to a changing context takes the resolve of the entire membership, not just the will of the forum secretariat. A K.I. in a protracted conflict context asked, “Are we [as NGOs] actually designing programs tailored to the different communities we are supporting for maximum impact?” The K.I. reflected that humanitarian discussions are still, many years on, dominating the forum and keeping the forum in a type of time loop, while the context had never stayed stagnant, and early recovery and resilience programming were also achieving impact in the country. Another K.I. reflected that since humanitarian needs remained high in their context, their forum’s membership was reluctant to even discuss the evolving early recovery programming. This was a strategy the K.I. did not agree with but could do nothing about without wider acceptance.

Conversely, another K.I. spoke about a forum operating in a traditionally development context, and how challenging it was to achieve member agreement to adapt the forum’s strategy and ways of working—such as discussions on red lines—when a large-scale humanitarian conflict occurred. In order to bring members along and encourage them to lead on necessary changes when a context shifts dramatically, it helps to have a culture of change and adjustment embedded within the forum’s governance makeup from the get-go.

Even in times of calm and limited contextual changes, members should be encouraged to take ownership over and, where an opportunity exists, suggest changes to a forum's focus and means of delivering.

Obviously, a forum should only adapt if that adaptation will lead to increased collective action. In one country, a donor K.I. said that the forum was replicating the humanitarian architecture in-country by operating within two distinct humanitarian and development silos. In taking this approach, the K.I. said that from their perspective, integration was missing, and they believed that space was needed instead for all members to meet as one group periodically to increase understanding, integration, inclusive dialogue, and to bring about collective action.

NGO fora need to be cautious as they adapt to changing contexts and not abandon their core mandate of coordinating NGO humanitarian action. As one donor K.I. said, "Resilience, development, and peacebuilding work can be influenced by political agendas, and NGO fora need to keep a good principled approach." NGO fora must continue to uphold and promote a principled humanitarian response, as no matter what contextual changes occur, humanitarian NGOs will need to continue to respond to humanitarian needs.



Forum directors should be tasked with—and held accountable for—promoting and upholding the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence to all stakeholders in a response, even while recognizing that forum “red lines” must be collectively defined by forum membership.

A critically important responsibility of an NGO forum director in a humanitarian setting is to promote awareness of the humanitarian principles and a principled way of working. However, a forum director needs to remember that they are not in a position where they can or should enforce their members' adherence to humanitarian principles and redlines. Nor should fora directors act as “humanitarian principal police,” as one K.I. said. As many K.I.s concurred, every NGO has their own redlines. A forum director needs to seek an agreed-upon collective principled position from their members. A K.I. said, “Fora get messy when a director takes a principled stance and members are not fully behind them.”

Reaching a collective position on humanitarian principles is not always straightforward. As one donor K.I. remarked, an NGO forum is “an excellent place for discussing humanitarian principles and messaging them, but it is a hard fight...as taking a collective [action] approach to humanitarian principles can be difficult. Everyone recognizes the collective definition and approach of humanitarian principles, but no one actually

takes that approach in reality, and they go back to their individual redlines.” The K.I. continued to explain that while the “collective wants to uphold and respect the humanitarian imperative and humanitarian principles,” when it comes down to implementing programs and achieving objectives, redlines vary by organizations, and even by country within the same organization. Therefore, in promoting humanitarian principles but also remaining pragmatic as to how each member will adhere to principles in action, a forum director can open space for constructive dialogue and debate, which in turn can bring about collective humanitarian positions and redlines.

Furthermore, a forum director can proactively highlight the risks of not adhering to humanitarian principles and explain the consequences of members’ actions if they cross redlines. This strategy can enable an inclusive dialogue without shutting down concerns and frustrations. As a K.I. said, “A forum director should remind members what the humanitarian principles are and what the ramifications could be for not following them, as it is very difficult and could even backfire to [attempt to] enforce principles on NGOs.” Sometimes, fora directors will take for granted that all members will understand principles in action and the risks for not adhering to them, including by not speaking out when the context demands advocacy. One Nexus forum gave an example of a recent humanitarian statement that required steering committee endorsement. A steering committee member from a development NGO did not understand why the statement was being issued nor why they should be endorsing it, as it covered a sensitive political topic. After the forum secretariat and peer agencies explained the detrimental consequences to humanitarian aid, and people in need, for not supporting the statement, the steering committee member endorsed the paper without further question.

Interestingly, several K.I.s raised a forum director’s experience and profile as an important consideration for promoting principled humanitarian action. One K.I. said, “While steering committees do not recruit and hire fora directors based on their personal beliefs, there is a general understanding that in humanitarian contexts, driving forward principled humanitarian action will be adhered to by the post holder.” Likewise, a donor K.I. said, “The right forum leadership should be in place for the context to ensure humanitarian principles are messaged correctly.” The K.I. gave an example of one forum in a restrictive conflict context, which had members who were undertaking peacebuilding activities. In the K.I.’s opinion, the forum director, who was tasked with leading messaging externally, did not communicate the peacebuilding activities with appropriate nuance, and the messaging became politicized. Consequently, the forum was no

longer being seen by all stakeholders as a neutral independent body. This had ramifications for the implementation of humanitarian programming.

Indeed, the ability to communicate effectively and with nuance is a critical skill for a forum representative. Multiple donor K.I.s stated that, in their opinion, a forum is of most value when secretariat staff act as the liaison to donors, the U.N., the government, and other stakeholders and successfully bring forward practical examples of humanitarian principles in action in a non-confrontational way. This is done through a variety of methods such as position papers, statements, and external messaging at both bilateral meetings as well as humanitarian coordination meetings. As one donor K.I. concisely put it, “NGO fora should hold all stakeholders in a humanitarian response accountable to respecting humanitarian principles through their words and actions.”



Forum staff, members, and outside supporters should continuously underscore the value of the NGO forum: to bring an independent voice to the response architecture that is free from both monetary and political influence.

In speaking with humanitarian fora donors for this research, they all concurred that NGO fora bring a distinct, independent voice that that can lead to greater impact for a response. A donor K.I. said, “We fund [NGO fora] to bring in a diverse voice as its more impactful in leveraging with the U.N. or authorities.” Another donor said that once they fund an NGO forum, the forum “need[s] to be left to operate independently.” This independence from outside monetary and political influence, even from their own donors, is critical for a forum to uphold the humanitarian principles, raise critical issues, and have constructive dialogue with external stakeholders in their members’ best interests.

As such, NGO fora are relied on by external stakeholders to raise operational challenges from the program implementation level as well as concerns that humanitarian principles are not being followed. The Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) meetings are key strategic coordination bodies where these conversations can take place. A donor K.I. said, “The HCT is the strategic platform for the response. We need to have [an NGO] forum at the table to allow for representation of the collective.” Most of the largest NGO fora have a standing seat at the HCT in their respective contexts, different from the rotating elected NGO member seats. Of course, prior to an HCT meeting, it is important that NGO fora directors gain consensus on HCT agenda items from their members. One K.I. said that OCHA, who set and communicate the meeting agendas, continually sent their country’s HCT agenda out the evening before the

meeting, making it difficult to have time to discuss topics with members. The forum was eventually able to advocate with OCHA to receive the HCT agenda well in advance of the meeting so they could bring their members' opinions and input to the table. Several NGO fora have advocated with OCHA to have a dedicated standing NGO forum agenda point. This allows for these fora to bring their members' issues to the main agenda with sufficient time for discussion, debate, and action, instead of being forced to speak during the brief any-other-business (AOB) agenda point at the close of every meeting. Another K.I. said that they plan their monthly country director meeting prior to the monthly HCT meeting so the HCT agenda can be discussed, and positions agreed upon.

According to many of the K.I.s, NGO fora often feel their voice is “not welcome” or “disregarded” at the HCT. Multiple K.I.s, in multiple contexts, said that some U.N. leadership do not appear to want to listen to NGOs when they raise the more contentious humanitarian issues such as the need for an HCT access strategy—something their members wanted to see developed and implemented to reach people in need. Gaining the support from peer HCT members, such as U.N. agencies and donors, ahead of meetings was identified as a way to advance support for fora directors' positions ahead of HCT meetings so they do not have be the lone voice around the table, yet still allowing for the forum to represent its members' voice.

One K.I. said that the humanitarian leadership in their country is expediting the process of deactivating the humanitarian architecture in country. The NGOs are concerned as this plan, in their view, is rushed, without a clear timeline or a proper risk analysis. Humanitarian needs are still present and there are concerns that they will be exacerbated if the transition is not conducted in a responsible manner. For example, at HCT meetings, the NGO forum and HCT NGO representatives—even though they believe their input is not always taken seriously—continue to raise humanitarian needs to ensure a principled response is repeatedly elevated. Further, in preparing for the upcoming HCT retreat, the approach the forum is taking to raise the NGO concerns on the premature deactivation of the humanitarian architecture, is to reference the IASC Guidance on Cluster Coordination at Country Level and the principles of cluster deactivation. In using the IASC Transformative Agenda Protocol, which set the parameters for improved collective action in humanitarian emergencies, the forum hopes that they will change the trajectory of the intended changes to the humanitarian architecture.



Forum directors, steering committees, and supporters need to identify ways to drive forward a dynamic NGO forum where members are engaged and actively contribute to collective action.

A common theme threaded through conversations with many K.I.s was the importance of encouraging and supporting consistent active engagement by all members. Often, a small number of very active members are continuously active and engaged in forum dialogue, with the same few members participating in external coordination meetings such as the HCT. A rhetorical question was raised by a K.I. when discussing member engagement: “If fora messaging, strategy, and even humanitarian redlines are being informed by the same few voices instead of its diverse membership, is a forum really supporting inclusive collective action?” So how does a forum support inclusive collective action when hearing from the same few, or same limited voices? It comes down to the leadership of the forum director and steering committee, and the different methods they employ to find the right balance that speaks to their members to drive forward active member participation.

K.I.s explained that NGO fora secretariats use various strategies to try to increase member participation such as scheduling monthly meetings at the same time/day each month, calling members individually to remind them about the monthly meeting after the meeting invite is sent, requesting topics for the agenda to ensure member-ownership of conversations, holding annual/biannual secretariat performance reviews, creating telecommunication groups, and others. While it differs forum to forum, limited member engagement is not a problem any forum has found a perfect solution for. One K.I. said, “Chasing people to attend meetings is not time well spent,” although another K.I. acknowledged that it was simply part of the job of coordination.

It can be difficult for a forum to design affective plans, policy, and advocacy for the humanitarian response without input from all members on a variety of issues. A K.I. working in a context with multiple complex emergencies gave the following example: “How can we [as an NGO forum] discuss and agree on a common position in a new area of operation for an emerging crisis, when we cannot even get momentum to discuss a constructive way forward with members to respond to a new emergency?” Similarly, a K.I. said that they find that what should be issues discussed by the members as a collective—access, durable solutions, protection of civilians, and other topics that directly affect people in need—get little input and traction from more than the same few members. Yet issues such as bureaucratic impediments, which affect almost everyone, get everyone’s attention and involvement.

Likewise, inclusive dialogue can inadvertently be unsuccessful if diverse members do not take the initiative to participate. Some K.I.s from the secretariats of Nexus fora expressed that it can be difficult to know how to best meet the expectations of non-humanitarian members' needs when members do not provide specific asks. One K.I. said that there are often concerns raised by development members that they are not included in discussions, such as on the direction of advocacy work of the forum. Yet the K.I. says that the forum receives limited further information about what exactly the blockages are from the NGOs concerned, so the forum does not know how to facilitate their engagement.

Although it was mentioned by several K.I.s that the COVID-19 pandemic changed how coordination bodies such as NGO fora engage, and that moving to online meetings had caused “zoom fatigue,” member engagement has been a common issue in NGO fora for many years, long before the pandemic. It was also recognized that being a member of NGO forum takes a commitment of time, on top of all the other responsibilities an NGO leader is tasked with, which is especially pronounced when fora members are also serving on the steering committees and/or the HCT and other humanitarian coordination bodies.

Several suggestions were provided from K.I.s as to how forum directors can drive forward more active and engaged member participation. First, a forum should consider including a provision in their forum Statutes of Governance (SoGs)—if such a clause is yet to exist—that allows for country directors or senior forum representatives to send alternative team members to forum meetings, such as the member organization's policy lead or humanitarian response lead pending the agenda topics. The K.I. explained that the forum director needs to ensure that all of their members know this option exists and that their members also understand that they need to give their alternate representative the authority to speak on their behalf. The K.I. explained, “Otherwise, it is just as counterproductive as not having someone participate when a member representative says at a meeting, ‘I will have to go back and ask if we can commit to XYZ,’ or ‘I will check and get back to you.’” This provision could allow for more fruitful and engaged discussion on topics that perhaps the country director is not completely engaged with such as humanitarian operations surrounding an access agenda point or policy discussions on protection of civilians when discussing the development of a high-level briefing paper.

The second suggestion pertains to external meetings such as HCTs or when senior humanitarian, donor, or government stakeholders attend meetings with NGO forum members. While it is common practice for forum directors to hold “pre-meetings” with members to review agendas and discuss joint forum positions,

it was suggested that it should also be common practice for forum directors to “assign” agenda points to diverse individual members who are willing to lead the discussion point on behalf of the NGOs. That is not to say other members will not participate as well in the discussion, but it ensures that different members kick-off each agenda point allowing for a wide range of voices around the table. When the agenda point is discussed at length and agreed talking points are set at the pre-meeting, the K.I. found that more members are willing to speak on behalf of the collective at the meeting itself. For example, ahead of HCT meetings, one forum director ensures that each HCT member is assigned at least one agenda point at their pre-HCT meetings—a practice so common now that HCT members come to pre-meetings ready to select which agenda points want to lead on and armed with information from their humanitarian operations and policy teams to discuss with their peer agencies. After a few months when this practice was first implemented, both the Head of OCHA and the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) commented how affective it was “to hear input from all the NGO members around the table.”

A third suggestion is a basic meeting attendance policy included in NGO forum SoGs. For one forum, they included a provision in their SoGs that if a member organization does not attend three consecutive monthly meetings that it would constitute grounds for discontinuation of their membership in the forum. Since SoGs are endorsed by all members, members agree to this practice and understand the ramifications for non-attendance. After this new policy was instituted, member attendance at meetings grew ten-fold. While this new policy did not address the second part of member participation—member active participation—for the forum director, they at least had more members at meetings so they could raise critical questions and have discussions that required the attention of the entire forum.

Fourth, while some NGOs already include coordination key performance indicators (KPIs) on the annual performance management plans of their policy and advocacy staff who are actively involved with and/or co-chairing advocacy working groups, it has been suggested that all senior NGO staff should have goals, KPIs, etc., on their annual performance management plans to engage with NGO fora. While “engagement is a fundamental task of senior NGO staff,” according to one K.I., the incentive that one’s performance is being reviewed based on their involvement with NGO coordination structures could bring added value if the willingness is there. Coalitions such as InterAction and ICVA are well placed to champion this initiative with NGO HQs, and should; however, the onus to make it happen in practice is on the NGOs themselves with “a commitment from the top” as well as the senior leaders.

Finally, a K.I. said that driving active member engagement should not rest on the forum directors' shoulders alone. Forum directors should work with their steering committees to identify why members are not engaging and how they can solve this dilemma together. One method that worked for a forum was to draw on their steering committee members roles as country directors. They requested that their steering committee reach out bilaterally to member organization country directors who were not engaged and begin a dialogue to find out why they were not engaging, what were the issues, and how the forum could resolve their concerns. The K.I. explained, "The forum director is not always seen on the same hierarchical level as a country director, so often, without even realizing what they are doing, requests by a forum director are overlooked, so there is nothing wrong with asking the steering committee for help when there is a fundamental issue to address and resolve." Likewise, NGO fora often look to InterAction and ICVA for support and advice when facing challenges with member engagement. With dedicated staff supporting NGO fora coordination, these coalitions have access to key decision makers such as senior NGO executive management at headquarters level and can bring about beneficial changes for NGO coordination.

CONCLUSION

Fundamentally, the task of any NGO in a humanitarian setting is to work with communities who are being denied their entitlements to increase access to those entitlements. NGO fora are created to support this task. It does not matter to a community how their needs are defined—emergency, humanitarian, early recovery, development—it matters that they can fulfill their needs. Vocabulary is of less importance than support.

A donor K.I. said that "NGO fora are relevant and important because they bring the collective voice that is otherwise hard to find when speaking bilaterally with a U.N. agency, or even at coordination meetings." It is in bringing the collective voice—an inclusive, diverse, and principled voice—that NGO fora can influence and bring about positive change for humanitarian responses.

Another donor K.I. succinctly said, "NGO fora keep responses honest." This is quite a heavy burden to shoulder when one considers all the roles expected from NGO fora. However, NGO fora do continually take forward this responsibility, whether a forum has humanitarian or Nexus membership, by supporting principled dialogue, inclusion, and collective action.



ABOUT INTERACTION

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for nearly 200 NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.