

UNIFIED ACROSS THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT SPECTRUM

ANNEX A: CONSIDERATIONS FOR NGO FORUM MEMBERSHIP EXPANSION

INTRODUCTION

The following guidance note is aimed at humanitarian NGO forum secretariats and steering committees to strengthen and streamline the decision-making process on whether to expand membership to include development NGOs. Best practices and lessons learnt have been compiled from a desk review and key informant interviews (KII) with 13 NGO fora in conflict, protracted conflict, acute humanitarian, and Nexus/early recovery contexts across the globe. While there are many NGO fora that are Nexus-membership fora consisting of both humanitarian and development NGOs, whether by design or through eventual expansion, there are also fora comprised of only humanitarian NGOs. These fora were typically formed to address increased coordination needs resulting from a humanitarian crisis. Fora will continually be setup to facilitate NGO coordination in new humanitarian responses and will, at the onset, most likely consist of humanitarian NGOs.

This guidance is intended for humanitarian NGO fora with membership comprised of humanitarian NGOs to support the decision-making process surrounding if, how, and when to undertake an expansion of their membership to include development NGOs. If facilitated and coordinated in an inclusive fashion, a forum director can build important linkages between humanitarian and development NGOs, increase dialogue, and debate, and bring about better collective action to best serve people in need.

DEFINITIONS

IT IS IMPORTANT TO FIRST DEFINE THE NGO STAKEHOLDERS REFERRED TO THROUGHOUT THIS GUIDANCE.

HUMANITARIAN NGOS

Humanitarian NGOs are the operational actors responding to a conflict, natural disaster, or other crises, 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 pure 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.

CONTRACTORS

Another important distinction to be made when discussing development actors are contractors, for-profit organizations delivering services such as major infrastructure works or technical support to government departments and ministries. Contractors are not members of NGO fora and, most importantly, do not have a mandate to adhere to humanitarian principles due to the nature of their work and organizational setup (being for profit). Interestingly, a K.I. stated that their forum was approached by a global contractor with a request to join as an observer. After initial discussions, the steering committee requested that the relationship be explored further to see what synergies could exist for members. However, it came to light that the contractor accepted a contract to implement a stabilization project on behest of the government in the same areas of operation that forum members were delivering humanitarian aid. Due to the potential and perceived risk this could bring to the forum and its members in terms of neutrality and independence, the forum did not take the relationship forward. That is not to say however, that contractors should always be dismissed as potential forum observers. One K.I. reflected that a forum could potentially assess relationships and linkages with contractors. If there were enough commonalities in values and mandates, and the relationship could be managed, the relationship could be explored. It would however change how

the forum functioned from a coordination role to more of a professionalized service delivery one, the K.I. further reflected. The option of opening a path to including contractors into fora would need to be cautiously assessed with a clear risk mitigation plan developed.

WHERE TO START THE EXPLORATION

In 2021, an NGO Forum in a complex setting underwent the process of expanding its membership of humanitarian NGOs to include development NGOs. The forum undertook the revision process due to the rapidly changing context in the country and the increasing pressure on all non-governmental actors.

The forum director initiated the process by conducting a **peer review** of several NGO fora in similar contexts to understand their membership criteria, composition, as well as recommendations (pros and cons) for opening membership to development NGOs.

Next, a **participatory analysis** was undertaken. This provided the director with key details on their context and why they were considering expanding membership, the development NGO landscape, opportunities, and risks. The director additionally assessed the risks and prepared risk mitigation measures. The forum director said that conducting a detailed analysis, especially detailing the opportunities, risks, and mitigation measures, was a critical decision-making tool for the steering committee and members.

Following the above peer review and analysis, the director clearly outlined the different decision options for their steering committee and members. These options were based on existing membership tiers in their Statutes of Governance (SoGs). For example, the following could be put forward for consideration pending a forum's structure:

1. No Change: Keep the current membership as is and potentially reassess again at a future date.
2. Complementary Approach: Put in place transition steps to a humanitarian-development membership such as organizing regular meetings inviting development NGOs to seek humanitarian-development commonalities and work together on issues informally.
3. Observer: Open observer status to development NGOs. This would give development NGOs membership, but they would not have voting rights. It would provide an opportunity to start the networking process with the goal to strengthen relationships between full members and observers.
4. Full Membership: Open current membership to development NGOs.

Accompanying the options above, also included was how the language would change in the SoGs if development NGOs were to become observers given their mandates are vastly different from usual forum NGO observers such as organizations in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Once the full analysis, including the director's own point of view, was presented to the steering committee and membership, members were able to discuss a way forward and take a final vote. The forum concluded that a cautious approach was the best, and that development members would be invited to join as observers. The forum also changed the language in their SoGs to better reflect the observer criteria, so that observers would fully take the benefits of the status and engage with the full range of actors in the country who are interested to coordinate and collaborate.

While each forum is unique and will follow different processes depending on their context, membership and SoGs, the forum director provided the following advice based on their experiences in the revision process:

- If the context is changing, do not wait to include development NGOs in some form. It is the role of the forum to serve members the best they can and evolve with the context.
- If the context is not yet changing, still consider including (in whatever form is deemed appropriate, from full membership to observer status, to other) development NGOs in the forum to understand all the issues in country for better collective action.
- Conduct an analysis for expanding the membership to guide the Steering Committee and members to make a clear rational decision. The analysis should include opportunities, risks, and risk mitigation. You can reach out to other fora who have gone through this process for advice and example outputs.
- Ensure development NGOs are and remain committed to the forum's issues if they will become full members. A cautious approach, such as having development NGOs as observers, is completely acceptable if you want to ensure that you don't lose your core mandate and identity as a forum.
- Always maintain specific space for humanitarian only issues within the forum if you expand to include development NGOs.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

For an NGO forum to begin to undertake an analysis, a list of guiding questions is compiled from NGO fora lessons learned and best practices which can be found in Annex B. The guiding questions fall under three key areas:

- I. Why is the forum considering expanding membership to include development NGOs?
- II. Development NGO Mandates: Opportunities, challenges, and risks
- III. Forum structure and capacity

I. Why is the forum considering expanding membership to include development NGOs?

While the question ‘why?’ may seem simplistic to a forum director when first asked, there can be numerous reasons behind the question that will highlight opportunities and risks. Ensuring there is a common understanding for the proposed expansion, and understanding all the reasons, is the secretariat’s role and will set the foundation of the analysis. It will be critical for the forum director to be able to inform the members why they are asked to vote on the inclusion of new members.

In the instance of the forum from the case study, the forum was created in response to a crisis. However, several years on, the rapidly changing context from humanitarian to Nexus dictated that waiting to open their membership to development members was not an option, and the time had come to assess expanding their membership to development members. The forum director realized that with an annually shrinking HRP—meaning decreased humanitarian funding—and a drop in global interest in the humanitarian response, the best way the forum could serve current humanitarian members was to be on top of the evolving Nexus and development programming conversations taking place within the wider NGO community.

In another country, the humanitarian context did not change. However, Nexus and stabilization programming began growing and was taking place in response areas side by side with humanitarian activities. The forum therefore wanted to have a better understanding of all the issues across the humanitarian development spectrum and richer dialogue between their members in the hopes of seeing better collective changes for people in need. They therefore expanded their membership to development NGOs for better collective action.

For yet another forum, the move toward a new structure of humanitarian and development NGOs came out of the desire for better linkages within the Nexus. Initially upon formation, the forum was informally joined with a dynamic and engaged Humanitarian Working Group existing within the forum which consisted of several development sectoral focused working groups. The humanitarian NGOs realized the siloed approach was missing linkages, and the general assembly decided to formalize a combined forum by redesigning its working groups and ensuring that each working group had co-chairs from both a humanitarian and a development NGO. The Humanitarian Working Group remained the same, but with the creation of an Aid Effectiveness Working Group for development NGOs within the forum. A Steering Committee was elected consisting of equal humanitarian and development NGO members. While the forum structure is still new, there are hopes linkages will be found within the groups with what is described as a Steering Committee endorsed “double Nexus approach.”

II. Development NGO mandates: Opportunities, challenges, and risks

Another important piece to the analysis is identifying the development NGOs in country, understanding their mandates, and assessing which organizations would potentially seek membership to the forum. Furthermore, what are the potential positive and negative impacts if they were to become members? For some humanitarian fora, this could be a huge undertaking, especially in a country with a large network of well-established development NGOs. For one K.I., they sought the assistance of multi-mandated steering committee members with long standing and well-established development portfolios throughout the country to connect with the network of development NGOs. This cut down significant time and facilitated relationships they may have otherwise not obtained.

Finding commonalities and linkages between humanitarian and development NGOs and assessing how they can be leveraged for humanitarian-development collective action can show what opportunities will exist. The K.I. from the case study observed that increased learning and contextual understanding of humanitarian and development issues are often interlinked and can be found in the same locations. They also found that creating linkages can provide better-rounded perspective of the issues and policy options, relying on different actors’ expertise and ways of working with authorities. One Nexus forum was able to mobilize members and create linkages to not only map member activities in a joint who-what-where tracker (3W) but begin to push toward an operationalized Nexus at the field level.

Several risks surfaced during discussions with stakeholders—the majority being around the potentially compromised humanitarian principle of neutrality—when discussing having development NGOs as members. One K.I. voiced words of caution when there is the existence of long-standing alliances between development NGOs and government authorities, especially in conflict contexts. These relationships could jeopardize the forum’s neutrality and ability for humanitarian forum members to have open dialogue on many critical issues. Further, another K.I. noted that it is important to ensure there is a common understanding of neutrality, especially in understanding the political environment to avoid politicizing advocacy and operations to the extent possible.

One challenge was the concern of the forum meeting development members’ expectations. A K.I. said that development NGOs will have very different expectations from humanitarian ones, and they will often be difficult to define, especially in terms of coordination. It will be important for the secretariat to carve out not only separate space for humanitarian members to meet, but for development members as well. A K.I. reflected from their experience how “it is difficult to operationalize development.” One K.I. said that it is important to “carve out space for development members to meet and talk as development actors are not as used to coordination and it is harder to get them involved or see the benefits.” One forum started a formalized Development Working Group when development members voiced that they felt they were not being heard or included in the forum discussions. While it was slow to start as the development members were not certain what they wanted to get out of the working group, it eventually found its footing once external speakers attended who were relevant to their policy and programming key priorities. With that said, it is very important as many K.I.’s stressed, that space is also kept for humanitarian only dialogue within the broader membership.

One forum reflected that while there are both pros and cons to expanding membership beyond humanitarian NGOs, when a new organization is applying for membership to their forum, they ensure that they explain that 80% of their work is focused on humanitarian issues in order not to raise expectations they cannot meet.

III. Forum structure & capacity

For NGO fora to expand, it is important to ensure the secretariat has the capacity and systems in place to support the increase in work that comes with an increase in members. Secretariat staff time is often already stretched thin supporting and coordinating the humanitarian needs of members, so they need to

realistically assess if they have the time and capacity to also support the development sector—likely an unfamiliar territory for humanitarian forum staff. One K.I. said they had yet to find the time to develop a development strategy or foster relationships with development donors which would benefit their development and multi-mandated members.

Likewise, a forum undertaking this analysis should assess if they need a technical specialist in a non-humanitarian area of focus to best serve development members and even existing multi-mandated members. If it is decided to explore organizational change, does the forum have the funding for new positions? Especially if the position is a non-humanitarian specialist which typically would not be funded by a humanitarian donor? One K.I. said that their forum, with both humanitarian and development members, was struggling to find donors to fund a non-humanitarian position from their current humanitarian donor base. Membership fees, however, once approved by members, were able to kick-start the launch of senior development position within its secretariat. The position was born out of members requesting the space and opportunity to discuss development issues, as well as the policy space for the Nexus conversation and the Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Redevelopment Framework in the country. The non-humanitarian NGOs realized that they had the capacity to shape the country's policy as a collective. The development staff position was therefore created to meet these needs to engage with development stakeholders from the government, traditional development donors, sit on development coordination platforms, and stay abreast of the development conversations and policy in-country. It is a unique profile to fill such a role, necessitating someone who also understands the humanitarian work of the members and can link the conversations across the humanitarian-development spectrum for collective action.

Changes to policy and advocacy work is another part of the secretariat that should be reviewed, both administratively (e.g., regarding sign-off procedures) and regarding content (e.g., how humanitarian messages and humanitarian principled redlines could potentially present challenges and opportunities in a Nexus forum). That said, one forum reflected that having both humanitarian and development NGOs provides a better-rounded perspective of the issues and potential policy options.

Urgent sign-offs for humanitarian issues can usually be completed as quickly as 24 or 48 hours in smaller- to medium-sized fora. A concern raised by one forum is that development NGOs' internal lines of reporting and management are quite slow, so it could be difficult to get anything approved in such a short timeframe. Therefore, fora spoken with rely on different options for sign-off and branding to get messages out the

door quickly. Many of these options are already in existence in many forum SoGs or advocacy sign-off policies. One forum, with almost 200 members, adjusted their sign-off process as it was impossible to get all members to sign-off on products. Most products now are approved through the steering committee or director rather than the plenary. From speaking with K.I.'s and reviewing SoGs of several fora, some of the sign off options include forum branding only (just forum logo/no member sign-on), no branding (no forum logo or NGO logos), and urgent sign-off only requiring the forum director and steering committee to approve (with no logos). When choosing the non-branded option, this can allow different language and perspectives to be shared in a single forum product, and according to one K.I., “it is not a collective position but rather a collection of perspectives.” Many K.I.s said there were difficulties to find consensus on humanitarian advocacy in Nexus membership fora. A solution expressed by several K.I.s, due to both the nature of their contexts as well forum membership composition, is the development of distinct separate products to ensure all positions are represented equally and that humanitarian principles can be strongly represented in humanitarian products.

CONCLUSION

One K.I. asked, “As a forum, why should we only focus on humanitarian issues?” reflecting that a forum should really be addressing the overall impact of the work—and the needs of people being denied their entitlements—be they humanitarian, early recovery, Nexus, or resilience. This question circles back to the purpose of this guidance, for humanitarian NGO fora to assess for themselves if, how, and when they should expand to include development NGOs, and what that will mean for the forum in their individual context.