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Interrelationships between humanitarian organizations

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF humanitarian organizations have come under the public spotlight more in the last five to six years than in the previous two decades. This became a central issue in media reporting of the humanitarian response to the crisis in Rwanda in 1994, and has been a recurrent theme ever since. A number of articles have questioned the accountability of humanitarian organizations, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs).¹ Meanwhile, many of the most difficult humanitarian operations are being carried out in situations where there is no formal State authority, or where the State is very weak, for example in Somalia, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Afghanistan. In these environments the “usual” accountability mechanisms between international aid agencies and the government of the recipient country simply do not exist. It is not surprising, therefore, that emergency aid has been called one of the largest unregulated industries in the world.

Humanitarian organizations have not sat idly by, and there has been an active if

unresolved debate within the sector. Indeed, humanitarian organizations have launched a number of their own so-called “accountability initiatives”, especially since the mid-1990s. Many of these focus on the interrelationships between humanitarian organizations, and most have been initiated by NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This article reviews some of these initiatives and their origins. It begins by considering the varied types of relationship that exist between humanitarian organizations.

Humanitarian organizations and how they interact

But first, what do we mean by “humanitarian organizations”? This article takes a broad view and includes national and international NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and some UN agencies – as long as their mandates and objectives are partially humanitarian. In fact, rather few of these organizations have a mandate which is solely humanitarian like those of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and *Médecins*

sans frontières (MSF). Most have a development mandate as well, which usually accounts for the larger part of the organizations’ resources and effort, and has a strong influence over their approach to humanitarian work. In this article we are not directly concerned with bilateral donor government agencies.

The interrelationships between these different types of organization are many and complex, and throw up different types of accountability, as evidenced by the following examples.

- One humanitarian organization may be funding another; for example, an international NGO which channels funds through national NGOs. This raises the more conventional notion of financial accountability, although there are likely to be other dimensions to the relationship, such as capacity-building.
- A growing number of humanitarian organizations are part of a larger “family” of international NGOs, such as Oxfam and CARE. In this case the relationship

¹ See, for example, *The Non-governmental Order in The Economist*, 9 December 1999.



Till Mayer / ICRC



H. J. Davies / UNHCR



Crispin Hughes / Panos Pictures



Humanitarian agencies are thick on the ground nowadays, all with different specialities and mandates.

is most likely to revolve around a common mandate, and there is often strong peer pressure to meet that mandate. Agencies may also be accountable to one another through agreements about an appropriate division of labour between the different “national” NGOs that belong to an international family.

- One humanitarian organization may be supplying another with relief resources; for example, the World Food Programme (WFP) provides emergency food aid to a number of international and national NGOs for distribution to beneficiaries. The relationship here may be covered by a Memorandum of Understanding or even by a formal contract. One humanitarian organization may be working in close partnership with another to deliver humanitarian assistance – for example, in a refugee/ displaced persons’ camp, where one organization is responsible for water and sanitation and another for health. The relationship in this case is usually more informal, based on cooperation and a close working arrangement.
- One humanitarian organization may be charged (formally or informally) with

coordinating the humanitarian response and therefore coordinating all other humanitarian organizations – the “lead agency approach” – for example, UNHCR during the Kosovo crisis or UNICEF in the southern sector of Operation Lifeline Sudan. This coordination role may include negotiating with warring parties for access to potential beneficiaries, on behalf of other humanitarian organizations, and is usually based on coordination by consent.²

The list could go on. What it demonstrates is the complex web of interdependency between humanitarian organizations in practice, from the conventional funding relationship to more complicated issues of partnership and representation. Yet, as Raynard has highlighted,³ there is a general lack of clearly defined responsibilities amongst the organizations. If food aid is not delivered to those in need, it may be difficult to establish whether this is the responsibility of the implementing NGO, or of WFP which is supplying the food, or of the donors who are supposed to provide the financial resources.⁴ This, in turn, makes it harder to establish and

strengthen mechanisms of accountability *within* the humanitarian system.

Partly for this reason, it has sometimes been suggested that evaluations of humanitarian operations should be system-wide or, in other words, should look at the entire international response to a humanitarian crisis. Only this type of evaluation really deals with the complex relationships between humanitarian organizations and identifies what has worked and what has not, i.e. fulfils an accountability function between agencies. But in practice, there has only been one such evaluation, namely the seminal evaluation of the international humanitarian response to the crisis in Rwanda in 1994.⁵ There have been some discussions within ALNAP⁶ about the value of a system-wide evaluation of the international humanitarian response, for example to the 1998 famine in southern Sudan, and to the Kosovo crisis in 1999. But neither materialized, partly because of the enormity of the task. Instead, evaluations are usually commissioned by a single humanitarian organization, focusing on its own performance. Of course this may take into account some interrelationships, but not at a system level.

Yardsticks

Humanitarian organizations have found themselves increasingly responding to humanitarian crises in the midst of war and violent conflict. International humanitarian law (IHL), enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, provides a set of rules about how war should be fought. It refers to the obligations of warring parties towards non-combatants, and states the principles such as impartiality that are supposed to govern the provision of humanitarian assistance. Although most States have signed up to the Geneva Conventions, the mechanisms for holding States and other warring parties accountable to these rules are weak. Also, apart from the ICRC, humanitarian organizations have no recognizable legal obligations under IHL. In other words, there is no legislative accountability of humanitarian organizations. Partly because of this weakness of legislative accountability, partly because of an awareness of the importance and value of humanitarian organizations working to the same principles, particularly in war zones, there has been a proliferation of “codes of conduct” in the last six years. A number of these incorporate some of the principles from IHL.

The “original” Code of Conduct – the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief – was drawn up in 1994 and has attracted hundreds of signatories since. This was one of the first attempts to apply basic principles and “standards of behaviour” across the humanitarian sector – for example, by calculating aid priorities on the basis of need alone and involving beneficiaries in

the management of relief aid.⁷ But it is pitched at a very general level, against which it is hard to monitor performance. Since then, there has been a proliferation of other inter-agency codes of conduct.⁸ A number of these have been drawn up for specific emergencies, such as the “Principles of Engagement for Emergency Humanitarian Assistance in the DRC”, and the “Sierra Leone Code of Conduct”. Some are geared specifically to warring parties in order to secure their agreement to certain standards and principles, like the Ground Rules negotiated for southern Sudan in 1995. Others have been more concerned to guide the behaviour of humanitarian organizations to ensure they are working to the same principles. Greater consistency in agency practice, particularly in dealings with warring parties, should reduce the likelihood that one agency will be played off against another and that humanitarian space will be manipulated as a result.

For some of the other codes, such as the Code of Conduct of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) and the People in Aid Code of Best Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel, the motivation is usually improved and more professional performance. For example, People in Aid is specifically concerned with improving the quality of human resource management.

This proliferation of codes is an indicator of the level of concern amongst humanitarian organizations to improve quality and performance, but the impact on accountability is, so far, limited. Opt-in to most of the codes is voluntary. There are very few examples of mandatory sign-up.⁹ Undoubtedly, peer pressure

encourages agencies to sign, but there are currently limited, if any, means for measuring compliance across the sector. As Raynard puts it:

“Any policy statement or commitment to a code of conduct on the part of an organization is only as good as the ability of the individuals within it to put those policies into practice... Accountability therefore needs to be embedded in the governance and management of organizations.”¹⁰

Indeed, some commentators have pointed out that agencies are unlikely to whistle-blow on one another because of the anticipated negative effect on how the humanitarian aid sector is perceived as a whole.¹¹

The most ambitious attempt to improve performance and accountability across the humanitarian aid sector is the Sphere Project. Launched in 1997, it has

² The most common approach to coordination, however, is the appointment of an *individual* within the UN as the Resident Coordinator or as Humanitarian Coordinator, as in DRC and in East Timor. See N. Reindorp and P. Wiles, *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience*, a study commissioned by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2000.

³ P. Raynard, *Mapping Accountability in Humanitarian Assistance*, report presented to ALNAP, see footnote 6, at the bi-annual meeting in April 2000.

⁴ Of course, the reason for failure to deliver food aid may be to do with entirely external causes – for instance, access may be denied by belligerents. This would also have to be factored into any analysis of failure and the extent to which more could have been done to negotiate humanitarian space by humanitarian aid agencies.

⁵ J. Eriksson, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, Synthesis Report, Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, Copenhagen, 1996.

⁶ Established in 1997, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) is an international inter-agency forum working to improve learning and accountability across the humanitarian system. ALNAP members hold bi-annual meetings at which the issue of a system-wide evaluation has sometimes been discussed.

⁷ *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, IFRC, 1996.

⁸ “Relief and Rehabilitation Network”, *RRN Newsletter*, No. 13, ODI, London, 1999.

⁹ Two exceptions are (1) the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK – all member UK NGOs must sign up to the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct if they wish to join the DEC, and (2) AusAID, which requires Australian NGOs to sign up to the ACFOA Code if they are to be accredited.

¹⁰ See footnote 3.

¹¹ N. Leader, “Codes of Conduct: Who Needs Them?”, Editorial, *RRN Newsletter*, No. 13, ODI, London, 1999.

been described as “one of the largest collaboration and consultation processes that the humanitarian community has ever experienced”.¹² It has resulted in a handbook that contains a humanitarian charter, along with minimum standards and key indicators for disaster assistance in five sectors: water and sanitation; nutrition; food aid; shelter and site planning; and health services. The dissemination of Sphere has been impressive: it has now been translated into at least five languages and hundreds of individuals have been trained.

The Sphere Project has also generated a lively debate within the humanitarian sector, which has tended to polarize agencies into those that support the Sphere standards and those that are against. The critique against raises concerns such as Sphere’s focus on technical standards and contends that it does not address issues of protection which may sometimes be compromised by the provision of material assistance. There has also been debate and sometimes confusion about whether the standards represent an absolute minimum, implying that inability to reach them means failure, or whether they are aspirational,

although a recent contribution from an Oxfam manager states that:

“Ultimately, Sphere standards need to be seen as guidelines that we try to reach, and for the moment they cannot be much more than this.”¹³

Less clear is how Sphere has contributed to improved accountability, although this is one of its stated aims. One of the concerns of agencies that oppose Sphere is also that donor governments may insist that their implementing partners adhere to Sphere standards, thus locking them into ever-closer relationships with donor governments that may be pursuing political objectives rather than just humanitarian ones.¹⁴ But, as a number of commentators have noted, Sphere is currently more of a “tool than a rule”, and a mechanism for raising the quality of humanitarian assistance.^{15, 16} Opt-in and sign-up are voluntary. Mechanisms are not yet in place for monitoring compliance, nor for imposing sanctions for lack of compliance. These would be inappropriate at this stage in Sphere’s development. Thus, the claim that it enhances accountability seems somewhat misplaced.

In contrast, the People in Aid Code of Best Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel is one of the few codes that does directly address issues of accountability. Agencies signing up must agree to an external audit of social accountability. Only when they have fulfilled a range of conditions, based on reporting, audit and disclosure of progress, may they state that they follow the code. Twelve agencies agreed to pilot the code, of which seven have so far fulfilled the conditions. This is no mean feat in four years. However, compared with Sphere, People in Aid covers more charted territory and can draw upon social accountability practice pioneered in other sectors.

Going for quality rather than accountability

Overall, although accountability has been much discussed by humanitarian organizations, rather little progress appears to have been made through the initiatives discussed in this article. In terms of the interrelationships between humanitarian

organizations, the unclear division of responsibility between organizations seems to be at the root of this. The sector is still hugely diverse and humanitarian organizations are still far from signing up to the same humanitarian principles.

Instead, efforts have focused on improving quality and performance, through initiatives such as Sphere. There appear to have been two strong motivations. First, to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, in response to both public and internal criticisms. In taking these initiatives, humanitarian organizations have been keen to stay in control of their own destinies, rather than be subject to the monitoring and initiatives of some external regulatory body. Second, the recent and rapid growth in the number of humanitarian organizations, particularly international NGOs, has raised concern amongst the more experienced and established ones to set and maintain standards of humanitarian assistance.¹⁷ Whilst there is a tendency to lump all NGOs into one category, some are much longer-established and more experienced

than others. The latter are particularly motivated to promote and protect the professionalization of humanitarian aid work, and improved performance of NGOs overall.

Some have argued that a logical next step would be some form of voluntary accreditation for humanitarian organizations.¹⁸ Of course, this throws up issues about the standards and performance measures that would be used in any accreditation process. Should these be the “technical standards” of Sphere, or process standards that refer to management, learning and evaluation, and/or what role might there be for the original Code of Conduct?¹⁹ These are important questions to be addressed, but the time may be ripe to entertain and begin to develop this particular idea, as a natural evolution beyond the initiatives reviewed here.

Although concerns about accountability have driven many of the initiatives described above, they should more appropriately be termed “quality initiatives”. A lot of valuable investment has gone into developing these initiatives, but their overall effectiveness is still to be

proven. A first step in this direction will be the evaluation of Sphere, to be commenced shortly.

To an important extent, the effort that has gone into developing these standards and codes has focused the spotlight on the interrelationships *between* humanitarian organizations, rather than on the dominating relationship between funder and implementing partner. ■

12 S. Lowrie, “Sphere at the End of Phase II”, *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 17, Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI, London, 2000.

13 F. Mompont, “Using Sphere: Oxfam’s Experience in West Africa”, *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 17, Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI, London, 2000.

14 F. Terry, “The Limits and Risks of Regulation Mechanisms for Humanitarian Action”, *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 17, Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI, London, 2000.

15 K. Van Brabant, “Regaining Perspective: The Debate over Quality Assurance and Accountability”, *Humanitarian Exchange*, No. 17, Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI, London, 2000.

16 See footnote 3.

17 In Kosovo, for example, there were over 300 NGOs at the height of the crisis. In Rwanda five years earlier there were over 200.

18 This argument was put forward by Nick Stockton of Oxfam at an international working conference on “Enhancing the Quality of Humanitarian Assistance”, held in The Hague on 12 October 2001, and was widely discussed by participants.

19 At this same conference, there were a number of calls for developing the original Code of Conduct, for example by “unpacking” it and/or by providing an interpretation of its broad principles and indicators against which adherence could be monitored.