

## **The role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters**

**26<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting in Kuala Lumpur**

**16-17 November 2010**

**Meeting Concept Note**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 26<sup>th</sup> ALNAP Meeting will take place in Kuala Lumpur in November 2010 and will focus on the relationship between the international humanitarian system and national governments. Building on existing and new research by ALNAP and others, the meeting will bring together a range of key humanitarian and government actors with the specific aim of exploring better ways of collaborating in disaster response. **The goal of the meeting will be to outline a distinct set of contextually relevant collaborative strategies and principles for how the ‘formal’ humanitarian system and national governments might work together, and to get a shared commitment to using these strategies and principles in future disasters.**

Calls for greater engagement between the international humanitarian system and national actors are far from new. As Bill Clinton put it in the preface to the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) synthesis report: “we must do better at utilizing and working alongside local structures... Local structures are already in place and more often than not the ‘first responders’ to a crisis. The way the international community goes about providing relief and recovery assistance must actively strengthen, not undermine, these local actors” (Clinton: 2006)

However, debates in the humanitarian sector on national capacities have tended to focus on civil society capacities, with relatively little attention paid to the role of national government. Although the relationship between international agencies and national and local civil society is a vital one, there is an increasing recognition that governments play a critical role in the humanitarian context. Emerging evidence and opinion suggest that localisation and an increasing role for the state are key trends in disaster response.

### **UNMET COMMITMENTS NORTH AND SOUTH**

The state’s role as the primary actor in disaster response is well recognised internationally. UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 of 1991, which gave the then newly formed OCHA a central role in the coordination of international humanitarian action, also stated clearly that:

“Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Hence, the

affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.”

This idea, while desirable in principle, is seldom realised in practice. Recent cross-country research conducted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) in London has argued that although international humanitarian actors should aim to encourage and support states to fulfil their responsibilities, the reality is that in fact, ‘too often, aid agencies have neglected the central role of the state, and [humanitarian] neutrality and independence have been taken as shorthand for disengagement from state structures, rather than as necessitating principled engagement with them’ (Harvey: 2009, p1).

While current international assistance models are good delivering aid in spite of considerable constraints, they are less able to do so in ways that build on and enhance national capacities. In fact, in many cases international aid may undermine these capacities. Although the international system may pay lip-service to the notion of local coordination and ownership, too often response appeals and plans are developed independently of affected governments – often resulting in alienation and resentment rather than cooperation and collaboration. This is reflected in the memorable phrase of a Sri Lankan government official after the tsunami: ‘I don’t know which wave was worse, the first wave of water, or the wave of aid that followed it’.

But international actors do not carry all of the burden of blame, and there may be good reasons why international agencies struggle to work with national governments. In many cases there is clear need for states to improve efforts to meet existing commitments. State assertions of sovereignty and leadership are not always followed up with the necessary investment in capacities for effective disaster response. Moreover, while national commitment and investment is key, it is also important to enlist the support of the developmental side of the aid system, which often has the needed skills and resources for strengthening these capacities, but have not prioritise such involvement.

## **CHANGING CONTEXTS AND NEW WAYS OF WORKING**

The international humanitarian community moves into action when needs within a state outweigh what that state and its ancillaries are able or willing to provide. There are a range of different disaster settings which shape how interactions between national responders and the international system play out. Specifically:

- a) There are **situations characterised by strong state leadership**, when substantial national capacities are mobilised to respond to a disaster event, supplemented by international support in the form of specific financial resources, materials, equipment or skills. The Chinese government’s response to the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 exemplifies this, where the majority of both funding and implementation came from national sources, but was supplemented by additional international funding and support.
- b) At the other end of the spectrum there are **situations where limited state response capacities are overwhelmed by an emergency** and the international community takes the lead in calling attention to the emergency, raising funds and coordinating and implementing the response. The response to the recent earthquake in Haiti is

such a situation - even before the disaster the state was in need of significant external support to assert its primacy. The disaster served to compound its weakness, and arguably the response risks further undermining the contract between citizen and state (Collier 2010).

Between these two ends of the spectrum are many different scenarios of how actors in the international humanitarian system interact with states. There are cases where ongoing vulnerability is addressed by the state, but cyclical emergencies make ongoing international support vital to meeting needs, as is the case for instance in Bangladesh or Ethiopia. In contrast, a state may manage the immediate response with its national capacities but accept international support for longer-term recovery and reconstruction, as India did in response to the Tsunami.

There is evidence of a growing trend for lower- and middle-income countries to extend their capacities to respond to disasters, in some cases positioning themselves as the central actor for identifying priorities and coordinating response. For example, building on experience in the tsunami and the Yogyakarta Earthquake, the Indonesian government has moved to strengthen disaster management within domestic legal and policy frameworks. The government is becoming more assertive of its sovereignty in humanitarian efforts, and is working to align humanitarian aid with national development priorities, in accordance with the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness (Willits-King: 2009). This example of a national government taking steps to place disaster response in the wider context of development policy is of real significance to the humanitarian sector. Mozambique has also taken steps to assert a central role in disaster response, causing in some situations tension with international coordination structures such as the clusters.

There are also more challenging scenarios, as in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, when the government asserted its sovereignty but was unwilling or unable to provide immediate assistance to the millions of its citizens left destitute by the cyclone, or allow agencies in at the pace they saw as essential. Much was made at the time about the nature of state sovereignty and the balance between rights and responsibilities. However, it is the eventual mechanism through which aid delivery was managed that may be the most significant aspect of the disaster from a longer term perspective. The Tripartite Core Group of the Government of Myanmar, the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) put the state at the centre of the coordination of the international response, and was widely praised both for creating humanitarian space and for coordinating the subsequent response (Turner et al: 2008, p 21). Cyclone Nargis demonstrated that even in these challenging circumstances, state actors cannot be avoided or circumvented.

As Maxwell and Walker have explained, in theory the process of initiating an international humanitarian response is simple: a crisis hits and overwhelms local and national capacities, leading to an appeal for international humanitarian assistance. Needs are assessed, supplies delivered and suffering eased. The crisis recedes, and the international humanitarian response is drawn to a close. In practice, of course, the process is, 'far messier, far less effective and far more political' than this (quoted in Harvey: 2009, p6).

A central priority, as Harvey argues, is to identify, "a more politically sensitive way... for governments to request international assistance without undermining perceptions of sovereignty or damaging national pride."

Related to this, rather than an off-the-shelf ‘avoidance model’ of working, international humanitarian agencies and state actors need to work together to develop a menu of possible ***collaborative strategies and operational principles for use in future disaster responses***. In the face of growing humanitarian needs, there is an urgent need to identify new models of international aid that are coherent and flexible enough to engage with and support state actors whatever their capacities and constraints may be, and across the full range of crisis contexts.

For international actors, the shift from substituting for or ignoring governments to collaboration and capacity enhancement will be a difficult one to make. But it may be a defining challenge for the sector in the years and decades to come.

## **THE 26<sup>th</sup> ALNAP MEETING**

It is against this background that ALNAP will focus on *the role of national governments in international humanitarian response to disasters* as the theme for its 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting.

The goal of this meeting is improve performance in future disaster response by creating a **shared understanding** among national governments and across the international humanitarian system about how humanitarian-state relations have worked in the past and how they can be enhanced in the future, as well as a **shared commitment to** making necessary improvements in the future.

Specifically, it will aim to collectively assess the future potential for a more flexible collaboration between international humanitarian actors and national governments; to learn from successful approaches to collaboration and interaction; and to put forward a set of clear and succinct ideas for how different actors need to adapt to make such approaches more widely applicable.

The Meeting will build on research and discussions undertaken across the sector, to which the ALNAP secretariat and network members have made an active contribution. It will also seek to draw in experience and learning from collaboration in other spheres of action, notably the military and the private sector.

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