



Humanitarian action in the Arab region

20-21 January 2014 | Amman, Jordan

Summary report

On 20-21st January 2014, 80 senior staff of international and Arab humanitarian NGOs and multi-lateral organisations met to discuss challenges and opportunities for improved humanitarian action in the Arab region.

Speakers included the HRH Prince Turki bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, HRH Prince Rashid bin El Hassan of Jordan, Ambassador Atta el Mannan, the Assistant Secretary General of the Humanitarian Department in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Ms Gwi-Yeop Son, the Director of Corporate Programmes at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). The meeting was co-sponsored by ECHO and Islamic Relief in Germany.

Jointly organised by the Humanitarian Forum (THF), the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute, UN OCHA, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO), the meeting included a working dinner to examine country-specific challenges and lessons learned in responding to crises in the Arab region, keynote speeches by HRH Prince Turki bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, HRH Prince Rashid bin El Hassan of Jordan and Dr Sara Pantuliano of HPG, as well as thematic working groups. At the dinner meeting that organised by Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization, Ms Gwi-Yeop Son recommended for the Humanitarian Forum to facilitate the regional consultation in preparation for Istanbul World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 in Istanbul.

The meeting complements other similar meetings organised to strengthen Humanitarian Partnerships in Muscat and Kuwait over the past 3 years.

Summary presentations

Welcome speeches were followed by key presentations to set the scene for the meeting. In his welcome speech Mr. Aymen al Maflah secretary general of Jordanian Hashemite Charitable Organisation in Amman called the participants to make practical recommendation that can enhance efficiency of humanitarian organisations in their response to crises. David Verboom, director of ECHO regional office welcomed the participants and emphasised that funding will not be effective without access to affected communities. He highlighted the importance of influencing political leaders to provide larger humanitarian space for relief workers to bring positive impact to the lives of affected communities as they respond to the real needs in new, innovative ways and coordinated approach.

Nigel Fisher UN assistant SG and regional coordinator for the Syria crisis- on the other hand emphasized the value of building unity and solidarity among humanitarian actors to increase their efficiency and effectiveness in achieving the shared goals of helping communities in need who live through difficult times. "In earlier conversations we spoke about importance of mutual trust, respect and commitment to shared values and principles when collectively responding to humanitarian situations and beyond. One important aspect that OCHA is keen on is the exchange of information as a mechanism for building trust between humanitarian actors as well as paint a better picture of humanitarian needs". He said that approaches will enhance our understanding of communities needs and how they are being responded to by different humanitarian actors and optimise the utilisation of resources.

HRH Prince Turki ben Talal of Saudi Arabia – Opening speech

The Arab region has been hard hit by humanitarian crises. This meeting has brought together a wide range of people in order to respond to the consequences of these crises. However, there are three aspects missing in the current emergency response:

- 1) **Joint planning.** There is a need for different individuals and organisations to meet and put aside their personal or organisational agendas to focus solely on targeting people in need. While they may not all operate in the same way, with the same mechanisms, there should be common principles and values.
- 2) **Successful partnerships.** Joint planning is not enough – what are also needed are equal and mutually beneficial partnerships. There is no room for competition or relationships where one partner benefits more than the other.
- 3) **Field monitoring.** Organisations must monitor progress and impact in the field and ensure that that programmes are effective.

Now, with the Syria crisis, more than 1/3 of the population have become refugees – it has become a massive emergency. However, the aid effort has not been well coordinated or organised through a joint approach; organisations have been led by their own objectives and agendas. We need to improve and develop partnerships to serve Syrians in need. This conference is an opportunity to build such partnerships. There is also a need to foster a greater spirit of volunteerism for humanitarian action in the region, with the necessary institutions to support this.

HRH Prince Rashid bin El Hassan of Jordan – Closing speech

Donors have been very forthcoming in Jordan, for which the country is grateful. However, many aid efforts continue to lack strong coordination which has led to confusion and difficulties in working together. There is also a disproportionate amount of attention focused on awarding or receiving credit; while it is important to report back to donors about activities and results, it should not come at the expense of a better coordinated and collaborative aid effort.

The aid response should also take into consideration the needs of the host population in Jordan, both in the short term and long term. Looking at similar crises in the past, while 60-70% of funding requirements may be met during the height of the crisis, it can drop to 10% of the required funds once the response shifts into the development phase. Another important issue for Jordan is water security. Prior to the Syria crisis Jordan was the 4th most water-scarce country in the world (per capita); now it is the 3rd. This strain on water resources has been felt by organisations seeking to provide water and sanitation in Zaatari camp.

There is also a need to improve transparency and due diligence within organisations, particularly in terms of personnel, in order to ensure that aid efforts are dedicated to improving the lives of people in need, not furthering personal or ideological agendas. An initiative that Jordan, and Prince El Hassan bin Talal in particular, would like to explore is a regional bank for reconstruction and development. It could seek to improve transparency and coherence in spending funds on rebuilding from such crises.

Sara Pantuliano – The changing humanitarian landscape: implications for the Arab region

Massive changes in the humanitarian system are coming to light, as increasing numbers of ‘new’ or ‘newly acknowledged’ humanitarian organisations are developing a significant role of influence in international humanitarian action. Responding to these changes, the Humanitarian Policy Group has embarked on a body of research to provide historical perspective on changes in humanitarian action, which includes a range of studies on the history of humanitarian action in the Middle East and North Africa. One of the studies has examined the evolution of the language and practice of humanitarianism in the Arab world over the 20th century. The new actors are seeking to develop their own approaches and mechanisms that are influenced by their understanding of humanitarian work. Given the fact that there is no monopoly over humanitarian action it may be more productive to speak about different models or approaches, rather than principles, which can be tailored to different contexts and crises.

Diversity must be seen as an opportunity to advance humanitarian action. Some progress has been made in the region in building trust and reducing barriers, through various meetings and workshops, including “Advancing humanitarian action and engaging with global actors”, a conference co-organised by HPG, the ICRC and Wilton Park in Istanbul in October 2013. However, the challenge now is to explore how the new humanitarian landscape can make better use of this diversity through encouraging complementarity rather than competition. This forum is an opportunity to start exploring how to turn this aspiration into reality.

Country focused discussions

At a working dinner hosted by Islamic Relief Germany, participants took part in table discussions focused on key humanitarian challenges and experiences of humanitarian action in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, the occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria and Syrian refugee responses in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, with the aim of sharing common challenges and lessons learned for improved humanitarian action in these specific countries, and the wider Arab region.

Many common challenges across the different crises emerged during the discussions. Participants noted that the diversity of actors engaged in humanitarian crises in these countries have at time led to differences of opinion, lack of unity and trust. These issues have made coordination and collaboration a serious challenge. Responses have been marked by a lack of collective and coordinated responses, coupled with a lack of information sharing amongst different organisations.

Participants also raised the challenge of humanitarian access due to insecurity as well as restrictions on access. Insecurity was a common feature in all the countries, which has hampered organisations’ ability to access populations in need and monitor and evaluate programmes. Bureaucratic measures and restrictions, such as barriers to NGO registration, staff visas and money transfers have made it difficult to operate. Counter-terror laws and measures were also mentioned as specific challenges for humanitarian action, particularly in the occupied Palestinian Territories and Syria, with donor restrictions noted as an obstacle when trying to partner with or fund local NGOs. Politicisation of aid was also highlighted as a difficulty, with the danger of political interference and manipulation affecting organisations’ ability to adhere to the humanitarian principles.

Capacity, or lack thereof, was also flagged up as a challenge. Many noted the sheer scale of the respective emergencies, and the difficulty of having enough capacity to respond to the crises. Capacity of local organisations was also discussed. In Lebanon, for example, local organisations have historically focused on development, with little experience of responding to humanitarian emergencies.

In response to these challenges, the lessons learned for improving effectiveness of humanitarian action in these countries, and beyond, include building capacity of local organisations, improving communication between organisations, developing ways of working collectively on tasks ranging from advocacy to needs assessments, and fostering a spirit of solidarity and mutual respect between local, national and international organisations working on humanitarian action in the Arab region.

Thematic working groups

Meeting participants were split into working groups that contained a cross section of Arab and international actors to discuss three key themes, in light of humanitarian responses to various crises that the region has witnessed over the last few decades:

- 1) Securing **access** to affected areas and communities through humanitarian negotiations,
- 2) Facilitating **cooperation and coordination** between various stakeholders,
- 3) **Humanitarian principles** and their application in practice.

Humanitarian access

Humanitarian principles in practice

- Participants stressed the need to implement the principles, particularly impartiality, in order to gain trust and acceptance from all parties. However, implementation is a challenge, particularly when seeking to negotiate access with uncompromising states or non-state actors. There is a need for organisations to establish their own limits on how far they are willing to compromise in order to access civilians in conflict.
- It is particularly important to weigh up conditions attached to funding by donors, or receiving funding from controversial/politicised sources – particularly as that could affect perception.

Humanitarian negotiations

- Participants stressed the need to talk to all sides in order to gain access in situations affected by conflict. Negotiations with armed non-state actors are not only necessary to gain access to areas under their control, but dialogue with them may also be an opportunity to improve their understanding of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the humanitarian principles.
- With regards to negotiations with belligerent states, the negotiations with the Syrian government has been a serious dilemma for many aid agencies, with many wanting to do more and access government held or besieged areas but have so far found the Syrian government unwilling to compromise. Organisations have felt hemmed in by these restrictions.
- Counter-terror legislation is a significant barrier to negotiating with entities designated as terrorists in UN, US, EU and other terror lists – which in turn inhibits the ability of organisations to provide aid in many places, such as Somalia. The anti-terror laws and measures have a chilling effect on humanitarian action, with some fearing prosecution or being blacklisted for negotiating with a listed entity. There is a need to challenge the regulations and influence governments to recognise the perverse effects of much of the counter-terror laws and measures. Agencies that have greater influence on organisations are encouraged to advocate on behalf of others to gain better access to populations in need.

Perceptions of different actors

- In the Arab region, mistrust of Western organisations, such as the UN or INGOs exists, but not across the board.
- There can be overly high expectations about what the UN can achieve in terms of negotiations, and sometimes other organisations – such as INGOs, NGOs, local civil society or diaspora groups – can gain access that the UN can't, due to how they are perceived on the ground. However, it is not about competition, but comparative advantage and division of labour. Partnerships with local organisations through intermediaries could help INGOs and the UN identify local partners through which they can gain access to certain areas, and provide financial support to the respective local organisations.
- Diaspora organisations occupy a unique position as some are well placed to gain access due to language, networks and perception of being an insider, with Syria as an example of a context where diaspora organisations have been able to access areas that many international organisations have yet to gain access to. However, there still exists some mistrust about the impartiality of such organisations due to perceptions about possible personal ties. Diaspora organisations should seek to work in a visibly principled manner and thus challenge the negative perceptions.
- Faith-based organisations can see benefits pertaining to how they are perceived as an organisation. In Afghanistan, Western religious NGOs were better understood and accepted by the Taliban than secular organisations, and Islamic organisations have at times been able to gain better access to some areas in Muslim-majority countries. However, this is not always the case: some Islamic organisations have been confronted with challenges due to negative perceptions of this same faith-

based identity. For example, some were most hard-hit by counter-terror measures due to such perceptions.

Aid worker security

- Security of staff and aid workers is a serious concern for many organisations, particularly when operating in insecure and volatile environments. Participants debated how to balance the humanitarian imperative with the need to protect their own staff.

Coordination for access

- There is a need to better coordinate access through negotiation efforts amongst organisations working in a particular response. Through greater coordination, agencies may gain better leverage and be better able to identify the most strategic organisations or individuals who can facilitate and negotiate access.
- Formal negotiations coordination mechanisms, such as the UN Access Coordination Unit in oPt can be particularly useful. In the case of Syria, loose coordination between organisations carrying out aid in government-held areas and those delivering cross-border aid can help reduce gaps. However, such coordination must be carried out carefully to ensure that the information is not misused for political or military purposes.
- There also needs to be greater coherence amongst approaches to enhance our credibility with stakeholders.

Cooperation and coordination

Goals and expectations of coordination and cooperation

- There is a need to distinguish between cooperation and coordination. They are not the same and perhaps we should focus on ensuring effective cooperation as a step towards greater coordination. This resonates with the idea that we should be aiming to achieve small advances rather than immediate radical change.
- There remains the larger challenge of ownership when organisations report back to donors, media or other stakeholders. The need to publicise achievements and demonstrate value of contributions will remain important. Yet it continues to be a challenge to efforts to coordinate – and also to take on less visible or appealing projects.

Existing multi-lateral coordination mechanisms

- Current coordination structures are not conducive to facilitating partnerships with local or regional organisations. There are numerous obstacles that impede wider engagement in these forums, such as language, resources to attend the frequency of meetings, use of jargon etc.
- The UN and its partners need to develop ways of making these fora more accessible. Regional and local NGOs should also attend these meetings to see how they can benefit and help make these mechanisms more accessible and contextually appropriate.

Information sharing

- There is a need to demonstrate the benefits of information sharing. Organisations need to see that the information they are providing is feeding into processes or outcomes that they are able to benefit from.

- In order to promote information sharing amongst different actors, organisations also need to be assured that sensitive information is used responsibly and that confidentiality is maintained.
- One platform is the Arab Humanitarian Portal – a bilingual information-sharing platform about activities, stakeholders/actors, and trends and events in the region.
- There is also a need to improve transparency about funding and donations. This is in regard to large donors who do not channel donations through the formal UN system.

Institutionalised structures

- Effective and sustainable cooperation requires more institutionalised structures, such as platforms, consortia or networks. There is support for an Arab NGO forum or network that could facilitate cooperation between many of the NGOs in the region and also help them engage with other entities such as governments and the UN with one voice. The International Humanitarian City in Dubai offered to host the first meeting of this NGO forum.
- Country level platforms could also help facilitate engagement in multi-lateral coordination mechanisms as NGOs pull together resources.

Focus on country level cooperation

- Many examples of successful partnerships came from specific countries, which highlighted the need to focus our energy on strengthening and facilitating cooperation at country level and use those experiences in these regional level discussions. In other words, take a bottom up approach to cooperation rather than seek a regional level entry point. This also ensures action on the ground.

Trust and dialogue between different actors

- Trust between many organizations in the room has improved over the years and there is a greater willingness to cooperate.
- However, many organisations from the region still do not attend these events as they continue to distrust the UN and other international humanitarian actors. Whilst the UN and others focus on working with organisations they already have partnerships with, they should also consider establishing a dialogue with others.
- There should also be efforts to improve understanding of the distinction between the UN's political and humanitarian role, one not widely shared in the region.

Capacity building

- More capacity building is needed in the region, but in a form that takes into account genuine needs of different organisations, not just trainings. There is also a lot that the traditional sector can learn from local organisations, recognising that capacity building is a two-way process.

Humanitarian principles

Humanitarian principles as a concept

- Humanitarian principles are largely accepted and recognised as central to humanitarian action with no contradiction to the traditions and culture in this region. Impartiality, in particular, is considered central to humanitarian action.

- More could be done to show the similarities between the principles and local cultures making them more accessible and easier to understand to those less familiar with them, similar to efforts carried out to improve understanding of refugee law or IHL. Important initiatives include one carried out by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) to look at commonalities between IHL and Islamic Law, and a project undertaken by the OIC to develop a cultural specific Code of Conduct for the Arab region.
- While the principles are known by many in the Arab region, particularly amongst leaders of local and national NGOs there is still a need to raise greater awareness about them and filter the principles down throughout local organisations and amongst the youth and civil society. Additionally, efforts to engage armed non-state actors in discussions about the principles are important, but some will simply not accept the principles. More discussion is needed on how to engage with such actors.

Implementation of the principles

- While the principles are known in general, implementation is lacking. There is also a need to improve understanding about the principles amongst all staff within organisations to improve coherence and implementation.
- All humanitarian organisations struggle to adhere to all four humanitarian principles in a consistent way. There must be an effort to distinguish humanitarian actors from political ones to avoid what one participant called the ‘dilemma of implication’. However compromises do have to be made as organisations face dilemmas on a daily basis, especially in relation to access.
- Similarly to the dissemination of IHL there is a short-term and a long-term goal. In a conflict, there is the immediate objective of providing humanitarian assistance according to the humanitarian principles but also a more long-term goal to influence the behaviour of belligerents. Whether the long-term goal has been achieved is difficult to measure quantitatively. Nevertheless, the short-term efforts do not replace work that aims to achieve the long-term goals of influencing behaviour.

Monitoring implementation

- Participants discussed the possibility of monitoring the implementation of humanitarian principles, though many recognised the difficulty of doing so. There was also a call for a guardian of humanitarian principles.
- Monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the principles would be difficult, but regardless there is a need for greater efforts to share experience and exchange ideas on context specific examples.

Financial architecture and principled humanitarian action

- Today’s financial architecture imposes certain restrictions on humanitarian agencies that make it difficult to adhere to the principles. Humanitarian agencies must engage with donors and states to make them aware of the need for independent humanitarian action, through humanitarian advocacy.
- Some difficult restrictions or requirements imposed on agencies include counter-terror measures, which are hampering organisations’ attempts to engage with groups critical to obtaining access to populations in need, and stabilisation efforts where humanitarian and development actors are asked to be part of a bigger political goal, risking a blurring of lines between political and humanitarian actors.
- Organisations should consider diversifying their donor base as organisations with wider donor bases are better placed to push back on demands. The START Network is a new initiative that can support such efforts.

Sharing of information

- Discussions around the principles are often held in capitals or established UN structures and format; These need to be decentralised and made more accessible to those less familiar with the principles. With the changes in the humanitarian landscape, the debate should also include actors with different backgrounds and experiences (rising/emerging actors, private sector, tribal and religious leaders, and so on).
- There could be a regular exchange of ideas and sharing of experience at a national and regional level to build on previous discussions.

Recommendations

- Create **Access Working Groups** at the national or regional level to help coordinate and strengthen access negotiations
- Develop a mechanism or support initiatives to **decentralise discussions** from Geneva and New York and bring conversations to a regional, national or local level to further engage with all relevant stakeholders
- **Improve current coordination** structures to make them more accessible to local NGOs, and for local NGOs to see the benefits of engaging in such meetings
- Improve coordination within the Arab region, through the creation of an **Arab NGO Forum** – an initiative supported by the International Humanitarian City, with OCHA to engage with existing networks to help provide expertise and lessons learned on developing structures and processes for networks
- Strengthen **coordination and partnerships on a national basis** to ensure a bottom up approach in coordinating humanitarian action in the region
- Continue to strengthen dialogue and coordination amongst stakeholders in the Arab region through **holding similar meetings in the future**, with suggested themes including innovation and capacity building.

Final note: these recommendations were presented at the League of Arab States meeting on 29-30 January.