

HPG Briefing Note

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The currency of humanitarian reform

The international humanitarian community faces an ever-growing range of complex crises and changing threats, from the challenges of protracted conflict and pandemics both old (HIV/AIDS) and potentially new (avian flu) to sudden and devastating natural disasters. The mechanisms that humanitarians draw upon to respond to this diverse range of crises have often been considered inadequate to the challenges posed. In the past decade and a half, the international humanitarian system has gone through more than one round of reform in an attempt to address the system's flaws and limits. Measures adopted under the UN's General Assembly resolutions in 1991–92, the follow-up to the Joint Evaluation of the Rwanda response in the mid-1990s and changes introduced under the UN Secretary-General's 1997 reform package have all sought to improve the coverage, coordination and effectiveness of the humanitarian system. For all these efforts, however, the system is still struggling to keep pace with the challenges it confronts.

This year has seen an unprecedented appetite for dialogue on reform of the international peace, security and aid architecture, reaching a peak around the World Summit in September 2005. This has included both UN/Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)-led and donor-led initiatives of relevance to the humanitarian community (see Table 1) which, although conceived independently of each other, are linked by a common concern with improving the timeliness, appropriateness and equity of crisis response. This joint Briefing Note by the Humanitarian Policy Group and the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) examines the various strands of the humanitarian reform agenda and the relationship between them. It assesses the prospects for substantial change in the international system, and for better humanitarian outcomes as a result.

What's on the table?

There is no single reform process or agenda. Nor are the issues involved simply technical. Some of the most political and contentious areas of concern to the humanitarian community were determined at the UN World Summit,

including a landmark acceptance (at least at the rhetorical level) of the obligations of the international community with regard to the protection of civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.¹

At the more technical level, three aspects in particular have attracted attention: financing mechanisms, leadership and response capacity, and gauging needs and collective performance. The financing debate involves the general contention that the level and modalities of financing available are inadequate to the level and urgency of humanitarian need, and that there are stark inequities in the allocation of these resources. The debate around leadership and response capacity is based on an analysis that there are major weaknesses and inconsistencies in the quality, speed and effectiveness of international response capabilities. With regard to measuring need and improving performance, it has been suggested that the lack of a common basis for measuring and comparing levels of need presents a major stumbling-block to prioritisation, impartial decision-making and accountability.

While much of the focus of the debate has been on the UN's humanitarian architecture, wider political, financial and operational issues are at stake. This Briefing Note focuses on the three areas of debate outlined above – financing, leadership and needs/performance assessment.²

A question of resources ... partly

There has long been a concern that humanitarian financing is inadequate to meet the level of humanitarian need. There is no easy way of measuring this. The current proxy indicator is the sum of the appeals made through

¹ UN General Assembly, World Summit Outcome, A/60/L.1, 20 September 2005.

² Many existing initiatives that do not obviously fall under the heading of 'reform' are nevertheless relevant to the various reform processes that are under way. These include current efforts to strengthen needs assessment and the related CHAP processes, and a two-year programme by some major international NGOs (led by CARE and funded by the Gates Foundation) to strengthen staff capacity, accountability, impact measurement and local capacity.

H U M A N I T A R I A N P O L I C Y G R O U P

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Table 1: An overview of the main reform initiatives

Initiative	Details/intent	Process and progress
Expanded Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)	<p>Adds a grant element to existing CERF mechanism. Aim is to generate \$500m annually in advance, un-earmarked funds through public and private contributions to be allocated as needed to UN agencies by the UN Emergency Response Coordinator.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$450m grant facility, replenished through voluntary contributions • \$50m revolving loan facility (safeguarded from previous CERF facility) • two-thirds of the CERF for rapid disbursement (up to \$30m per crisis) • one-third for 'neglected crises' • an Advisory Group of 8 contributors and 4 experts to provide oversight. 	<p>Proposal put before ECOSOC in July 2005. ECOSOC adopted a resolution calling on member states to improve the CERF by adding a grant facility.</p> <p>Implementation requires a UN General Assembly resolution. Set to be debated in the General Assembly in November 2005.</p> <p>Donor support: UK, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Ireland, Switzerland, Norway; \$187 million pledged at time of writing.</p>
Common funding at country level	<p>Multi-donor up-front funding, linked to the CHAP/country strategic workplan. Three models proposed – common fund, allocation model and consultative model. Under each model, the Humanitarian Coordinator has varying degrees of influence over funds disbursement – from decision-making authority to influence through bilateral consultations according to priorities identified in the CHAP/workplan.</p>	<p>UK proposal with some donor support. To be trialled in Sudan and in the DRC in 2006, dependent on 60% of donor funds being channelled through one of the three models proposed.</p>
Benchmarking	<p>To develop consensus on definitions and collective use of a core set of indicators (malnutrition and mortality and coverage of core services) to inform prioritisation and enable more accurate tracking of the speed and scale of response, and to better inform resource allocation.</p>	<p>UK proposal. Attempts to build on the SMART process.</p> <p>Advisory Group comprising Sphere members, UN agencies, SCHR, ICVA, NGOs. UK (DFID) is supporting WHO and OCHA-led process to identify how these data might be gathered and analysed routinely. Proposals to be submitted to the IASC in January 2006.</p>
Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative	<p>22 donors (DAC + EC) committed to a set of principles and good practice for humanitarian action. Includes efforts to agree common indicators of donor performance in timely and flexible financing according to need, reporting requirements and peer review for humanitarian response.</p>	<p>UK government current chair of the GHD initiative. Informal working groups on sectoral issues meet in Geneva on an <i>ad hoc</i> basis.</p>
Humanitarian Response Review (independent study commissioned by the ERC)	<p>Identified systemic capacity deficiencies in protection, camp management, emergency shelter, watsan, nutrition and feeding, logistics and emergency telecommunications, and reintegration and recovery.</p> <p>Recommendations resulted in IASC proposal for 'cluster leads' for sectors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNICEF – watsan, nutrition IFRC – shelter in natural disasters UNHCR – shelter and camp management in conflict situations, protection WHO – health WFP – logistics UNDP – early recovery 	<p>IASC Principals developing implementation plans by December 2005.</p> <p>IASC Principals have agreed to set preparedness targets for 2–3 new emergencies in 2006, and trial the cluster system in three ongoing emergencies in 2006.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Initiative	Details/intent	Process and progress
Report on Integrated Missions (independent study commissioned by OCHA and DPKO)	<p>Integrated structures supported as the most appropriate for large complex missions, while acknowledging that the level of integration should be context-specific. Regarding the role of humanitarian coordination, key recommendations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continued double-hatting of the HC as a DSRS (sometimes also as Resident Coordinator) • where peacekeeping activities contradict agreed procedures to protect humanitarian space, the HC should resolve the matter by referral to the SRSG, and if necessary UN HQ • reference to humanitarian principles should be strengthened in UNSC mission mandates • HC offices should be physically separated from the mission • force commanders should consult and agree priorities for quick-impact projects with the HC. 	Subject to ongoing ECHA deliberations.
<p>Broader UN reform:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Level Panel Report on Threats Challenges and Change (HLP) • In Larger Freedom (ILF) 	<p>The HLP was an independently commissioned report for the Secretary-General, and ILF was his response to it in the lead-up to the World Summit in September 2005. Recommendations largely concerned the international peace and security architecture, and measures to strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the UN system in the face of security threats, including the institution of an intergovernmental Peacebuilding Commission and Peacebuilding Support Office within the UN Secretariat.</p> <p>Both recommended improvements to aspects of the humanitarian system and issues of humanitarian concern, including the protection of civilians and disaster preparedness and mitigation.</p>	<p>2005 World Summit Outcome Document outlined various commitments, including a decision to institute a Peacebuilding Commission and Peacebuilding Support Office (to be operational by December 2005); strengthening the UN country presence and its ability to ensure humanitarian access; improving the CERF; and a declaration of preparedness to 'take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council [if peaceful means are insufficient] if national authorities are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity'. The General Assembly is to continue deliberations on the 'responsibility to protect'.</p>

the UN's Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the Red Cross Movement, which reflects the needs identified through the Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) and other needs assessment processes. However, because many agencies do not participate in either the CHAP or the CAP, and donors often choose to fund outside of the CAP, this is a poor measure for decision-makers at the global level.³

Current financing reform debates have their origins in a donor-led initiative starting in 2003.⁴ They are premised on the need for more predictable, timely resources, allocated

³ The ERC is seeking to improve financial tracking by expanding the Expenditure Tracking System developed in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and an upgrade of the Financial Tracking System may improve one element of financial measurement.

according to need. It is argued that one route to achieving this goal is to give greater authority over the allocation of funds to the mandated authorities in the UN – the Emergency Response Coordinator (ERC) at headquarters and the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) in the field. There are two initiatives of note here.

The first is the recommendation to expand the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). This mechanism currently consists of a \$50m revolving loan facility; the proposal is to expand this to include a grant element, to the level of \$250m in January 2006, and \$450m within three years. There are

⁴ The Humanitarian Financing Work Programme and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative. See <http://www.reliefweb.int/ghd/documents.html>.

two objectives for the expanded CERF. The first is to create a rapid reaction mechanism for new crises, allowing disbursement of funds within 3–4 days, up to \$30m per crisis. It is proposed that two-thirds of the CERF be used for this purpose. The second objective is to enable the CERF to address critical needs in ongoing and ‘neglected’ (i.e., under-funded) crises – typically in countries where donors find it politically difficult to engage, and where humanitarian agencies may have limited presence. This category will receive the remaining one-third of the funds, to be allocated on a twice-yearly basis. The ERC will have the authority to draw down from the CERF, in consultation with Humanitarian Coordinators in-country, in order to finance UN agency proposals.

Overall, the humanitarian community remains divided over this proposal. To many, it appears to constitute a sensible improvement, consistent with recent donor commitments to providing flexible and timely funding. Yet there remains a great deal of debate. The questions raised centre around three issues: the financial implications of the new fund; how it relates to agency capacities; and whether it will indeed lead to more impartial decision-making.

Even if the CERF were to attract the hoped-for \$450m (and at the time of writing \$187m had been pledged), this would only represent approximately 6% of global humanitarian resources, currently estimated at roughly \$7.8bn.⁵ It is also unclear how much of this \$450m would represent ‘new’ money, or a reallocation of resources from existing humanitarian funding. A mechanism that allows the ERC to respond immediately without waiting for donors to channel funds is an important improvement, but without a commitment to increasing overall levels of assistance the effect on the humanitarian system will be limited to a redistribution of existing resources. It is likely that donors committed to the CERF will be able to capitalise on generally increasing aid budgets emerging from the undertakings made at the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey in 2002 and at the World Summit 2005. However, this is not guaranteed. Moreover, real improvements in response times depend on how efficiently UN agencies are able to find and contract suitable implementing partners. Given these limitations, expectations for the expanded CERF should not be over-inflated.

The move from a small loan facility to a larger grant-making facility highlights the question of sustainability. In the absence of assessed contributions for humanitarian response, the expanded CERF will depend on voluntary contributions. However, although some donors have expressed an interest in committing multi-year funds, there is no undertaking to replenish the fund as it is depleted. This is

likely to have a bearing on how the fund is used, and may lead the ERC to be cautious in allocating the funding available. At this stage, it is clear that UN agencies will retain their existing emergency financing mechanisms.⁶ Meanwhile, the perceived threat that donors will shift resources to the UN will encourage some non-UN agencies to redouble their own fundraising efforts. Ironically, the proposed financial reforms, rather than streamlining arrangements, could result in more financing modalities, rather than fewer.

On the question of capacity, UN agencies’ experience of using their own rapid response mechanisms suggests that having such funds does not of itself guarantee an effective response. The Niger crisis demonstrates that timely response is not simply a function of the timely availability of funds. The World Food Programme, for example, did not significantly draw on its reserve for the Niger response,⁷ and only \$2m was drawn down from the existing CERF loan fund. The capacity for effective and appropriate response depends on a number of factors in addition to funding, including good, accurate analysis of need, strong leadership and delivery capacity. In this sense, the success of the reformed CERF will depend in part on the success of attempts to strengthen the capacity of the ERC’s office, and the capacity and authority of the Humanitarian Coordinators in-country.

The second initiative concerns ‘pooled’ or ‘common’ funding at the country level, which involves donors channelling part of their resources directly to the Humanitarian Coordinator, as opposed to financing separate UN operational agencies (although core funding will continue, as will separate NGO funding channels). This is being driven by several donors, including the UK, through the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) process, and is being trialled in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The aim is to improve the timeliness and flexibility of decision-making, giving the HC the authority to prioritise resources in a strategic way, according to needs as they are assessed on the ground.

This approach assumes that allowing funding decisions to be made at the field level is the best way of ensuring that priority needs are met in the most time-responsive way. However, unless significant improvements are made in attracting, retaining and analytically supporting good-quality HCs globally, this initiative will continue to prioritise a few trusted HCs, rather than the system as a whole. The preliminary pilots in Sudan have raised concerns that HCs will be placed in a politically awkward position: agencies will lobby on behalf of their own interests, raising the prospect that decisions might be made on political and institutional grounds rather than on the basis of impartially-assessed humanitarian priorities. Much depends on the ability of the HC to mediate between these interests and establish common priorities. Others have raised the concern that common funding at the country level will merely add another layer of bureaucracy to operational

⁵ Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Update 2004-2005*, p. 5. Earlier estimates have ranged up to about \$10bn. See Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2003*, pp. 1–2. Given recent increases in private and non-DAC engagement in humanitarian assistance, both figures are probably under-estimates. See Adele Harmer and Lin Cotterrell, *Diversity in Donorship: The Changing Landscape of Official Humanitarian Aid*, HPG Report 20 (London: ODI, 2005).

⁶ WFP, WHO, FAO, UNDP, UNHCR and UNICEF all have stand-by emergency funds.

⁷ See HPG Briefing Note, *Humanitarian Issues in Niger*, August 2005, <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/HPGBriefingNote4.pdf>.

agencies' search for project funding. Again, for common funding to improve the quality of response better engagement with the CHAP will be needed.

Improving the capacity to lead ... and respond

In 2003–2004, the humanitarian response system was unable to meet the needs of the affected population in Darfur, Sudan. This was not the first time that the performance and capacities of humanitarian actors had been called into question, even when allowance is made for problems of safe access – nor was it the first time that the international system as a whole had failed to take effective action to halt widespread violent abuse of civilians. The crisis in Darfur was both a protection and an assistance failure. Several reviews, either generated or given added impetus by the Darfur crisis, have highlighted the need to strengthen leadership in determining response priorities, and these have significant implications for the role of the Humanitarian Coordinator.

With respect to protection, Darfur, and the Secretary-General's commissioning of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in the wake of Iraq, gave new life to debates about the international community's responsibilities to protect civilians. The subsequent acceptance of the 'responsibility to protect' principle in the World Summit Outcome declaration has implications that go well beyond the humanitarian system. But elements of the current reform proposals – not least those relating to the leadership role of Humanitarian Coordinators and the structure of UN integrated missions – will have a bearing on the humanitarian community's own efforts to ensure civilian protection through assistance, presence, advocacy or otherwise.

The financing proposals on the table seek to bolster the HC's ability to determine response priorities and direct the allocation of funds accordingly. Other reform proposals emerging from the study on integrated missions commissioned by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) have sought to address issues of seniority within UN country teams and missions, and to safeguard the integrity of the humanitarian component. Complementary work by OCHA and the UN Development Group (UNDG) is seeking to improve the quality of HCs and their support personnel in-country. A more radical proposal has been to grant the HC emergency powers to direct other UN agencies where the ERC decides that this is necessary.⁸ While the logic of such a move appears compelling, it cuts across existing institutional positions in ways that highlight fundamental issues of governance within the UN system. These issues do not feature on the current reform agenda.

While not solely a failure of aid, the deficiencies of the assistance community in Darfur (as with the response to the

Rwanda crisis ten years earlier) were striking enough to prompt system-wide reflection from both donors and the ERC, and to generate political momentum for reform. The ERC's response was to commission a study of response capacity, the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR).

Given unrealistic expectations and time limits, the HRR was not the comprehensive global mapping and analysis of response capacities that it might have been. It did nonetheless highlight systemic weaknesses in various 'sectors': protection, camp management, emergency shelter, water and sanitation, nutrition and feeding, logistics and emergency telecommunications, and reintegration and recovery. The findings also revealed a lack of investment in the preparedness and surge capacity necessary for agencies to fulfil their sectoral responsibilities in emergencies. The HRR and resultant deliberations within the IASC attempted to address one part of the challenge by looking at the issue of leadership. By formally identifying lead agencies for each of the sectors ('clusters') in all emergencies, the IASC has determined that responsibility for effective intervention in a given sector lies in the hands of a lead UN agency. While to some extent this serves to reaffirm previously established roles, this more formal arrangement has the potential to promote greater coherence of approach, better prioritisation and standard-setting, better preparedness (as lead agencies will be responsible for identifying and helping to address systemic deficiencies in their sectors) and programmes that are delivered more efficiently and with greater oversight.

However, a number of concerns have been raised. Some have questioned the capacity of the designated lead agencies to fulfil a leadership role at global and local levels. Others fear that, coming at the same time as the financing reforms – and particularly the common funds – the decision to give individual agencies responsibility for particular sectors may exacerbate institutional competition for resources. Some donors are also concerned that agencies will view the cluster leadership role as an under-funded mandate and will seek additional resources to build up their institutional capacity at headquarters level, resulting in a counter-productive expansion in bureaucracy.

In relation to both cluster reform and financing issues, many have questioned how NGOs, the Red Cross Movement and other non-UN actors will be effectively brought in to the proposed reforms. The UN's share of operational activity remains an unknown quantity, but even a generous estimate would suggest that it is much less than 50% of the total. With the burden of implementation activities lying with the NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent, there is a risk that adding another layer of reporting and bureaucracy will decrease rather than enhance the timeliness of response, and will diminish the proportion of resources that actually helps the intended beneficiaries.

A major question here is whether the HC 'represents' the entire humanitarian community, as the IASC intended, or

⁸ See speech by Hilary Benn, UK Secretary of State for International Development, *Reform of the International Humanitarian System*, London, 15 December 2004.

whether it primarily represents the UN humanitarian portion of the broader UN mission in the country. Even if the HC and the UN try to include the entire humanitarian community, some agencies are likely to keep at arm's length UN attempts to coordinate, lead or finance their activities. The concern of many in the humanitarian community to maintain independence from the UN emerged as a particular point of debate in the OCHA/DPKO review of integrated missions, and has remained a concern in the consideration of that report's recommendations.⁹ Overall, the UN has a major undertaking ahead in demonstrating respect for the principles of neutrality and impartiality, whether within or outside UN integrated mission structures.

More fundamentally, there is a concern that the 'cluster lead' proposal involves an essentially technocratic approach to the allocation of roles, which fails to take due account of legal mandates and existing capacities. UN lead agencies will also face a challenge in demonstrating their leadership credentials in some sectors, particularly where the comparative advantage of NGOs may be stronger than the UN lead agency. The cluster lead approach also risks reinforcing existing stereotyped responses, and failing to take account of the interests of beneficiaries in the particular context. Thus, new forms of assistance, such as cash, may be overlooked in mainstream programming.

The decision to give UNHCR the lead role in protection and camp management for conflict-related internally displaced people (IDPs) has been welcomed by some who have long argued that the collaborative approach has fallen short of meeting IDPs' needs. But it also implies a potentially misleading view of protection as another 'service' to be delivered, analogous to health or water, that scarcely does justice to the nature of the problem or the solutions it requires. Indeed, some argue that the proposal creates a potential conflict of interest with UNHCR's core mandated role of providing international protection for refugees, and that there is a risk of prioritising the protection of IDPs in conflict zones over their attempts to seek asylum. Furthermore, given that the IDP caseload is far larger than the refugee caseload, many question UNHCR's capacity to handle the demands of both groups.

Overall, both donors and NGOs feel that too little discussion preceded the IASC's decision on cluster leads, while acknowledging that there is a certain commonsense logic to it. Some positive reports from the earthquake response in Pakistan, where this approach is being informally trialled, suggest that it can serve to enhance the quality of the collective response at field level. Time will tell whether it represents an overall advance on current practice.

⁹ Espen Barth Eide et al., *Report on Integrated Missions – Practical Perspectives and Recommendations*, Independent Study for the Expanded ECHA Core Group, May 2005. See also K. Osland, *The UN and Integrated Missions*, report on the proceedings of a conference organised by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs, May 2005, <http://www.nupi.no/IPS/filestore/TheUNandIntegratedMissions.pdf>.

Gauging needs, priorities and collective performance

The third major strand that can be discerned in the reform proposals relates to questions of needs analysis, priority setting and collective performance. It is increasingly recognised that, unless all actors are asking the same basic questions to diagnose need, and using comparable methods to answer them, the system as a whole has no common basis on which to agree priorities for response. The UN humanitarian actors have yet to explicitly adopt common indicators and related performance criteria. Although some references to Sphere minimum standards can be found in agency and IASC materials, Sphere has not been consistently embraced as a common set of guidelines. The lack of a common yardstick raises the question of how to gauge the net effect of the proposed reforms, and whether agencies will be more accountable (individually and collectively) for delivering good humanitarian outcomes.

Several recommendations from agencies (the IASC/CAP reform process) and donors (through the GHD) attempt to address deficiencies in the way in which need is assessed both on a global and local level, and to gauge the system's performance in relation to this. 'Benchmarking' is seen as one approach to the problem, based on agreement on common indicators of need, systematic collection of data, and the application of related standards and criteria for response.

In the GHD process, the focus has been on principles and collective indicators of donor performance (for instance, the timeliness and flexibility of resource allocation), and further work is now being promoted to improve the use of standardised measures in the planning and measurement of collective performance – including indicators of beneficiary access to assistance, coverage of populations in need, and commonly agreed indicators of mortality and malnutrition. Work sponsored by the US and Canadian governments under the SMART initiative¹⁰ is being taken a step further under UK-led proposals to strengthen collective benchmarking. Analysis is currently being undertaken about the use of indicators of mortality and malnutrition by agencies to inform inter-agency planning and monitoring processes, including the CHAP/CAP, and to inform an analysis of the speed, scale and impact of humanitarian response. This is being done in an attempt to develop consensus around the use of indicators, and to explore the possibility of establishing agreed benchmarks for collective performance. To be truly reflective, this would need to embrace the work of agencies currently operating independently of the CHAP and Consolidated Appeal processes. This is not a straightforward endeavour, as previous efforts to reach agreement on indicators have shown. Attempts to go beyond standard physiological criteria to include economic or security criteria, for instance,

¹⁰ SMART stands for Standardised Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transition, an initiative sponsored by USAID and CIDA. It has the broad participation of the UN and international NGOs. SMART aims to standardise the way in which key emergency-related data on mortality, nutritional status and food security are collected. See <http://www.smartindicators.org>.

have proved problematic. Even the proper use of mortality and malnutrition data is controversial, given that these are 'lagging' indicators and therefore provide an insufficient (albeit essential) basis for triggering preventive responses. Recognising these limitations, current benchmarking proposals do not attempt to define response 'triggers', but they nevertheless face a difficult task in reconciling different views on the proper use of indicators.

More than a technical process, benchmarking requires widespread consensus from donors and operational agencies to be meaningful. With such a diversity of approaches in the system this is challenging, and while there has been some convergence around assessment indicators and methods in recent years in sectors like food and health, many actors remain cautious about attempts to standardise approaches, and question the value of additional data-gathering exercises. Many also point out that there is no necessary connection between the amount of information available and the quality and timeliness of response.

Nonetheless, many agree that benchmarking could be a route to improving the quality and timeliness of response – particularly if the benchmarks build on work already done under the SMART process, and contribute to building consensus around existing response indicators such as the Sphere minimum standards. Indeed, some argue that agreeing indicators and benchmarks is the most crucial aspect of reform. Certainly, if they are to form the basis on which collective performance (specifically that of the ERC and HC) is to be judged, this demands concerted attention from all concerned.

Finally, questions of performance and accountability need further consideration. The benefits of peer review have been emphasised by donors and some agencies through the GHD and other processes. Here, as in discussions about leadership, the highly *unsystematic* nature of the international humanitarian 'system' is evident. Attempts to strengthen individual and collective accountability are hampered by the lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities between the different elements of the system. In the absence of stronger governance mechanisms or overarching frameworks, we rely on the web of obligations arising from legislation, mandates, memoranda of understanding and contractual agreements between the different actors. Beyond that, attempts to regulate the system depend on an appeal to a sense of common purpose and collective responsibility, and a commitment to shared principles and standards. The understandable demand for organisational independence of action carries with it a high degree of responsibility to act with a sense of common purpose beyond organisational horizons. This, ultimately, needs to be informed by an understanding of what is in the best interests of the intended beneficiaries.

Conclusions

The current reform proposals, taken together, do not amount to a radical agenda for change. Perhaps this reflects uncertainty about the scale and nature of the problem the

humanitarian community is facing. Is this a system in crisis in the face of increasing demands and needing a radical overhaul? Or is it functioning reasonably well and merely needs a 'system upgrade', as the ERC has put it? The reforms on the table appear to suggest the latter.

Regarding the financial proposals, the intention behind the CERF expansion, particularly to increase rapid reaction and impartial resource allocation, is welcome. Further work needs to be done in parallel to ensure that the capacity and authority of the HC's office is enhanced, as is the administrative capacity of the ERC's office, and that more efficient contractual/partnership arrangements are worked out with operational agencies. Donors will need to make a greater commitment to coherent financing and to replenishing the fund before there can be any confidence that it will serve its intended purpose. The principles and good practice outlined in GHD should serve as the standard, irrespective of the range of funding mechanisms and channels available.

Some of the detail remains to be worked out. It is unclear, for instance, whether donors will be willing or able to dispense with individual reporting for their allocations to the CERF, and could entrust monitoring to a representative body. The trust necessary to allow this may depend on an agreement on response criteria.

The proposals regarding finance and leadership are closely related to the issue of gauging needs and prioritising responses. Ultimately, effective financing of humanitarian action depends on clear criteria for the allocation of resources. This is not a managerial or even an accounting problem alone. It is a complex challenge, and resources are finite. It requires both strong leadership, and a high degree of consensus around response criteria.

There is little doubt that the 'diagnostic' aspect of humanitarian response is seriously under-resourced, both in terms of needs assessment and evaluation of impact. Donors and agencies alike need to see credible assessments as essential products in their own right, rather than simply underpinning an appeal for funding. They will need to invest more in assessment capacity and in the necessary expertise to gather reliable demographic, epidemiological, nutritional and other data. Current proposals concerning indicators and benchmarks have the potential to get us closer to agreement on the minimum necessary evidential basis for determining appropriate response and impact.

The timetable for taking forward some of these initiatives is ambitious, and opportunities for dialogue on their implications, not just for the UN but the whole humanitarian community, have been limited. There has also been very little recipient state and recipient population engagement in the reform proposals – an ongoing oversight which deserves greater attention.

Finally, if the current proposals do not amount to a radical or comprehensive reform package, what is missing? First,

perhaps, a critical assessment of the humanitarian challenges of the future, linked to an analysis of the adequacy of financing and of human resources in the sector. Radical reform of governance in the system might require a fundamental review of the current operational roles of UN agencies, of lines of accountability within the UN system, and of the relationship between UN and non-UN actors. On a less radical level, existing proposals would seem to point to the need for a stronger role for the HC, and the replication of the current IASC grouping at the field level – perhaps modified to allow greater NGO representation and a stronger interface with national authorities.

More radical reform would deal seriously with both ‘upwards’ and ‘downwards’ accountability mechanisms. It would involve a thorough-going review of the relationship between humanitarian and political-military actors, inside the UN and beyond, with clear priority given to the need

to strengthen mechanisms for protecting civilians. It would also review the basic economics of current service delivery models, under which multiple actors absorb resources at each level, while adding sometimes questionable value. It would ask what proportion of the resources put into the system actually benefits the intended beneficiaries.

The proposals currently on the table do not address these questions. They are aimed primarily at making some of the technical and managerial aspects of the existing system work better. Whether they succeed in doing so will depend in part on whether the objections described above can be satisfactorily addressed. Ultimately, the likelihood of any substantial improvement in the functioning of the system as a whole depends on how effectively its component parts can be made to work together to achieve common goals, and whether they are properly resourced to do so.

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