The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project

A chance to influence the humanitarian system

NGO and Humanitarian Reform Project

Assessment on the Afghanistan Kabul based Humanitarian coordination mechanisms June-September 2009.

By Lydia Geirsdottir Humanitarian Reform Officer Afghanistan

The following is a summary of the NGO and Humanitarian Reform Projects cluster coordination open for public dissemination, more in depth analysis on each cluster will be raised in discussion with the respective cluster leadership. The assessment is based on the Humanitarian Reform Officers observation/ participation in the monthly cluster meetings, interviews with the cluster UN leads and deputy leads, discussion sessions with the NGO partnership in the respective cluster, individual discussions with NGOs participating in the clusters during the period from June to September 2009. The assessment is based on where the clusters are in relation to the following simple definition on cluster function.

1) Gather together humanitarian partners working in the same sector. Relevant representation of relevant humanitarian actors.
2) Collect and compile the information available to the partners which will then become the cluster baseline.
3) With the baseline available develop an understanding of the prioritized needs on a country wide basis and a cluster strategy to respond to these needs to ensure that gaps are identified and met and that the cluster partners have the capacity to respond.
4) Use the HAP process as a framework for articulating the sector strategy and developing the response strategy which the request for proposals should embody.
5) Develop a cluster Workplan to guide the cluster in fulfilling its strategy, ensuring funding for the needs identified, ensuring capacity building of the partners to be able to meet the needs and working on advocacy issues that have been identified while developing the strategy, develop tools to measure the impact of the cluster response to the identified needs.

The HRP initially commissioned a baseline mapping study of the progress of humanitarian reform in Afghanistan. The commissioned author Antonio Donini had the following to say about the task he was given.

"This report highlights key challenges and dilemmas that the humanitarian community in general, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in particular, are facing in Afghanistan today. The terms of reference (TOR) envisioned that this exercise would provide a baseline against which progress on humanitarian reform could be assessed. However, in

Afghanistan humanitarian reform issues pale in comparison to the bigger issues of redressing the credibility of the humanitarian enterprise and addressing the potentially escalating assistance and protection needs of civilians caught up in conflict and crisis."

Hence his report provided an excellent analysis of the humanitarian context in Afghanistan but it did not look closely at the coordination mechanism guiding the overall intervention. Although Humanitarian reform issues indeed do pale in comparison to the overall complexities of the challenges faced here by the humanitarian community and the Afghan population in particular, never the less are they instrumental to the response strategy of the humanitarian community while at the same time the underlying complexities provide some of the answer as to why the humanitarian coordination structure in Afghanistan so far fails to ensure a comprehensive and strategic response to some of the most urgent needs of the population.

Background

The roll out of the cluster system and the reestablishment of OCHA in Afghanistan was not done in response to a sudden increase of the humanitarian needs or in response to a sudden onset emergency. Rather it was done in recognition to the massive ongoing humanitarian needs that the population faces and due to the country being disaster prone and regularly affected by external shocks, including increased conflict, price increases and other smaller scale sudden onset emergencies.

The vast majority of the assistance provided in Afghanistan is based on the notion that Afghanistan is a post-conflict developmental context or even today an counterinsurgency stabilization effort and it is only recently that humanitarian needs have grow in recognition. This is despite the fact that most indicators point to a humanitarian situation beyond what we normally see in traditional humanitarian contexts. Hence the challenge for the humanitarian community is to distinguish the humanitarian needs from the long-term developmental efforts directed at addressing the chronic poverty of the population and designing humanitarian programs that are complementary to the long-term developmental programming rather than the traditional other way around.

This is indeed a challenging task for the humanitarian community and it is the HRP opinion that the distinction has yet to be made. The clusters and OCHA have been rolled out as an ad hoc effort to the developmental intervention and both are in the process of defining their identities and distinguishing their tasks at this stage. This is not to say that humanitarian programming has not been taking place in the absence of clusters and OCHA - it certainly has - however it has not been conducted within a strategic humanitarian framework.

On multiple occasions respondents expressed that if we were faced with a big emergency then the clusters would find a common ground and a common task to focus around and through that would find direction and a purpose for existence.

The recognition needs to be made that we are faced with a ongoing emergency, over 60% of this country is at war with civilian strife and limited accessibility as a

consequence, infant mortality rate is 13% and for those who survive birth 26% of them will die before the age of 5 due to simple preventable diseases, 77% of the population lack access to safe drinking water, 88% lack access to sanitation, 34% of the population does not meet their daily minimum caloric intake and allegedly up to 4% of all children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, a possible 54% of them are considered chronically malnourished.

None of these issues will be addressed without a long-term developmental strategy, but on the other hand a long-term developmental strategy will not save the lives currently at risk and alleviate the immediate suffering of the population. Hence the clusters and OCHA are instrumental in designing an overall humanitarian strategy defining the humanitarian areas of intervention.

8 clusters have been rolled out in Afghanistan, in addition a **Logistics Working Group/ Cluster** was temporarily active but has been put on hold due to lack of capacity in OCHA and WFP and due to low participation of NGOs. 6 of the 8 clusters have deputy NGO leads.

- **Education,** lead is UNICEF, co-lead is Save the Children US.
- **Emergency Shelter**, Lead is UNHCR, deputy lead is CARE.
- **Emergency Telecom,** lead is WFP, no NGO participation except ANSO (not covered in this assessment).
- **Food security and Agriculture**; Co-leads are WFP and FAO, deputy lead is Afghanaid.
- **Health**, Lead is WHO; deputy lead is IbnSina, Afghan national NGO.
- **Nutrition,** Lead is UNICEF and deputy lead is FAO, IbnSina is in the process of becoming deputy-lead.
- **Protection**, lead is UNHCR, deputy leads are NRC and UNAMA Human rights.
- **WASH**, lead is UNICEF, deputy lead is DACAAR.

Cluster assessment

The overall impression of the Cluster structure in Afghanistan is that it is a system in need of support and a system that needs to go back to the basics. Dedicated people are working on all levels to make the clusters function but in terms of output the clusters have in general substantial work ahead of them to achieve the humanitarian reform objectives of the IASC which is; *to strengthen humanitarian response by demanding high standards of predictability, accountability and partnership in all sectors or areas of activity. It is about achieving more strategic responses and better prioritization of available resources by clarifying the division of labour among organizations, better defining the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian organizations within the sectors, and providing the Humanitarian Coordinator with both a first point of call and a provider of last resort in all the key sectors or areas of activity. The success of the cluster approach will be judged in terms of the impact it has on improving the humanitarian response to those affected by crises (IASC Guidance note on the Cluster approach).*

In the HRP interviews so far none of those participating in the clusters feel that the cluster approach has as of yet improved the humanitarian response to those effected by crisis or provided substantial added value to beneficiaries in need. Creative

solutions are few and far between and many better equipped then the NGO and Humanitarian Reform project have attempted to address the institutional challenges of the cluster system, hence this assessment does not aim to have all the answers and solutions, it states some of the problem which we collectively need to develop the responses to.

On a positive note, the clusters and the general coordination structures in Afghanistan are full of dedicated people willing to go way and beyond to make the system work and if their capacity and dedication receives the necessary support then the future looks bright. It must also be said that the performance varies between the clusters with some clusters being further along then others.

The clusters are commonly lacking

1. Baseline information on needs within their sector.
2. Response Strategy based on baseline information and prioritized needs within the sector. The HAP 2010 process has improved the situation yet the strategies developed by the clusters need further refining with better baseline information.
3. Workplan guiding the work of the cluster to fulfill and accomplish the strategy.
4. Tools for measuring impact of the activities of the cluster partnership
5. The cluster ToRs have little relevance to their actual work and achievements.
6. A true sense of partnership among its partners with an equal sharing of the responsibility.
7. Linkage and support from the Global clusters is very weak.
8. No cluster has a ToR developed to guide the role of the deputy NGO lead, neither has an MoU been developed where UN agencies share the cluster lead.
9. All of the clusters need to improve their communication with actors outside of Kabul.

Recommendations

1. The clusters need dedicated capacity in the form of a Cluster Coordinator working on behalf of the entire cluster partnership and with a clear distinction from the facilitating agency.

2. The cluster leadership needs to be clarified with MoUs being developed where UN agencies share the lead and each cluster should in partnership develop a ToR for the NGO deputy lead.

3. The clusters need to go back to the basics and develop their foundation in order to increase their effectiveness. This starts with defining the humanitarian needs within their sector and distinguishing what they consider to be humanitarian programming. The HAP 2010 process has moved this aspect along but it can be further defined.

4. Each cluster should develop a activity workplan based on their strategy outlining how they are going to ensuring funding for the needs identified, ensure capacity building of the partners to be able to meet the needs, work on advocacy issues that have been identified, and develop tools to measure the impact of the cluster response strategy.

5. Each cluster should increase their outreach and evaluate their working practices to further include NNGOs as full partners in the respective cluster.

6. Intercluster linkages need to be developed with more interaction between the clusters; there is great need to increase the operational linkage. Both in terms of sharing and comparing baseline information and integrating operational strategy. Currently there is not much, if any, cross participation between the clusters, each operating in a vacuum from each other beyond the monthly meeting.

7. The general capacity of the clusters is currently low; looking at what the clusters need to achieve some serious capacity building is needed to get them up to speed. The global clusters should provide substantially more support and additional capacity to the national clusters.

8. The institutional aspect of the cluster system needs to be further strengthened to increase the predictability, accountability and systemization of the reformed humanitarian architecture and make the functioning of the clusters less dependent on committed individuals. This can be achieved with greater general knowledge about the structures and the respective partner's responsibilities.

9. The clusters need more support from OCHA guiding them in their activities and supporting them with compilation of baseline information and strategy development. The clusters need consistent OCHA participation in their meetings and activities.

10. OCHA should provide a regular cluster orientation session for new staff joining the clusters due to high turnover of staff.
11. The concept of Provider of last resort needs to be further highlighted with the HC taking ultimate responsibility for holding the cluster leads accountable for the needs of the beneficiaries.

12. The HC together with the HCT needs to make the capacity building of the clusters one of its top priorities.

13. The clusters should go through an impact evaluation to measure whether the whole package really is improving the humanitarian response to those affected by crisis or if the time, capacity and money invested in the clusters could be better utilized.

The NGO and Humanitarian Reform project perspective;

One of the main objectives of the HRP project is to increase the NGO participation in effective coordination mechanisms. The underlying problem with that is that NGOs are most willing to participate in effective coordination but like the chicken and the egg dilemma the coordination cannot become effective without the full participation of all its partners.

The partnership notion has yet to set in among both the cluster leads and the cluster partners. The awareness level of the Principles of Partnership needs to be raised. The UN leads are seen as the drives and owners of the cluster process and NGOs do not claim ownership in the process. The cluster partners are referenced to as cluster members and the UN staff as leads. This is where some of the key work can be done, getting all cluster partners, whether they are leads or partners to understand and internalize that the cluster is based on partnership with rights and obligations on behalf of all partners. That everyone has an equal voice and that the cluster procedures are executed in a transparent way. Leads and deputies have certain obligations in terms of cluster management but in terms of decision making the partners have an equal say.

However, with that said the main challenge to the NGO participation in the cluster system is not a lack of inclusion on behalf of the UN leads, it is not the lack of transparency in the system nor the lack of will to participate, it is the lack of NGO capacity to function as full partners. It is the lack of time and human resources to make a full commitment to the work of the clusters. A well-functioning cluster is very time consuming: working groups need to be created for almost everything that the cluster does in order for the cluster to be inclusive and transparent in its operation. The demand for the participation of NGOs in these groups usually outweighs the capacity of the NGOs. Even in cases where larger NGOs can dedicate people to participate actively in the cluster it is done so with a negative impact on the work of the own organization or with the staff member in question volunteering their evenings and weekends to take on the additional work. In addition most NGOs on a Kabul level keep small support offices here, the technical staff who should/ would be participating in the clusters are out in the field. Due to cost and security the NGOs are very hesitant to send them to a monthly meeting with little use. Every NGO staff member in country is here for a full time job supporting the operational work of the NGO in question and the participation in compiling baseline, working out a strategy, measuring impact, developing contingency plans, working out technical standards, developing common assessment formats, participating in HAP, supporting the upcoming ERF projects etc is more than most if not all NGOs can keep up with.

These practices leave the UN leads to do most of the work and perpetuates the notion that the clusters are a UN led structure with equal partnership being a challenging goal to achieve.

Humanitarian reform is an excellent idea in its ideal implementation but humanitarian crises are rarely ideal contexts. The various pillars are all interlinked and if executed perfectly, it certainly is a system that can improve accountability and our response to beneficiary needs. To achieve that the humanitarian community in Afghanistan needs to make a committed effort which hopefully will make the sum of our resources, capacity and efforts larger then the sum of its parts.