

ACFID Humanitarian Reference Group 2010 Humanitarian Forum

Challenges for operating in insecure environments: A practitioner's perspective

28-29 April 2010, Melbourne

A Summary Report

The Aim of the Forum: To discuss practical and innovative solutions to overcoming the security challenges faced by humanitarian organisations in the delivery of quality services in insecure environments.

The Objectives: To provide participants with:

- **Context:** Identify external and internal challenges to accessing and providing quality services to beneficiaries in insecure environments. Discuss the changing nature of humanitarian space.
- **Resources:** Examine the ability of humanitarian actors to operate within these contexts including capacity and financial resource constraints to upholding the humanitarian imperative.
- **Innovative solutions and strategic ways forward:** Identify innovative and effective approaches used by agencies to address security challenges.

The Outcomes are presented on pages 9-10 as Recommendations and Next Steps. In brief, they can be summarised as encouraging humanitarian response agencies to increase their collaboration on a range of operational and policy issues. Sharing critical security information, working together with donors, being more inclusive of newer players as important stakeholders and sources of information and ensuring a more consistent message regarding humanitarian advocacy and security responses are amongst the key recommendations.

The Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG) undertook to follow-up on these recommendations with some immediate next steps.

- Sharing the notes and presentations from the forum with all participants
- Setting up an information sharing website linked to the ACFID website
- Further discussion on all recommendations will be held at the HRG meetings during the remainder of 2010.

Day 1

The forum was officially opened by Marc Purcell, Executive Director of ACFID. The forum objectives and program were outlined by the Co-Chairs of the ACFID Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG) – Claire Seddon (ActionAID Australia) and Richard Young (Oxfam Australia).

Keynote Presentations

Two keynote addresses were presented during the first morning. The first, by Antonio Donini (Feinstein Institute), provided a broad philosophical, ethical and political overview of the current context of humanitarian work around the globe. The second was a more operational look at security issues facing humanitarian practitioners presented by Peter Muller (UNOCHA, Pacific). A summary of their presentations is provided below.

Keynote 1: *Humanitarianism in the 21st Century – lessons from Afghanistan and other recent crises.* Antonio Donini, Senior Researcher, Feinstein Institute

Mr Donini's address explored the challenges faced by humanitarian actors in the 21st century, based on his recent experience of working in Afghanistan as well as other crises in Sudan, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

His talk initially set the stage by exploring what is humanitarianism today before addressing some broader considerations about what this all means for the future.

In setting the stage, Donini addressed some of the broader philosophical, strategic and ethical issues around working in insecure environments. He started by exploring the concept of humanitarianism, arguing that it is a concept fraught with ambiguities that attempts to address three different realities: an ideology, a movement and a profession. Humanitarianism is a diverse banner of concepts usually defined according to the 'eye of the beholder'. He described modern humanitarianism as a political economy in which actors compete for influence, space and market share and that there is a visible, multi-million dollar face of humanitarian action behind which is hidden a range of realities and discourses which influence our notions and practice of humanitarianism. Donini contends that humanitarians have crossed the threshold of power – that they are no longer marginal but are part of a multi-million dollar institutional set up which is linked to powerful forces in the world.

The profession of humanitarianism has seen dramatic growth and transformation in the last two decades, evolving from being a marginal and non-intrusive activity in the way that conflict was conducted to become a central feature of north-south relations. This landscape is further complicated by the integration of development, human rights and advocacy into the scope and practice of humanitarian work.

The group of actors involved in humanitarian action has also become increasingly complex. From the original founders of the humanitarian movement, including faith-based organisations, new trends and players have emerged in the last ten years, particularly from the private sector and the military. The role of the military has become an important extension of interventions, beyond their role to protect civilians under military occupation as mandated by the Geneva Convention. There are now private companies saving lives

through their financing of humanitarian action that operate outside the usual standards of accountability and transparency. This group includes the increasingly influential non-traditional donors such as China, India, Gulf States and Islamic charities, and the governments and local communities of countries affected by crisis.

Donini addressed the motivations of the individuals who call themselves humanitarians, stating that they can be very different. In broad terms, humanitarianism is about the three 'Cs' of compassion, change or containment, and traditionally there have been two 'souls' in the humanitarian ethos, one focusing on the values of compassion and charity, the other on change and transformation. The third one, containment, has appeared in recent years, and while humanitarian action in support of political objectives is not new, Donini argues that the breadth and depth of manipulation as well as the tightening web of connections with global political agendas is a new trend.

In discussing what this all means for the future of humanitarian action, Donini predicted three megatrends:

- a. Humanitarian assistance is up, humanitarianism is down
- b. Universalism is down, sovereignty/nationalism is up
- c. Conflict is down, 'natural' disasters are up.

Humanitarian action has become a huge business in the global market place – worth \$15-\$18b a year, 15% of ODA and growing. Humanitarianism is a growing enterprise that employs over a quarter of a million people and where structure and institutionalisation are replacing volunteerism and solidarity. Donini states that assistance has grown exponentially and that the pressure to act like a business will challenge our ability to maintain some kind of respect for the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Donini then argues that the crises in Afghanistan, Sudan and Sri Lanka are defeats for humanitarianism because the humanitarian action is perceived as a form of imperialism, forcing sovereign states in a direction they don't want to go. He contends that in the coming decade, humanitarians will be confronted with issues of sovereignty and nationalism as never before, particularly with the emergence of new and powerful actors such as Brazil, China, and India.

The increased vulnerability of populations to climate change, technological disasters, urbanisation, demographic shifts and so forth will be the future focus of humanitarian agencies. This will require them to address vulnerability more comprehensively and develop new skills to respond to the changing nature of crises, e.g. crises that are more urban, more unpredictable and less linked to displacement. This has implications for the scope and shape of a humanitarian enterprise that is still based on Cold War and post-Cold War assumptions of what constitutes a crisis.

Donini closed his presentation by identifying four key challenges for the future of humanitarian action:

1. **Independence** – What can we do to address the perception that we are aligned with military agendas?
2. **Universality** – If we are perceived as northern and western, how far will we go to change this perception?

3. **Perceptions and definitions are important** – We use the term ‘humanitarian’ as a short cut that covers all sorts of realities. In Afghanistan the same agency will be working with government in one part of the country and rebels in another. Does it make sense to have this multi-mandate, or should we be more discerning in defining our niche?
4. **Challenge of power** – Traditionally NGOs have developed in confrontation with the states – challenging the way they function; now we are a part of the state – will this remain? Are we essentially parallel with empire and globalisation, or do we want to change and go back to basics, have a clearer separation?

Key Note 2: *Challenges for operating in insecure environments: A practitioner’s perspective*

Peter Muller, Regional Disaster Response Adviser (Pacific), UNOCHA

Mr Muller’s presentation addressed three key aspects of the challenges for operating in insecure environments:

- The current context and key risks
- Operational practices, arrangements and innovations
- Options for the future: addressing constraints on access

The current context/risks

Muller outlined the increasing concern about the ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations affected by armed conflict in a timely manner as indicated by UN reports, information from the field and various consultations. The levels of violence experienced by humanitarians has been steadily increasing, with a peak in 2008 of 155 incidents involving 260 victims of which 122 were killed, 76 were injured and 62 were kidnapped.

Approximately 75 per cent of attacks on aid workers in the past half decade have occurred in seven countries – Afghanistan, Chad, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan – and the majority of victims are NGO international staff and UN local contractors.

Muller then outlined the range of operational practices and arrangements that have been implemented in order to respond to this increasing risk.

- **Liaison with all relevant state and non-state actors** which included strategies such as developing a wide network of contacts.
- **Reinforcing common operating and humanitarian principles** to enhance perceptions of neutrality, impartiality and independence and heighten acceptance as well as make the distinction between military interventions and humanitarian aid; and working through common standards, basic operating rules and agreed minimum frameworks.
- **Negotiations to obtain security and access assurances** through mechanisms such as formal agreements, local or informal agreements. These take time and there is a need to find a balance between short and medium term results.
- **In order to obtain access during hostilities**, specific arrangements for security and access are important such as humanitarian corridors, days of tranquility, temporary cessation of hostilities and ‘humanitarian ceasefires’.

- **Mitigating security risks** through reducing exposure to risk (through restrictions on mobility), hardening humanitarian agencies as targets (compounds, vehicles, etc.) and the use of armed accompaniment such as national military, police, PK forces, multi-national forces, etc.
- **Armed escorts and patrols** as a last resort (IASC CM guidelines) as they affect perception of humanitarian actors and are difficult to reverse once implemented.
- **Reducing the humanitarian footprint** to reduce exposure and minimise visibility by operating 'under the radar' and focusing on areas for 'essential programming'.
- **Remote management** of activities funded by UN and INGOs but without sustained presence and direct oversight. This generally requires using 'windows of opportunity' for assessments, 'hit and run' distributions implemented by local organisations and/or private contractors.

Muller concluded by proposing a number of ways that humanitarian actors can address these constraints on their access to humanitarian crises, which he described as the need for a collective improvement in our performance as humanitarian actors. These included:

- Compiling and disseminating good practices and strengthening empirical evidence
- More coordinated efforts to enhance access
- A common approach and commitment to information sharing
- A common framework to inform decision-making based on a robust shared analysis
- Greater emphasis on humanitarian negotiations, requiring a strategic effort towards sustained dialogue with non-state actors as well
- Compliance with humanitarian principles.

Workshops

A series of four workshops were conducted simultaneously during the afternoon of Day 1, with each workshop presented twice so that participants were able to attend their choice of two of the four workshops. The facilitators of each workshop collected summary notes from both their workshops that were then used to inform the discussions on Day 2. These summary notes are outlined below for each workshop.

Workshop 1: *Challenges to upholding the humanitarian imperative*

Helen Durham, Australian Red Cross
Roger Yates, International Emergencies Director, Plan International

A Definition of the Humanitarian Imperative:

Humanitarian imperative is a limited part of a broader humanitarian cloak that provides **protection of life and dignity when it is most threatened.**

Response to acute need, urgent situations

Two broad definitions of 'humanitarian':

1. The broad approach of everyone to be 'humanitarian'.
2. An urgent response to an acute situation of immense need.

Challenges:

- Exit strategies or transition to development – when does the transition begin and the imperative end?
- Beginnings of humanitarian assistance
- Outsiders - external actors with values potentially imposed when not asked for
- Money/Donors
- Need for flexibility balanced with principles
- Humanitarian impulse from wider population
- Complexity of agency's doing multiple activities – development and humanitarian
- Not being more demand oriented
- Ethical dimensions on the ground – ability to be impartial
- Local-global transference
- Media
- Agencies image portrayed in the media by political actors
- Information management
- Expectations
- Accountability
- Donor expectations - accountability
- Donor fatigue
- Time frames
- Interface between personal and professional courage
- Media creates cynical environment
- Action meeting words – judge by actions
- Work with local partners
- Results driven
- Competition for funding
- Structure doesn't allow for needs base
- Tied funding
- Complement others in sector
- Agencies role in setting other agencies up
- Multiple players/actors
- Needs based vs politics

Overcoming the challenges

1. Opportunities to advocate to general public – educating the public
2. Commitment to original principles and design
3. Maintaining balance and demonstrating commitment to principles
4. Partnerships in a more genuine and complementary sense
5. Accepting that there are challenges that are out of reach
6. Lower expectations
7. Independence – honesty with own agencies' realities and views

Workshop 2: *National staff security, partner responsibilities and the challenges of remote programming*

Barry Steyn, Asia Regional Security Adviser, CARE International
Bijay Kumer, International Head of Human Security, ActionAid International

- a model of security by nationalising country offices
- transferring risk requires decent policies
- a discussion around humanitarian security, security and humanitarianism are linked in a changing world
- the need for a forum of different community perspectives
- NGO solidarity
- donor advocacy in regards to security and funding
- risk assessment with the involvement of local communities
- capacity of managers regarding security
- a discussion around the threshold of acceptable risk

Workshop 3: *Advocacy and public media messaging in insecure environments*

Denise Cauchi, Director of the Humanitarian Crisis Hub
Moammar Mashni, Co-Founder and Manager of Australians for Palestine

- demonstrating the impact of advocacy
- difficulty in interesting the media
- being strategic in selecting different approaches to advocacy
- the complementarity of different approaches – strength in numbers
- power of survivor voice
- potential of Diaspora advocacy
- whose voice is being heard – issues of accountability and representation
- power of celebrity
- protection
- balance between advocacy and humanitarian imperative and the humanitarian space
- access

Workshop 4: *Context and Risk Assessment – linking intelligent ‘intelligence’ to accountability and program design*

Mike Penrose, Director of Emergency Programs, Save the Children Australia
Anthea Spinks, Senior Policy Advisor, World Vision Australia

- risk aversion preventing action by NGOs
- creation of regional inter-agency security forum
- consensus on non-negotiable minimum standards
- access:
 - local partners
 - use of armed protection
 - presence of Muslim country donors and other non-western actors
 - How much are we ready to compromise to gain access
- to whom are donors accountable?
- we are not all the same ...
- the continuum of humanitarian and development and the appropriateness to separate these

Day 2

The second day of the forum was a half day where participants followed up the key questions that were drafted in response to the issues raised in the workshops the previous day, and identified what we as humanitarian actors can do about these issues.

Participants worked in five 'buzz groups'¹ according to the workshop themes to respond to the questions outlined below and agree on some concrete actions and next steps that were progressively recorded and shared with the broader group. The actions and next steps were recorded according to those to be taken by individuals, organisations or the sector, and were grouped according to five broad themes that emerged throughout the morning.

Key Questions for Buzz Groups:

General

What can we do? Identify some concrete steps forward as individuals, organisations and as a sector.

Workshop 1

- How do we get back to our principles?
- What will be the implications?
- How do we enable local capacity to have more impact in providing humanitarian assistance?

Workshop 2

- How to incorporate the transfer of risk into a culture of security consciousness?
What are the structures and processes you need to put in place?
- How do agencies better collaborate on security management?

Workshop 3

- What is the balance between advocacy and humanitarian imperative and the humanitarian space?
- Whose voice is being heard?

Workshop 4

- Is risk aversion preventing action by NGOs?
- How much are we ready to compromise to gain access?

¹ In this context 'buzz groups' refer to a participatory methodology where forum participants work in small groups (10-12 people) around tables set up in the main plenary space.

Recommendations:

The general outcomes of the forum discussion groups have been consolidated into the eleven recommendations listed below. The complete results of the group discussions are synthesised in the table at Annex 1.

1. Commence dialogue amongst agencies (not just NGOs or Red Cross/Red Crescent) about developing a universal Code relevant to all humanitarian actors that reflects these principles.
2. Improve awareness within our organisations² and with new agencies in the sector about the Humanitarian Imperative and Code and particularly with governing boards and senior management to enhance their understanding of the challenges of applying them in practice.
3. Agencies actively collaborate and share security related information in order to have more consistent responses on security management and contingency planning. Such information would include situation analyses, training resources, risk analysis processes and security policies. Individual agencies will need to allocate staff time and resources towards enhanced collaboration and coordination. Local partners to be involved as much as possible.
4. The sector agrees on policies and procedures for high risk situations particularly in relation to the potential transfer of risk to local organisations.
5. ACFID allocates resources (staff or working group) to addressing regional security issues, and facilitate opportunities for regional and local security personnel to share information and discuss issues.
6. Pro-bono legal advice be sought to investigate the implications of the counter-terrorism legislation on humanitarian practice and security. AusAID be engaged in discussions about issues relating to NGO accreditation with regard to operating in high risk situations, as well as raising awareness of security and operational challenges more broadly with the Australian Government.
7. Agencies and individual staff members are made aware of issues relating to risk, organisational policies, standards for appropriate conduct and their obligations to share critical security information.
8. The ACFID HRG investigates the UK DEC model with regards to benefits for collaborative advocacy as well as sharing information and experience more broadly.
9. The complementarity of sector agencies be developed through the drafting of country strategies on humanitarian advocacy which draw on pre-emptive research and strategies on high-risk countries. These strategies would be shared with the ACFID HRG and more broadly, and larger NGOs would conduct additional research on key issues, for example an analysis of vulnerability.
10. Engage groups beyond the usual humanitarian response agencies, including Diasporas, survivor groups, regional bodies, and the private sector (through Crisis Hub for example) to develop common messages and credibility around key issues.

² NGOs were specifically mentioned but other organisations were also represented at the forum to which this recommendation could also apply.

11. Agencies take a more collective approach to engaging with donors on funding allocations and conditions.

Next Steps:

1. That the notes and presentations from the forum be distributed to all participants.
2. That a page linked to the ACFID website be set up specifically for the Humanitarian Reference Group in order to share the key information identified in Recommendations 3 and 9 above.
3. That all other recommendations be considered for future discussion at HRG meetings during 2010-2011.

Annexes:

Annex 1 – Outcomes from Day 2 discussions

Annex 2 – Forum Evaluation Report

ANNEX 1

The following table is a synthesis of the agreements made during the buzz-group sessions on Day 2 of the forum. While the responses have been organised according to emerging themes, the content and wording has not been altered.

Individual	Organisation	Sector
ACFID HRG Humanitarian Forum, 2010 – A Summary of Agreed Actions and Next Steps.		
Humanitarian Imperative		
	Have materials prepared that we actually engage NGO leadership (CEO and Board) on issues around the challenges of the application of humanitarian principles in practice	
	Doing more within organisations – staff, board, supporters – about the Code and Humanitarian Principles	Open dialogue about a universal Code – not just for NGOs and Red Cross (make sure our codes are not watered down) – focus on impartiality
	Complementarity	Engaging new players in the sector to understand the Code and principles and where they fit.
	Making informed choices about operational humanitarian work – against an understanding of the code and principles and any compromise is articulated. Review these decisions as situations change.	Inform through formal education sector about the humanitarian sector and the complementary roles within the sector.
Security		
Avoiding inappropriate behaviour Recognising your responsibility for your staff’s security – lead by example Recognise your own risk profile and	Establish well structured internal security policies/systems – based on agency mandate. Staffing policies from a security lens.	Collaborate around security management, formalise informal meetings to share information and discuss issues and resolve Collaborate on contingency planning, set agreed trigger

ANNEX 1

The following table is a synthesis of the agreements made during the buzz-group sessions on Day 2 of the forum. While the responses have been organised according to emerging themes, the content and wording has not been altered.

Individual	Organisation	Sector
act accordingly		points, consistent messages and methods of hibernation / relocation
Ensuring security of all staff regardless of transference of risk (local and international)	Ensure resources are devoted to coordination at a sector level – devotion of time , skills and ability to meaningfully engage and ensure resources for designated security office in insecure environments	Explore the legal issues around current terrorism legislation – i.e. the law itself in terms of implications for practice and security. - look for pro-bono assistance Lobby WoG approach and promote the role of AusAID in counter-terrorism regulation/promote training on working in insecure environments.

ANNEX 1

The following table is a synthesis of the agreements made during the buzz-group sessions on Day 2 of the forum. While the responses have been organised according to emerging themes, the content and wording has not been altered.

Individual	Organisation	Sector
Joint responsibility of the individual and agency to analyse and plan for individual risk profiles	Show solidarity in advocating for funding from donors for independent/collaborative security management	
Listening to local staff in relation to security risks on the ground	Adopting SOPs for evolving situations based on intelligence from local staff – engage local staff in risk profiling	Share information and collectively agree on situational analysis to provide one message to donors
		Bring together a forum of regional / local security people to share information and discuss issues.
		ACFID to appoint a Security Advisor / establish a security WG to discuss regional security issues and ways forward.
	Capacity building of local partners in regards to security awareness and associated training.	Agree on policy, minimum standards for security in particular transfer of risk to local organisations.
	Shared resources for establishing standard Training, Policies and Procedures to develop organisational/sectoral security culture. Value add training on Security Management.	
Information/Analysis		
Willingness to share information through a variety of means	Present a realistic account of our achievements – don't need to be as self-critical	

ANNEX 1

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Individual	Organisation	Sector
through a variety of means	need to be as self-critical	
	Articulate our roles and mandates clearly so generate good understanding of different parts of the sector – including complementarities	
Taking active part in existing forums	The need to understand the legal and political implications of working in a country	
Staff to be made aware of their obligations to share key security information and the agency to ensure that there is a safe environment and appropriate mechanisms for them to do so.		
Use existing systems for learning lessons. Make personal and organisational commitment to change systems and practice based on reflection and experience.		
	When looking at need, need to factor in a more sophisticated understanding of vulnerability. Need to use existing data and knowledge from the development sector to inform our understanding	
Advocacy		
	<p>Complementarity - Each NGO to develop country strategies on advocacy to be shared with ACFID HRG. Larger NGOs to develop shared knowledge base on ongoing and planned research for HRG and Diaspora groups to use.</p> <p>Start pre-emptive research and advocacy on high risk countries... to prepare common messaging ahead of potential disasters</p>	

ANNEX 1

The following table is a synthesis of the agreements made during the buzz-group sessions on Day 2 of the forum. While the responses have been organised according to emerging themes, the content and wording has not been altered.

Individual	Organisation	Sector
	The voices of the people affected by disasters must inform the balance between advocacy and humanitarian assistance	
Making strategic choices from a range of approaches to advocacy – i.e. across the spectrum from campaigning to linking with Diaspora groups and looking for the best mix to achieve advocacy objective. Use of new technology eg twitter and blogs		
	At HQ undertake joint advocacy work with key stakeholders on the challenges of remote programming and the need to fund security structures.	Constitution of lobby groups critical to credibility and getting messages across, need for new voices (eg Diasporas, Rotary, Unions, Survivors’ Voice) same message Engaging corporate and regional bodies, eg ASEAN where appropriate around common advocacy issues
		Bring common interest groups together – ie role for Crisis Hub
		Looking at opportunities for exploring DEC model- and the benefits it brings to collaborative advocacy, and the potential it has for influencing government, ministers and the media
		Analysis of global organisational risk analysis processes to look at how sector wide analysis can contribute to ACFID membership

ANNEX 1

The following table is a synthesis of the agreements made during the buzz-group sessions on Day 2 of the forum. While the responses have been organised according to emerging themes, the content and wording has not been altered.

Individual	Organisation	Sector
Donors/Funding		
	Choosing to be less competitive about funding	Taking a collective stand against donor pressure and funding conditionalities
	Solidarity in sourcing funding to support flexible spending in relation to security and programs in insecure environments	
	Engaging with AusAID on their transfer of risk and guidance guidelines	
		Explore issues around maintenance of AusAID accreditation and the requirements for safe operation in high risk environments (pro bono legal assistance)

ANNEX 2

Participant Evaluations – Summary

Thirty-seven completed evaluation forms were received.

The ratings for the following three questions are the **average** of the ratings from the 37 received evaluations on a scale of 5 (excellent) 4 (very good) 3 (good) 2 (fair) 1 (poor).

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. How well did the Forum meet your needs and expectations | 4 |
| 2. How well was the material presented? | 3.9 |
| 3. How relevant were the session content/outcomes to your work? | 3.9 |

The sessions nominated as the MOST liked session were:

- | | |
|--|----|
| • Keynote Presentation by Antonio Donini | 13 |
| • Workshop 1 – Humanitarian Imperative | 10 |
| • Plenary Buzz Groups (Day 2) | 9 |

The session nominated as the LEAST liked session was:

- | | |
|--|----|
| • Keynote Presentation by Peter Muller | 10 |
|--|----|

A summary of a range of comments:

- Many found Mr Donini's presentation provocative, thoughtful and usefully challenging
- Many suggested that it would have been good to have PowerPoint or key points of Mr Donini's presentation provided
- The venue and catering were well regarded and positive
- The timing of the forum overall was considered appropriate and many appreciated the time for discussion
- A number of people considered the forum and workshops to be well facilitated
- Most considered that the workshops were a good balance of presentation and discussion, and that the speakers were well prepared
- Some suggested that more 'real life' examples and practical lessons would be useful
- A number appreciated the opportunity for discussion with peers within the structure of the forum and the informal time for networking
- Many people appreciated the time for both discussion and the opportunity to move from talk to action by working towards the agreed action points
- Some indicated that the role of ACFID in this process is important particularly in following up the agreed action points
- Some considered that more analysis of real issues was needed
- One suggested that it is more appropriate for the HRG to facilitate the group.