

## **NGO Networking and Cooperation Towards Total Disaster Risk Management in Asia**

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In recent humanitarian crises, the sheer number of actors and their different interests and agendas has made the coordination of aid and development programs an almost impossible undertaking, resulting in competition, a lack of efficiency and effectiveness, and the waste of money and other resources intended to help the target population. In the crises we experienced some thirty years back, the numbers of active international NGO's in were less than one hundred. During the recent crises in Europe, Africa and Asia the number of NGO's did explode. There were more than 670 international NGOs registered in the International Council for Voluntary Agencies Directory of NGO's in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

I earlier this year gave a presentation on NGO coordination, or "the art of herding cats" as I named the presentation at the time. Collectively, NGO's represent a huge enterprise, spending an estimated 12 – 13 billion USD annually, most of this still in the hand of the northern organisations. Yet we must realize that according to UNDP Human Development Report from 1993 "only" 250 millions, less than 20 % of the estimated 1.3 billion people leaving in absolute poverty at the time was reached by the NGO community.

Apart from the fact that 250 millions were reached, such figures obscure the fact that that an increasingly large percentage of NGO activity is concentrated on emergencies in a handful of countries across the globe. For better or the worse, it is these emergencies that attract the bulk of private and official funds. The proportion of total disaster aid spent on relieving disaster soared from 2% in 1989 to around 7% in 1994. As the number of crises demanding our attention increases, so does the number of new NGO's willing to meet the demand. The international safety net of voluntary assistance has never been so wide.

NGO's especially in emergencies compete, and often successfully, for funds not only at international level but also at national levels, with a growing trend to fund southern NGOs directly. The number of southern NGOs is impossible to guess, not at least because of the loose definition of NGO. For instance, there are 25.000 grassroots organisations in Indian State of Tamil Nadu alone, and there are more than 12.000 in Lebanon. In a number of recent disaster, the short-term money available to the NGOs, albeit usually to northern NGOs has surpassed even that of UN. This is not to say that the NGOs are set to replace the more traditional international aid structures (and I would say that is neither likely nor desirable): rather, they have become increasingly linked to the wider aid community, The United Nations, other multilateral bodies and international institutions, in a manner that never been foreseen in the days when NGOs simply filled the gaps at a grass root level. Rarely would one today find, for instance, and UN or Government Strategy document dealing with development aid or emergency response that does not mention the role of NGOs as implementers and partners in the design of countrywide programmes.

However, the phenomenal increase in the number, size and financial status of NGOs in the 1980 and 1990 has to large extent happened without close inspections of their actual performance. When foreign aid is criticized in the international press, NGOs are more often the saviours than the demons. Perhaps this is as it should be, for NGOs have increased their visibility tremendously in the recent years, particularly in response to humanitarian disasters, and have, for the most part, had a good record of performance.

But as humanitarian actors, we must also be willing to look critical to our performance from the inside. For all the success of NGOs, numbers of NGOs has been guilty of poor practices, wastage and lack of professionalism that to large extent has gone unchecked. Many NGOs are good at pointing at their successes, however, few are willing to share actions that would not stand up to public scrutiny. NGO programmes are not regularly independently evaluated.

Critics of NGOs have pointed to lack of accountability, mutual competitiveness and poor coordination as perhaps the three most serious charges. Following the emergencies in the Great Lake area of Africa and the crises in former Yugoslavia, key actors in the NGO community realized the need to enhance the quality of their work by introducing a set of minimums standard to guide NGO and humanitarian assistance in crises. This process given the name the Sphere.

Sphere is based on two core beliefs: first, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of calamity and conflict, and second, that those affected by disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance. Sphere is three things: a handbook, a broad process of collaboration and an expression of commitment to quality and accountability. It is also promote the simple notion that greater cooperation between NGOs will lead to a learning environment where useful ideas and experiences can be shared in a common cause. More importantly, if we believe that NGOs as a community has something unique to offer, then a greater coordination and collaboration both at field, national, regional and global level is crucial to in realizing that potential.

The sphere project is aiming to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance as well as the accountability of humanitarian agencies, and the handbook sets out what people affected by disasters have a right to expect from humanitarian assistance. The Sphere projects has two key elements:

The Humanitarian Charter describes the core principles that govern humanitarian action and asserts the right of populations to protection and assistance. Defining the legal responsibilities of states and parties to guarantee the right to assistance and protection, it is based on principles and provisions of international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, and on the principles of the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct.

The Minimum Standards aim to advance the rights set out in the Charter. Developed using broad networks of experts in five core sectors; water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services, it identifies standards applicable to each.

The 2004 edition has been revised and updated, taking into account recent developments in humanitarian practice in water and sanitation, food, shelter, together with feedback from practitioners in the field, research institutes and cross-cutting experts in protection, gender, children, older people, disabled people, HIV/AIDS and the environment.

Many people react negatively to the word coordination, being afraid of loosing some of their independency and flexibility. However, from my point of view coordination is not a bureaucratic imposition designed to stifle the independence and imagination of individual NGOs; it is a tool for increasing the effectiveness of a collective endeavour. The challenge is to design a structure conducive to strengthening cooperation without limiting the freedom of any of the participant, or maybe more correctly, creating a common ground for enhancing the accountability of NGO action. Working with NGOs I have seen many times that bad performance or lack of accountability of one single NGO can jeopardize the possibilities for a large number of hard working NGOs.

In all NGO coordination, disseminating information and providing a forum for information exchange have been, and remain, among the most important tasks. However, the quality and relevance of information sharing depends totally on the NGOs themselves taking an active role providing and sharing information. To do so the NGO network must be seen as useful for the participants, otherwise they will have numerous other options for information sharing. Hence, we must always ask what role we want the network to play. Looking back on my own experiences working with NGO coordination in Afghanistan, Lebanon, former Yugoslavia and may other places I more and more have come to realize that we need more to focus on facilitating strategic coordination by ensuring NGO involvement and input on policy-making level. To do so the network needs the combined resources of all its members, but beyond that a link to other resources such as the Sphere projects, ICVA, IFRC, or any other NGO coordinating bodies that assist the network in analysing information and offering it in a different form aimed at advocacy and policy-making.

The idea of the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADDRN) was, and I believe it is still a good idea, but the network can hardly be seen playing an active role in the region. The participants in the network could play a stronger complementary role in promoting an integrated disaster risk management approach by linking it to already accepted international standards such as Sphere. In doing so, the network can make a real case insisting on using a minimum standard of risk analysis to be integrated into any local development program they are involved in. By taking such a role, and believe me, it will never be given to you; the network can place itself in the drivers seat instead of sitting in the backseat waiting for other to take a lead.

The next question is do you have something to deliver that could catch the interest of all the different actors you work with as NGOs? In my opinion the answer to that question is yes. To take such a role you need to focus on what you are good at, and move that to a policy level in the region. NGOs have traditionally focused on local and popular participation in the development processes. Using this knowledge, combined with the need to bring together action on disaster preparedness and disaster reduction is one way to go. The need to integrate local hazard mapping, to point at the upstream challenges and long term approaches to avoid unnecessary step-back in securing a sustainable development are areas where the network could focus. And it is more relevant in Asia than in most other places in the world.

We are now in Kobe, which was severely hit by an earthquake in 1995. Lessons learned from that disaster and numerous other disasters in Asia is something you all can help disseminate to a larger audience. It is proposed to have an international conference on disaster reduction in Kobe in 2005. You will all have a role to play in that conference promoting in a much more vocal way than up till now the need to integrate disaster reductions activities in all development programs to ensure we are reducing risk and securing a more sustainable development in Asia.

Thank you for your kind attention.