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Partnership, partnership

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Partnership is a nice word. It has a warm feeling to it. It is well-understood. For example, my husband is my life partner. My colleagues are my partners in our work. The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement works with partner institutions in many parts of the world. Partnership is a nice word.

The word partnership has a long history in the humanitarian community. For years, UNHCR has worked with implementing partners – not quite as warm a term as just partner – but certainly better than ‘subcontractor.’ Parinac, or ‘partnership in action’ was based on the recognition that if partnership is to be meaningful, it must be more than just nice words. Action is required. Joint action.

Today I want to focus on partnerships within the NGO community. Usually at these meetings we focus on the UNHCR-NGO relationship or partnership and we’re usually quite critical. It’s true that sometimes NGOs resent a certain ‘arrogance’ of UNHCR staff. It’s true that often NGOs feel that they are viewed as ‘junior partners’ in this partnership – and if we’re honest, that feeling is based in the fact that UNHCR is a big organization with lots of resources – more resources than most NGOs have. It’s also true that sometimes NGOs feel a certain moral superiority because they work for far lower salaries and aren’t constrained by the same bureaucratic limitations that the UN faces. And usually at these meetings, we end up talking about the UNHCR-NGO relationship. But the fact is that UNHCR is one of the best UN agencies in terms of dialogue and access to NGOs. There is much to be done to make the UNHCR-NGO relationship a true partnership, but I want to focus on the partnerships among NGOs.

Take a minute and look around this room. 250 NGOs are present, from every region. There are large international NGOs which have budgets which are close to – or surpass -- that of UNHCR. There are small national NGOs which have only a handful of staff. Some of the NGOs here today work on a whole range of issues, including refugees and IDPs, but also development and peacebuilding and democracy and HIV/AIDS and the environment. Some are quite specialized and focus exclusively on refugees. Some are vocal opponents of their governments while many get along quite well with their governments. Many of the NGO representatives here have attended these consultations for several years. For some this is their first exposure and even their first trip to Geneva. One thing that most of the NGOs in this room have in common is that they are constantly looking for funds to keep their programs going. In fact, I should say that this group isn’t typical of the broader NGO humanitarian community because you are here! You’ve been able, one way or another, to scrape together the airfare and to survive Geneva’s expensive

prices. You can also go to sleep tonight reasonably secure that your hotel won't be bombed.

The Global Humanitarian Platform is an initiative to bring together the three main families of humanitarian actors on an equal footing – non-governmental organizations, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and UN and other intergovernmental agencies – in order to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The July 2007 meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform adopted 'principles of partnership' which are to serve as a basis for relationships within and between the three families of actors. Let me review these principles:

- Equality
- Transparency
- Result-oriented approach
- Responsibility
- Complementarity

I think we can all agree that these are also nice words. I want to talk about these principles in the context of partnerships within the NGO community. Look around the room again. Do you feel that you are – or could be -- partners with the other NGOs in this room? Do you feel that you relate to each other on the basis of equality? Or are the big international NGOs – or the Geneva insiders or the native English-speakers -- somehow more equal than others? How transparent are you with the other NGOs that you do know? The NGOs, for example, working on the same issues in your country? Do you feel comfortable sharing your strategies and your financial reports with them? And how much do you really work together with other NGOs in your country to ensure that your work is more effective? Do you strategize together and agree on a coordinated approach? Or do you just tell each other what you're planning to do? Or what you've done? Do you feel responsible to other NGOs – or just to your boards and your donors? When you're undertaking a project, do you consider how your efforts would complement those of other NGOs? Would you stop a particular program if there were another NGO in the country doing a better job?

The principles of partnership apply to relations between NGOs as well as to the relationship between NGOs and the UN and between NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Society.

As many of you know, I worked in the NGO world for many years and I have a deep appreciation for the contributions which NGOs have made – on the ground, in assisting and protecting refugees and IDPs and also at the international level. NGOs have led the way for the whole humanitarian community in many ways – it was NGOs that pressed and lobbied and mobilized to have IDPs recognized as a group with particular needs. It was NGOs that pressed and lobbied UNHCR to take issues of gender and children seriously. It has been largely through NGO initiatives that issues such as accountability to beneficiaries are on the international agenda. NGOs have modeled peer reviews and codes of conduct. In fact, NGOs, particularly international NGOs shape the international humanitarian response. At a recent seminar Brookings organized on the media and

humanitarian response, the role of NGOs in alerting the international community to act was clear.¹

In sum, NGOs are a wonderful source of creativity, compassion and change. But all is not right in our sector and I believe that we need to confront some of these issues. In particular I want to focus on power and money and relate them to the Principles of Partnership adopted by the Global Humanitarian Platform.

Power, Money, and Partnership

Equality

The principles of partnership say:

Equality requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other's mandates, obligations and independence and recognize each other's constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organizations from engaging in constructive dissent.

But if we look within the broader NGO community, it is clear that we are a long way from achieving this equality and mutual respect. We aren't all equal. There are major differences in power between international NGOs and between international NGOs and national NGOs. Less than a dozen international NGOs mobilize 90% of the funds for humanitarian response. All of these have their headquarters in the North. Although most have some kind of federation structure and work through national affiliates, I think it's fair to say that they are dominated by Northern-based affiliates.

The difference in resources between international and national NGOs is notable. Many international NGOs provide funds for national NGOs. But this pattern is changing with more international NGOs opening offices in Southern countries. Where once international NGOs channeled funds to national NGOs to implement projects, increasingly they are operational themselves and may be competing with national NGOs for funds. The number of international NGO branches, measured by the presence of an office or just an individual member in Africa rose 31% to 39,729 between 1993 and 2003. The rate of increase in sub-Saharan Africa was higher: 40%.²

A recent article notes that "a growing number of complaints are being voiced by reputable national NGOs that their Dhaka-based international counterparts are increasingly squeezing them out of the race for local project funding. It seems these international NGOs (INGOs) no longer restrict themselves to mobilizing resources from their rich home countries to bring into Bangladesh." The article goes on to say that funds are increasingly disbursed locally by donor agencies and embassies which seem to prefer

¹ For more on this issue, see Abby Stoddard, Humanitarian Alert, Kumerian Press, 2006.

² William Mclean, "Foreign NGOS Map New Route to African Legitimacy," Reuters, 9 October 2005, p. 1.

to work with international NGOs rather than national ones. The author suggests that expatriates have an unfair advantage in accessing these funds.³

Many complaints about international NGOs have been voiced by national NGOs. ‘They hire our best staff with salaries that we can’t match.’ ‘They don’t share their plans with us.’ ‘They are included in UN meetings, but we often aren’t.’ ‘They sometimes don’t respect our culture.’ ‘Their actions can get the whole NGO community into trouble with the government.’ ‘They reduce funding or end programs with little notice or explanation.’

National NGOs themselves are far from perfect. Some have political agendas. Some have terrible records of reporting and financial accountability. Some are more vulnerable to actions by their governments than international NGOs.

I also want to suggest that a lot of the tension between international and national NGOs – as well as between international NGOs – has to do with the competitive funding environment. Many international NGOs say they are committed to capacity-building of national NGOs. But think about this for a moment. What would happen if national NGOs developed sufficient capacity to be able to carry out operations as efficiently as international NGOs? Don’t international NGOs have a vested interest in not building the capacity of national NGOs? What does this mean for partnership? Equality?

Transparency

A second principle of partnership is transparency. The Principles of Partnership say:

Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations.

If we take transparency together with equality, this implies that everyone shares information equally. But we are far from this point. While there may be good sharing of day-to-day information at the country level, I suspect that does not extend to sharing of strategies and long-term plans. I remember when I worked at the World Council of Churches and we would have roundtable meetings with partners – both funding partners and national partners – the local partner, say the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, would lay out their plans in great detail and the funding partners would comment and probe and eventually fund the program. But the funding partners didn’t share their strategy papers for Zimbabwe – not with the local partner, nor with each other. Are international NGOs and national NGOs alike willing to share their budgets and plans and strategies with each other? If not, what does this say about transparency?

³ Jannatul, Mawa, “The Disparity between National and International NGOs,” *The Independent*, 4 October 2000, p. 1. www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/role/globdem/funding/2001/0410disp.htm

Results-oriented approach

Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.

We are all interested in results. Although it is true that humanitarian work at times resembles a disaster industry, it is also true that NGOs are staffed by people who are motivated by compassion and altruism; they want to help people in need. And, lest we get too smug, let me stress that we don't have a monopoly on those attributes. NGOs have a fairly bad reputation for coordination. (Certainly not people in this room!) But NGOs each have their own system of accountabilities. Think about the coordination mechanisms in which you're engaged. Would coordination be easier or more effective if you started by putting the results first? If instead of saying 'this is what we're planning to do,' the conversation began with 'how do we (collectively) stop women from getting raped when they're looking for firewood?' There are some good examples in the NGO community where those kinds of questions have been asked and have led to good joint initiatives to reduce violence in refugee settings. I think NGOs eventually responded pretty well to the 2002 revelations of widespread sexual abuse in West Africa. But the first response was to send out teams of staff from the different international NGOs to investigate what happened. And then, satisfied that **their** staff hadn't been involved in any abuse, they began to work together to develop a common response.

The need for visibility in order to raise money sometimes makes result-oriented coordination more difficult. Sometimes NGOs respond to a particular crisis not because they have particular expertise which is needed, but because they need to be visible, to be seen as responding. The competition for funds makes it difficult to coordinate effectively.

This principle calls for result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities. If we don't have transparency, it's hard to be clear about the capabilities and concrete operational capacities which different NGOs bring to the table. This relates to the principle of responsibility and complementarity as well.

Responsibility

Humanitarian organizations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their task responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills, and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.

What does it mean to say that NGOs have an ethical obligation to each other? I suggest that it means when you commit yourself to do something for or with NGOs, that you actually do it, that you don't get sidetracked when, for example, a donor request comes

in. NGOs should commit to activities only when you have the means, competencies, skills and capacity to deliver on these commitments. Sometimes NGOs take on tasks when they don't have the capacity because they expect the resources which will come in will help build that capacity. The attitude is sometimes 'well, we've never worked with children before, but we could certainly learn if we got this grant.' How many of you have volunteered for a task when you knew you didn't have the time to do it well? Sometimes undoubtedly, you manage to pull it off and that's part of the NGO ethos – or 'can do' spirit. But it's also one of our greatest weaknesses as a community.

Complementarity

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantage and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and build on. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

This principle has two parts: we should build on our comparative advantage and build local capacities. Sometimes these two parts are contradictory. Let's take an example. Say super International NGO has a well-established track record of camp management and local NGO has a good record in vocational training. The principle of complementarity would suggest that super NGO manage the camp while local NGO carries out vocational training. But that doesn't allow much movement or growth. How will local NGO ever develop the skills to manage a camp? But what happens if we look at capacity in a broader sense – not just funding or technical expertise in a given sector, but also ability to relate to the community, to understand local cultures and norms, to remain in the community? If we broaden the understanding of capacity, it might turn out that super NGO doesn't have the capacity which is needed to run the camp.

What does it mean to build capacity? Capacity-building has become one of our buzzwords, we use it all the time. But what does it mean? Even leaving aside the different understandings of capacity, how do we know what works? Is it more cost-effective to organize a one-time training seminar for 100 people or to support one person to take a 3-week course on reporting? Is it more beneficial to send a consultant to work with a particular local NGO for several months to deal with administrative issues or to organize a training course for all NGOs on administrative management in a particular town? Are there ways that capacity can be built aside from training? I've often wondered, for example, if international NGOs are concerned with capacity-building of local NGOs, why don't they include them in, for example, their needs assessment missions? Maybe seeing how it is done would build capacity more than participating in a course on how to carry out needs assessment. And if we look at capacity as the ability to protect and assist vulnerable people, are international NGOs ready to look at the capacities which local NGOs bring? How do you balance capacities such as knowing how to speak a local language with the ability to develop indicators of impact?

Partnership, partnership. It is such a nice word. But when you unpack it and begin to consider what it really means on the ground, it's a little more complicated. The principles of partnership developed by the Global Humanitarian Platform offer us yardsticks for assessing the state of the partnership within the NGO world. And when we are able to address some of the problems – especially those coming from sensitive issues of power and money – within our community, we will be in a stronger position to develop meaningful partnerships with UN agencies and the Red Cross/Crescent movement.

Thank you.