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HOW HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CAN STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT CONFLICT AND END NEED

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

Eighty percent of humanitarian needs emanate from violent conflict. Two thirds of all humanitarian assistance is provided to long-term recipients facing protracted crises of a duration of eight years or more. Protracted conflicts have contributed to the unprecedented levels of humanitarian needs that have increasingly overwhelmed the international system in recent years.

As the number of people displaced by conflict exceeded 51 million in 2014, and the cost of assistance escalated to USD 450 million, the need to address cycles of conflict and need has reached a new urgency. To do this, new approaches are required that can reconcile efforts to meet short-term needs with the necessity of contributing to long-term peace and development outcomes.

In line with these circumstances, one of the key objectives being set by the United Nations Secretary General for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) is to create a shift in present approaches to humanitarian response away from “delivering aid, to ending need.”

If strides are to be made in this direction, consideration must be given to strengthening the abilities of communities,

societies, and states, to cope with adversities in nonviolent and non-coercive ways. This objective inherently directs attention to local capacities for resilience to violent conflict.

The WHS therefore compels actors from across the humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development sectors to come together to develop strategies and approaches for ensuring that international humanitarian response can positively affect people’s resilience to conflict. While respecting the different challenges and demands that characterize different stages of crisis, what can be done to ensure that international crisis response enhances, and does not undermine, national and local capacities to both prevent and address future ones?

THE CHALLENGE

The collective challenge posed to international, national, and local actors engaged in conflict-affected contexts by the WHS is to “Commit to a new way of working that meets people’s immediate humanitarian needs, while at the same time reducing risk and vulnerability over multiple years through the achievement of collective outcomes.”

This will require strategies for working together that extend the scope of the responsibility to Do No Harm beyond the

immediate context of delivery, and apply it to the long-term impacts and outcomes of such engagements in order to:

- Limit cycles of violence and long-term need (recidivism and dependency)
- Reduce people’s risks and vulnerability (cf. Agenda For Humanity)
- Improve people’s abilities to become more self-reliant (cf. Agenda For Humanity)

THE APPROACH

To contribute to the development of concrete responses to this challenge, Interpeace initiated a project in 2015 together with local partners in three contexts (Indigo, Cote d’Ivoire; Pole Institute, DRC; Mustakbalna, Palestine), funded by the government of Sweden.

Although much smaller in scope and scale, this project was developed in the tradition of CDA’s “Listening Project.” Over four years and in 20 countries, that work sought to understand, and share, “the views of people who represented broad cross-sections of their societies, ranging from fishermen on the beach to government ministers with experience in bilateral aid negotiations”¹, on the impact of humanitarian assistance on their communities and societies. This work has been foundational in articulating an insight shared by many people with experience in international aid - no matter their role: “In the midst of [local] difference, there was striking unanimity and consistency about the processes and the effects of the international aid system” (ibid.).

Interpeace’s project took a narrower perspective, focussing on participants’ experiences of collaboration with external actors, where these existed, in the context of humanitarian response, and their views about whether this contributed, or did not, to national and local capacities for resilience to violent conflict. Over several months, the participative process engaged with a range of local actors in the three locations, motivated by a specific interest in findings that can help lay the foundations for new and more effective partnerships between internal and external actors. Given this objective, it was important to learn about the ways in which people are more than beneficiaries of aid, but also actors in their own experiences.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the study, like CDA we also found that despite important differences between the three contexts, participants highlighted many of the same challenges and opportunities concerning collaboration between internal and external actors, and resilience.

From these local perspectives, the research teams developed six key insights about the relationship between collaborative approaches in the context of humanitarian response, and local capacities for resilience to violent conflict. From these insights, five key recommendations have been developed for steps the global community can take to help move from “delivering aid to ending need”.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

1. COLLABORATION MATTERS, ESPECIALLY IN CRISIS

Collaboration between internal and external actors has an impact on the system of relationships in a given context - both between internal groups and individuals, as well as between the population and institutions of the state. When the very fabric of society has been torn apart by violent conflict, it becomes even more important to reinforce what helps a society repair, and avoid weakening it further. People in all three contexts of the study related stories illustrating that, when humanitarian response does not take into account the system of relationships it is stepping into, or the capacities that are needed to move beyond conflict, the engagement can end up further weakening the very resources needed for peace. But they also shared some positive examples of how collaborative approaches, with international and local actors working hand in hand, were key in enhancing capacities that are essential for dealing with conflict in non-violent ways.

¹ Anderson, M., et al (2012) *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. CDA: Cambridge.

2. CRISIS DOES NOT NEED TO TRUMP COLLABORATION

The urgency of life-saving measures in situations where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict is undeniable. This urgency is often seen as outweighing the need for, or benefits of, collaboration with internal actors when time is of the essence, and local structures, processes, or capacities are either unavailable or invisible to international responders. However, there are valuable opportunities for productive collaboration possible at each stage of crisis, and at all levels of society. Examples of local responses initiated even before the arrival of the international community, or in places which external actors are unable to access, exist. From the point of view of local actors, the value of building upon these initiatives has both immediate advantages (e.g. local diagnosis of local need can sometimes be more accurate), as well as long-term gains (e.g. by ensuring both relevance and appropriateness of response to the context, strengthening relationships in context, and enhancing local capacities for response to future crisis). At the same time ensuring that assistance draws on existing capacities and initiatives is a response to the resounding call to preserve the agency and dignity of local actors in the response to a crisis that has already taken away much from them.

3. COLLABORATION BETWEEN SOME DOES NOT LEAD TO RESILIENCE FOR ALL

When collaborative approaches are restricted to the interaction between external actors and a specific internal group - such as local leaders or civil society, residents in a particular area, members of a certain ethnic group, profession or trade, or local actors working as staff on an international intervention – this can indeed contribute to the capacities and resilience of those directly involved in the effort. But this does not by default translate into broader resilience of the community or society. When such broader resilience is not taken into account, “collaboration” can become a dirty word from the point of view of those who are excluded, and social tensions (both new and old) can be fuelled at a time when cohesion is key. This insight stresses the importance of choosing local partners wisely by taking a systemic approach, which considers the system of social and political relationships, in the design and planning of

humanitarian response to ensure that good intentions (to work collaboratively) lead to positive results in both the immediate- and long- term.

4. PRESENT APPROACHES TO RESILIENCE OVERLOOK CRUCIAL ELEMENTS FOR TACKLING CYCLES OF CONFLICT

While helping people return to income-generating activities is of course essential in the aftermath of a crisis, and key to working towards stability, a resounding observation shared across all three contexts of this project was the need for peace, not just economic self-sufficiency. An income generated in a context of social tensions, a lack of trust between society and state, and political strife is potentially a momentary benefit in a fragile situation that can relapse into violence. Likewise, while improving disaster preparedness in vulnerable environments has helped lessen the likelihood and/or the impact of disasters, unless attention is also paid to those capacities that help societies face and move beyond conflict, the source of much humanitarian need remains unaddressed.

5. RESILIENCE IS DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT PLACES

While there may be common elements or features across societies, the meanings, sources, and opportunities for resilience vary across cultural, historical, and crisis contexts. For example, while resilience to violent conflict may universally involve capacities for social cohesion, the ways in which social cohesion can take shape, be best supported, and is expressed, may vary from context to context. These differences must be learned and assessed in each context in order for collaborative approaches to humanitarian response to identify entry points to strengthen them effectively.

6. TRANSITIONS ARE PARAMOUNT

The importance, and difficulty, in making the transition from humanitarian aid to development assistance is underscored in present discussions around the humanitarian-development nexus. However, such transitions are also

of paramount importance from a peacebuilding point of view. Several examples from the project have highlighted that transitions are the “make it or break it” junctures for resilience outcomes. Any gains fostered by collaborative approaches can be lost when aid is designed and implemented without transitions in view, and the roles and relationships that will need to take their place in the absence of external actors have not been anticipated or fostered through the intervention itself. Conversely, the project found compelling examples that illustrated how, when smooth transitions from external support to local leadership orient an intervention, local capacities that are key to resilience to violent conflict can be enhanced in ways that extend beyond the specific intervention.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Given the insights developed above, the following recommendations begin to map key areas of attention, propose actions to take, and indicate new resources to develop in order to support a different way forward for humanitarian response in a collective effort to shift away from “delivering aid, to ending need.”

1. MOVE BEYOND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY TO PEACE SENSITIVITY

Conflict sensitivity was developed to help address the problem of negative and unintended consequences that can sometimes occur with the implementation of humanitarian and development interventions, especially in conflict-affected contexts. It has helped sensitize implementing actors to the need, and responsibility 1) for understanding the conflict dynamics playing out in a given context; 2) for understanding the interaction between an organization’s intervention and the dynamics of that context, and 3) to act upon that understanding in order to avoid contributing to existing tensions or creating new ones, and to “maximize the potential contribution to strengthen social cohesion and peace”.²

2 CDA, KOFF CS factsheet http://koff.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/koff/Publications/KOFF_Factsheet_Conflictsensitivity_Sept2012.pdf

But, the focus of conflict sensitivity is on the potential role and impact of interventions, and thereby, intervening actors. As such it stops short of what is needed to address the goal of reducing people’s risks and vulnerability, and improving their abilities to become more self-reliant. What is needed is a shift in orientation to one that also takes the broader local system, and the local capacities and resources it both has and requires to break cycles of conflict and need going forward into account. Taking a peace-sensitive approach to humanitarian response adds a focus on the role and impact of local capacities and resources, instead of focusing on the role and impact of outside interventions alone. In doing so, it extends the attention of humanitarian actors beyond immediate conflict and aid dynamics to include medium- and long-term peace impacts.

Implications:

1. **Ensure that a systems view is employed** in the design, planning, and implementation of humanitarian interventions to ensure that the effects of interventions on the system of relationships within a society are taken into account.
2. **Require transition planning** (from humanitarian aid to development assistance) that:
 - Is based on an assessment of local capacities for RVC
 - Is incorporated in programme design from the outset of crisis response, and
 - Includes a risk assessment of potential impacts of the transition on local capacities for RVC.

2. REDEFINE SUCCESS TO INCLUDE RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT CONFLICT (RVC)

Meeting the current humanitarian challenges requires changing the definition of success for humanitarian response from ‘patching up wounds’ to contributing to conditions that will make it less likely for new wounds to be created in the future.

Decades of research and experience have taught us that violent conflict often emanates from long-term dynamics within a society which erode precisely those capacities that enable them to cope peacefully with both internal

and external shocks. Responding to needs alone and endeavouring to return to the status quo ante too often means a return to the conditions that lead to violence in the first place. Likewise, when capacities for social cohesion and trust are fragile or damaged from conflict, societies are vulnerable to violence in response to other types of crisis. Redefining success for humanitarian response to include contributions to RVC opens new opportunities to work on preventing crisis through the way we respond to them.

Implications:

1. **Adopt a more holistic view of humanitarian mandates** to include responsibility for protecting and strengthening local capacities for resilience to violent conflict.
2. **Expand policy and programming considerations of resilience to include an RVC focus**, which moves beyond a focus on livelihoods and economic self-sufficiency and gives explicit attention to three key components: inclusivity, social and political cohesion, and transformation.³

3. ADAPT THE SYSTEM TO ACHIEVE THAT SUCCESS

Given that violent conflict is at the origin of most humanitarian needs, and at the heart of most protracted crises, strengthening resilience to it is a priority with strategic merit for all stakeholders engaging in humanitarian response. But, where there are many competing priorities and issues, interests and urgencies, only what is required is sure to get done.

3 **Inclusion:** improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, who are disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society so as to reduce grievances that animate current or future conflict; **Social and political cohesion:** a society's *resilience to violent conflict* manifests itself in relationships at different levels and institutions of society, both horizontally - between individuals and groups - and vertically - between the population and institutions of the state. Processes of re-stitching the social fabric of relationships damaged by violent conflict, not only serve as retrospective means of adaptation, but also operate as forward-looking and preventive in nature; **Transformation:** the ability of a society to collectively transform relationships in ways that address the factors which enabled conflict to emerge in the first place.

In order to ensure that our collective efforts contribute concretely to resilience to violent conflict, the system must be adapted accordingly. This means moving resilience to the centre of humanitarian programming and policies, as a key set of capacities and conditions around which we shape our goals and actions, and against which we measure and evaluate our impact.

When there are many competing priorities and issues, interests and urgencies, only what is required is sure to get done, therefore this change has to be created at every level.

Implications:

1. **Adapt donor requirements** to establish RVC as a priority outcome area, and to create space for interventions to be both adaptive and responsive to local contexts.
2. **Develop organizational incentives** to create both political and operational requirements and support for activities that identify, assess, and strengthen local capacities for RVC.
3. **Develop professional criteria** to shape staff competencies and evaluate performance to achieve practice change that supports RVC at both organizational and individual levels.

4. COMMIT TO MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration between international and local actors does not inherently lead to strengthening local capacities for resilience. Sometimes it only leads to strengthening the capacities of those actors directly involved, rather than contributing to the resilience of the community or society at large. When the wider social, cultural, and political system is not taken into account, this can lead to a misguided choice of local partners, which can exacerbate dynamics of exclusion, and decrease social and political cohesion. In other cases the involvement of local actors in an international intervention is superficial and only serves to 'tick the box' on participatory approaches, but does not constitute real collaboration that has a bearing on the action itself or its outcomes.

Meaningful Partnerships can be a 'north star' for guiding participation between affected populations and external providers towards the objective of enhancing local

capacities for resilience – not only for direct partners, but for the community or society more generally. Meaningful Partnerships are defined as those that are realized through collaboration between internal and external actors, with an explicit view to strengthening RVC. Translated into specific guidance and tools, this concept can be employed to help ensure that partnerships are composed, designed, conducted, and evaluated with resilience to violent conflict squarely in view.

Implications:

1. **Ensure partnerships are composed with local partners who are selected based on their resilience potential** including their ability to build bridges between different groups and levels in society; their legitimacy and trust among the local community; and with a view to fostering inclusion.
2. **Require partnerships to be designed with a long-term perspective** that treats transitions from humanitarian aid to self-sufficiency and sustainable peace as crucial junctures to plan for from the earliest stages of humanitarian response.
3. **Manage and monitor partnerships to ensure they are conducted in ways that facilitate local agency and leadership, valorise existing capacities, and ensure an adaptation of programming in line with negotiated solutions.** This requires moving beyond classical aid provider-beneficiary relationships and making different kinds of roles available to be played by local actors as well as shared/participatory decision-making throughout the humanitarian response cycle.
4. **Evaluate partnerships for their concrete contributions to resilience to violent conflict** just as systematically and explicitly as they are evaluated for their delivery on results based management criteria.

5. MOVE FROM A “BEST PRACTICE” TO A “BEST PROCESS” APPROACH

Because Meaningful Partnerships are premised upon local capacities for RVC, and RVC varies from place to place, putting Meaningful Partnerships in motion requires an approach that can do two things:

- a. Generate relevant local information, and

- b. Provide a way of applying that information to how Meaningful Partnerships are composed, designed, conducted, and evaluated (see above)

This means shifting from a *best practice* approach to partnerships, to a *best process* approach. “*Best practice* approaches favour learning lessons, generalizing from these lessons, turning them into universal best practices, and then producing guidelines or tools from these practices. By contrast, a *best process* approach ... foregrounds learning about the unique, the specific, and the nongeneralizable, and starts from a premise that — in most cases, — no practice is universally best. Consequently, attention is directed towards generating needed knowledge, building situated theory for action, and assisting with design processes from that new basis of understanding.”⁴

Adopting a best process approach is a commitment to locally informed and adapted programming that is designed to be effective through the use of local knowledge and the involvement of local actors in consequential ways.

Implications:

1. **Adapt existing resilience assessment frameworks** to the particular needs of Meaningful Partnerships in the context humanitarian response.
2. **Support RVC assessment and research** over time, so that mission-critical information is available before crisis strikes (e.g. such as local capacities that can be mobilized in response, resilience potential of possible partners, etc.)
3. **Develop approaches and requirements** for translating resilience findings into the design of policies, programmes and partnerships as a way to ensuring they build from existing RVC capacities.

4 Miller, D., Rudnick, L., Kimbell, L., Philipsen, G. (2010) Conference Report: The Glen Cove Conference on Strategic Design and Public Policy (UNIDIR)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Transformative Agenda for humanitarian response agreed in December 2011 was intended as a set of actions aimed at “improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the collective [humanitarian] response”. Based on the three pillars of Coordination, Leadership, and Accountability, that agenda focused on improving partnership and coordination between and among international humanitarian actors.

Now, the Agenda For Humanity prompts the present reform effort to sharpen attention to the barriers and opportunities for enhanced coordination and collaboration between the international system and local actors. As such, it represents an important shift from focusing solely on the efficiency of the international system to a broader view which includes its effectiveness with regard to positive change in the local context as well.

It will be critical to follow through on this shift to address some of the fundamental challenges the humanitarian system is currently faced with. With humanitarian needs at an all-time high – of which the majority is caused by conflict – and not enough resources available to meet them, crises have to be

addressed sustainably to reduce the needs that confront the international community. Humanitarian actors have a role to play, through the way in which they deliver aid, to support countries’ abilities to emerge from conflict and prevent future strife. This will have to become the new yardstick for the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

In order for collaboration between international and local actors to achieve the desired effectiveness gains for humanitarian response, it must orient towards strengthening local capacities for resilience to violent conflict. These capacities not only enable societies to face adversity and endure, but to transform beyond the issues that allowed conflict to erupt into violence in the first place. Collaboration should therefore not only aim to ensure that aid is more appropriate and accountable to people’s needs, but it should also be a vehicle to strengthen the social and political cohesion needed to work towards more inclusive and independent futures, and manage future crises without violence. By making contributions to resilience to violent conflict part of the definition of success for humanitarian response, Meaningful Partnerships will make concrete steps ‘from delivering aid to ending need’, as the Secretary-General has called for in his Agenda for Humanity.



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