

Integrated Response Approach

Donal Reilly, Director, Technical Assistance, Humanitarian Response Department,
Catholic Relief Services, for discussion, April 2016

The existing 11 cluster humanitarian coordination system was developed out of a need to organize how humanitarian organizations delivered aid, and for the most part has improved the coordination and accountability of humanitarian response activities (Slide1). That being said the Cluster system represents a top down approach to response coordination with a specific focus on organizing by existing aid sectors, and doesn't take into consideration the existing response design and coordination structures that exist in country at the local and national level.

Over the past number of years there has been increased need for a more integrated approach to response design, coordination and financing. The increase in use of multipurpose cash grants has also highlighted the need to move away from a siloed approach, as well as a desire to ensure greater access and participation of local government and civil society and to have a system that is more responsive to the expressed needs of affected populations, which are (in most cases) multi sectoral and vary by location.

Recent discussions within the humanitarian community have focused on how we can ensure better integration of response interventions. In the Secretary Generals' WHS Report, he states that we should 'reinforce and not replace national and local systems'. In addition we should 'enable people to be the central drivers in building their resilience' and doing so we should 'commit to the following in order to move beyond traditional silos, work across mandates, sectors and institutional boundaries and with a greater diversity of partners toward ending need and reducing risk and vulnerability in support of national and local capacities and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda'.

However, instead of the humanitarian community looking at how to adapt the current model to fit a changing response environment and respond to lessons learned, we are suggesting this may be an opportune time for a more fundamental change to the humanitarian architecture - a change that will result in a flexible and integrated structure for response and recovery design, implementation, coordination and financing. A revised system that is responsive to the expressed needs of affected populations and to the extent possible, an extension of existing mechanisms for response and recovery coordination and management.

(Slide 2) Typically during a response humanitarian actors tend to insert (or line) themselves with existing administrative boundaries, i.e. National, Provincial, local Authority, to village/block level (and household). However, NGOs also tend to provide services based on sectoral expertise and donors follow sectoral and time bound funding modalities. This results in a confusing environment with multiple NGOs providing different services in one community, and/or

multiple agencies providing the same services in one community. Other challenges identified include:

- Multiple needs assessments.
- Multiple registrations.
- Duplication of community meetings.
- Formation of competing community committees.
- Patchy delivery of humanitarian services.
- Duplication of operational resources required to deliver aid and services.
- Coordination “burden” – as stakeholders need to ensure leadership for and participation in multiple coordination forums.

In many instances, the current system results in multiple, time consuming and often conflicting conversations between the affected communities and those providing assistance - a frequently cited source of anxiety for affected communities. Promoting participation and mobilization of affected populations is essential, but these efforts must be carried out in a way so as to not cause confusion or even worse – lead to tension or conflict.

How we currently view households in a humanitarian context is often at odds to how we view them in a development context. For example a typical livelihood framework (Slide 3) that we would apply to a development context highlights the interaction between various household assets/capacities as well as external systems and structures in influencing household strategies and outcomes. We need to ensure that we carry this same practice into our humanitarian work to ensure we are not looking at needs alone – in the absence of these key internal and external factors that influence what we do and how we do it. This approach will allow us reinforce and scale existing systems and structures that will have a lasting impact on future resiliency

If we agree that affected households should be the center of response and recovery programming then it is appropriate to have an operational and coordinating model that reflects and enables this approach. A system where the humanitarian community partners with households to enable them to manage their response and recovery. A system that simplifies lines of communication with the affected community and local authorities, identifies clear lines of responsibility for humanitarian actions and the accountability for the quality and effectiveness of those actions. A system that is designed from the bottom up, that is as local as possible and international as necessary.

What may work in some national humanitarian responses is a system that is commonly referred to as the neighborhood approach. This approach was eventually adopted by many NGOs in Haiti to deal with the complexities of an urban environment, and also in Nepal at the request of the government for WASH, Shelter and Livelihood programming.

The key element of a neighborhood approach is having a decentralized multi-sectoral coordination approach with one NGO taking the lead and responsibility for engaging community groups and the local authority in managing response and recovery activities in their neighborhood. A single NGO would take on the responsibility of identifying needs, targeting,

registering participants, and coordinating response activities, either by directly implementing or partnering with specialized service providers.

Key elements of a neighborhood approach;

- Community/household needs centered approach. (bottom-up)
- Committing to accompanying communities through the emergency response and recovery process.
- Operational area defined by existing administrative boundaries.
- Single point of coordination with communities with regards to assistance and services.
- Single point of coordination with the local authorities.
- For the most part the current Clusters will be TWIGs, primarily providing technical information to the Coordinating NGO on appropriate response programming and technical specifications. The Clusters will be responsible for coordinating with line ministries ensuing response activities are in line with government policies and specifications.
 - The Logistic and Communication Clusters continue to have an operational role in providing support across the total operational area.
 - Depending on the context some specialized clusters such as Health may need to have a coordinating role of response and recovery activities
- Coordinating NGOs need to be capable of managing/coordinating multi-sector programming which might include partnerships (or contracts) for specialized services.
- Multi-sectoral funding that supports the specific needs of the area or neighborhood. Ideally funding that is managed at the lowest level.
 - Distributed by zone, not by sector.
 - Rapid start-up funding available to Coordinating NGO.
- The approach needs to be flexible and adapt to the context and responsive to changing needs.

No doubt there are many challenges to be worked out in adapting a neighborhood approach, not least how NGOs would be allocated response areas in a system that is highly competitive, particularly in the early stages of a response. However, if the humanitarian community is genuinely committed to putting affected communities at the center of the humanitarian response operations, then we owe it to these communities to design an operational model that does just that.