



**ICVA Conference  
Monday, 19 March 2012  
Geneva, Switzerland**

## **Adjusting to Reality?**

**14 March 2012**

The humanitarian community, formed by those involved in the delivery of humanitarian response, continues to quickly grow while the boundaries of it, or in terms of who is and who is not part of it are not always clear. In this ever expanding humanitarian community, the different actors' various ways of working may have an impact on the understanding or perception of what would constitute humanitarian action. Furthermore, we have to reflect on how new humanitarian actors and those who have a long tradition in providing humanitarian response relate to each other. What are the implications of the expanding humanitarian community for humanitarian coordination structures at the country level? The bottom line is that the humanitarian community is strengthening its overall impact on the ground in humanitarian settings, however in an increasing number of instances there seems to be less humanitarian access. The main question, therefore, is whether or not we, as a humanitarian community, are able to adjust to this new reality?

Headquarters' perspectives and diplomatic approaches often dominate meetings on humanitarian issues in Geneva. As a result, these discussions do not necessarily resemble or represent the reality on the ground in humanitarian crises. This Conference will try to make a difference, especially this year, by bringing more ICVA members to Geneva, as well as discussing the theme of the rapidly changing reality in humanitarian settings on the ground.

The Conference will take on a slightly different format to previous years. Our aim for the Conference is that it will provide an opportunity for interactive discussion and an open dialogue. Participants will be seated at tables with the expectation that they will engage with each other, while the speakers will provide short introductory remarks to discuss their respective interventions, and also interact with the participants with the help of a professional facilitator (Ms Gillian Martin Mehers). The goal is to bring different perspectives to reflect on the current reality of humanitarian response and to have an enriching dialogue on the way forward for the humanitarian community.

### **Session 1: Setting the Stage**

The first session will open with welcoming and introductory remarks from the Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee, Mr. Paul O'Brien. The Permanent Representative of Qatar in Geneva, H.E. Ambassador Ms Al-Thany will focus her remarks on the changing humanitarian



landscape from the perspective of a country whose role in humanitarian action has been rapidly growing. It is expected that she will refer to recent humanitarian crises in which her country has been actively involved. The 'HopeFor' initiative launched by Qatar in June 2010 will also be covered in her presentation. Following her remarks, participants will be asked to discuss their expectations for the day.

One essential aspect that traditionally binds the humanitarian community is that it finds a shared foundation in the principles and standards underpinning humanitarian response. The question is, however, whether or not all humanitarian actors apply these same principles. Towards the end of the 2011 ICVA Conference, a rather radical suggestion was put forward: perhaps the only truly universal humanitarian principle is that of impartiality. Is it realistic to expect all actors to be impartial as they deliver aid? Or are there different values and principles that drive their responses? Participants will also be asked to discuss this issue as part of the first session.

### **Session 2: The Reality Check**

The second morning session will explore the current reality and look at what forms or ways humanitarian response is delivered today by bringing various practitioners together from different backgrounds. Mr. Richard Blewitt will moderate the presenters and initiate discussions on the motivations for their work, their objectives, and ways of working. What other motivations have driven them to respond in certain areas at certain times? What do they see as working well? They will also reflect on the "traditional" humanitarian actors and the coordination structures that often come with a humanitarian response. The efforts of national or local NGOs are often overlooked by those structures and the international actors. Is there a way for both "traditional" and "new" actors to work together effectively to meet needs? What has to change in order to make overall humanitarian response more effective? The participants will also be involved in this dialogue.

### **Session 3: The Way Forward?**

(part 1)

Once the scene has been laid by the speakers from the morning session, we would like to explore what this reality means for the future. The session will feature a set of stories demonstrating how organizations are responding (or should) respond to the changing reality of humanitarian response. How should humanitarian agencies adjust to the changing reality and what should humanitarian response look like in the future? Three speakers will be invited to reflect on these questions. Participants at the tables will also be asked to discuss these issues and come up with examples on how (their) humanitarian agencies are adjusting or should adjust to the changing environment.

(part 2)

The second part of this session will dig even further by reflecting on what the new reality means for humanitarian responders? Last year, the UN humanitarian system and its partners embarked on an ambitious agenda, known as the “Transformative Agenda,” to improve humanitarian response. This agenda has received much support from (donor) governments. It can be found on the IASC’s website: [www.humanitarianinfo.org](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org) and ICVA’s website: [www.icva.ch/doc00005182.html](http://www.icva.ch/doc00005182.html).

Another basic aspect of this agenda is the idea that the humanitarian community will work from one (‘master’) plan. The question, however, lies in whether or not all the different ways of working can be reconciled and be fit in one strategic plan for the entire humanitarian community? Do they need to be merged as this may risk a compromise on the basis of the lowest common denominator? Or do we simply accept that the maximum achievable goal in coordination is to understand what each of the actors is doing in order to decide on our own actions?

The risk is that the “Transformative Agenda” may widen the gap of those who, for various reasons, do not necessarily buy in to UN-leadership and that multiple structures for coordination may be set up. Does the new reality mean that we have to turn the current humanitarian architecture on its head? Or will the current humanitarian architecture become increasingly irrelevant? What new opportunities are created by having new actors joining existing coordination mechanisms? What role do the Member States of the UN have in supporting the architecture that the UN puts in place in humanitarian responses? Participants will be asked to come up with (realistic) ideas on the best way forward for the humanitarian community.

### **Closing Session**

It is not expected that the Conference will come out with an action plan or road map of the way forward, but instead, it is hoped that organisations and governments will use the reflections of the day internally. The following two days after the Conference ICVA will hold its General Assembly, which is expected to adopt a new strategy and to translate this strategy into concrete activities. It is intended that the discussions and suggestions that have been raised during the day will influence future thinking in ICVA, and, hopefully, elsewhere in the humanitarian community.