

Discussant Questions on Panel 2.14. The Contribution of Non Governmental Actors in Disasters.

Three questions were posed and the audience were invited to respond first. Comments are listed after each question.

Question 1. (Received from Tim Randall of Cranfield University by email).

Bearing in mind the potential damage that could occur by unprofessional health workers, particularly in the Psycho-Social sector, is it not appropriate for the UN to support recipient Governments by recommending which NGO's should be allowed to practice and any constraints that should apply to them and equally recommending which NGO's should not be allowed to practice?

- The question was considered to be patronising and while it was recognised that the government had a responsibility for accreditation of NGO's and for WHO to play its normative role in setting standards, the UN would be ill advised to play a gatekeeper role over NGO's. NGO's were in many respects better able to ensure appropriateness because they were able to innovate and initiate in ways that governments and other actors were not.

Question 2.

The Tsunami has swelled the coffers of UN agencies and NGO's alike with more money now available than can be spent. This potentially adds to the tendency for supply driven rather than demand driven responses. How can NGO's ensure demand is matched with supply and supply matched with demand?

- Good NGO's whether INGO's or Community Based Organisations are first and foremost accountable to the people they aim to serve, and thus can ensure a people centred, needs based response.
- Even if NGO's make mistakes, they are often better able to embrace errors in the interest of continuous improvement. It is better to 'do the right thing wrong than to keep doing the wrong thing right' (Russell Ackoff), because strategic effectiveness is ultimately the better use of resources than operational efficiency.
- NGO's are often far more attuned to the availability and mobilisation of 'non-conventional' – the intangible resources of wisdom, solidarity, know-how, historical memory, commitment etc – which are not easily measured and quantified but which (in contrast to the conventional resources of money and political power) are depleted by *non usage*. People need more than replenishment of material goods lost following a disaster, and local NGO's can play an invaluable leadership role in activating the non-conventional resources latent in communities affected by disasters, to ensure a balanced equilibrium between endogenous and exogenous resources, especially in the recovery and reconstruction phase.

Question 3.

How can NGO's ensure that disasters ultimately have a developmental impact and that emergency relief interventions do not undermine self-reliance?

- The first responders to a disaster are not NGO's but the affected community itself, but once NGO's arrive their priority should, from the outset to ensure affected people remain the protagonists of their own development. Communities are always in a process of development before the disaster and the arrival of emergency external aid, and hopefully will continue to develop after the disaster.
- For the disaster to have a beneficial effect NGO's need to enter a disaster situation with a commitment to stay the distance and not abandon the community once the urgent relief phase is over.
- While NGO's often have to position themselves in the public eye as 'problem solvers' to raise money, development is not about 'fixing' but 'facilitating'. The process is more important than the product, and while governments are often wary of the ideological or missionary interest of NGO's, ultimately the more an NGO (or any organisation for that matter) is *value-based* the more likely it will be *value-adding*.

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