The IASC Transformative Agenda
Information Note for NGOs

April 2012
from SCHR, InterAction, and ICVA

Background

The 'transformative agenda'[1] is the current terminology being used to define the processes underway within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to address the operational challenges related to the 2005 "humanitarian reform" process. It also is meant to improve coordinated responses that meet the needs of, and are accountable to, affected populations. The process, initiated at the IASC heads of agency ("Principals") level in December 2010, was in response to the well-documented failings of the international community in response to the Pakistan floods and Haiti earthquake.

Over the past 15 months, much of the work has process-focused, and while far from the measure of success we require, it has been useful in shifting attitudes and creating consensus on priorities – particularly among UN agencies. Many of the issues under discussion don't fit neatly in one category. The broad strokes of the transformative agenda are highlighted in a 'chapeau' document and an 8-page detailed action plan for 2012 (49 actions to be completed by July IASC Working Group meeting).

What is included in the transformative agenda?

- The transformative agenda is focused around the three themes of leadership, coordination, and strategic systems. Accountability to affected populations is meant to be cut across the three themes.
- It is initially focusing on large-scale, sudden-onset large-scale disasters (referred to as "level-3 or L3 emergencies") that require a "system-wide" mobilization.
- A range of processes has been agreed, in principle, for both headquarters and field levels, which should result in faster and more appropriate responses.
- It is meant to be used in a broader range of contexts over time, i.e. slow-onset and smaller scale disasters.
- By and large, what is being currently developed is not particularly new as it builds largely on existing mechanisms and practices introduced since the 2005 humanitarian reform process: it consists of improvements, clarification, and sometimes (hopefully) simplification of existing practices.
- Two areas that are relatively new (on the UN side at least) are a strong commitment to accountability to affected populations (that has yet to translate into practice) and a more robust and rapid mechanism to respond to level-3 emergencies.
- While the focus has been so far on level-3 emergencies, further discussions will take place within the IASC about how some of the proposed instruments should apply in non L-3 situations.

Key Elements of the transformative agenda

Many aspects of the transformative agenda remain in draft, as details continue to be worked out within agencies. A number of elements related to level-3 emergencies will be presented for finalization and adoption at the upcoming IASC Principals' meeting on 24 April in New York. This paper aimed at NGOs tries to present the key elements that may have the greatest impact within a response.

---

[1] The 'transformative agenda' heading was attached to the process at the end of 2011, though flowed from the processes underway throughout 2011.

Leadership
- Includes an inter-agency rapid response mechanism to deploy strong, experienced senior humanitarian leadership to guide the humanitarian response from the outset of a major crisis.
- One element of this inter-agency rapid response mechanism is that the NGO community can identify a senior NGO person to be part of the team to go in and support NGO coordination.
- For large-scale emergencies, the UN will appoint a very senior Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) from the L-3 HC roster.
- The concept of "Empowered Leadership," which means the HC will have more authority over the allocation of resources, planning and priority setting, deployment of clusters, and advocacy for a period of 3 months in an L-3 emergency. Cluster Lead Agency heads will report directly to the HC on the achievements of cluster objectives, as outlined in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) strategic plan.

Coordination
- Reference Modules on clusters are being developed that strive to be clear and concise.
- There is agreement that clusters should only be activated following a determination of need by the HC and HCT, which is an important improvement, and that they should be "focusing on delivery of results, rather than process". This improvement is putting into place what was originally agreed under the 2005 humanitarian reform.
- There is an expectation from UN agencies, supported by the last cluster evaluation, that the efficacy of clusters would be enhanced by sharing leadership responsibilities with NGOs, particularly at sub-national level. NGOs maintain different views on this point.
- Other elements of the coordination/clusters section of the agenda relate to Minimum Commitments for Cluster Participation (which were formulated by the NGO consortia and then taken to the UN) and strengthening NGO representation in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)   .

Strategic Systems (Accountabilities)
- Focuses largely around the role of the HC, HCTs, and clusters. The main assumption is that peer accountability can be enhanced on the basis of clearer, concise, and time-bound strategies that everyone agrees to deliver.
- The aim is to minimize misunderstandings and create transparent and realistic expectations with regard to the commitments of the HC, HCT members, and cluster lead agencies (CLA).
- Implementation of the plan should be monitored, and cases of under-performance against the agreed plan should be addressed and referred to the global level if necessary.
- The strategic plan – to be developed quickly in an L-3 emergency – would be informed by common needs assessments, and form the basis of Common Humanitarian Action Plans (CHAPs) and Consolidated Appeals Process (CAPs).
- Finally, the real-time evaluations (RTEs) will be made timelier and more targeted, so that they can feed directly into management and decision-making at HC/HCT level.

What are the possible implications for NGOs on-the-ground?
- **L3 declaration**: NGOs would be involved in the declaration by the IASC Principals of an L3 emergency (within 48 hours of a disaster) and would be expected to share analysis at HQ level, particularly through the NGO consortia, with the IASC Principals.
- **Inter-agency rapid response mechanism:** Within 72 hours the agencies will ensure senior and experienced staff are en route to the affected area. NGOs will need to identify (a) senior NGO colleague(s) to be part of the mechanism to support NGO coordination.

- **Strengthening leadership**: There should be mechanisms put into place to ensure that there is a 360 feedback mechanism within HCTs so that the leadership of the HC and the HCT can be improved. NGOs will also be to contribute to the appraisal of the performance of HCs at the global level through the consortia. The first exercise is taking place on 12 April. The format of this process may alter depending on the results in April.
- **Common needs assessment**: there will be an expectation on the NGOs to engage with the Multi-Cluster Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA) where appropriate, or at least to ensure greater coordination of needs assessment, analysis, and preliminary scenario declaration.
- **HCT**: on the basis of the HCT representative arrangements, it is expected that in every context, there is sufficient representation of NGOs at the table. Through this mechanism, NGOs will be able to contribute to the development of a strategic plan for L3 situations that forms the backbone of the appeal and planning documents. NGOs on the HCT will be asked to represent the wider interests of the NGO community and not just their own NGOs' interests.
- **Clusters**: there is an agreement that clusters will be activated only on the basis of needs on the ground (rather than institutional needs) and that they will be focusing on delivering results. The minimum commitments for cluster participation at country-level should be used as guidance. There will be an expectation for NGOs to co-lead some clusters, particularly at sub-national level. There will be important guidance developed on "de-activating" clusters so that they do not continue endlessly.
- **Accountability to affected populations**: as the overarching purpose of our work, it will be important that that these commitments are taken seriously at field level and are incorporated into planning. In addition, the piloting of the draft Operational Framework for Accountability to Affected Populations will be important

What is the process for this moving forward?
- Continual engagement with consortia members to ensure operational ground-truthing.
- 'Champions', including the 3 NGO consortia, continue to track the action points and push for progress.
- IASC Principals Meetings, the IASC Working Group, the IASC Principals Steering Committee,[2] and IASC subsidiary bodies are all focused on the transformative agenda and moving it forward.
- Learning from, and testing within the field is also under discussion, with a mission to South Sudan scheduled from 11-14 April. In addition, a simulation exercise by IASC Principals took place on 27 March to test procedures in an L-3 emergency.

What are some constraints?
- The field voice is missing, or very limited.
- Number of documents under review, with the time being given for reviews being incredibly tight. It is very hard to gather member feed-back (consortia working together to develop common messaging so as to help guide process clearly, with this note being the first such effort).
- Momentum – time and ability to see this through, especially at an incredibly rushed pace set out by the IASC Principals. The flip side to this challenge: we need to get items out and test them.

Critical steps as we move ahead
- Field-Level – putting the agreements and improvements into action.

---

[2] Anthony Lake (UNICEF), Antonio Guterres (UNHCR), Amir Abdullah (WFP), Bruce Aylward (WHO), Robert Glasser (SCHR), Joel Charny (InterAction), and Valerie Amos (OCHA, ERC)

- Messaging – clear and consistent communication on the transformative agenda with field colleagues.
- Leadership – of the UN Agencies and the NGO community.
- Representation – we need to find ways to work together better at representing wider interests.
- Accountability to affected populations must be part and parcel of the transformative agenda.
- We must engage at the cluster and HCT level and demand an enabling environment guided by a common goal of strategic results that lead to accountability for affected populations (we must not let clusters become funding conduits alone).