

Partnering Across Non-Governmental Organizations

Improving Partnering Across International NGOs

Challenge

When a disaster hits, many countries rely on the services of non-government organizations (NGOs) to help with emergency medical, shelter, food and other services. Each NGO has its own goals and funding for providing food, medicine, child support and so on. In major disasters, these services need to be coordinated yet NGOs operate functionally independent of one another. The result can be ineffective delivery of services or worse. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (IFRC) provides relief services at the community level. It is their volunteers who often see the lack of coordination of aid efforts first hand.

Approach

The Secretary General of the IFRC, invited representatives of various international NGOs and key UN programs to meet together with the Secretary Generals of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies from around the world. The focus of this meeting was to be identifying ways to improve coordination using examples from recent experience with tsunami and pandemic flu responses. Approximately 80 participants meet for a day in Paris to improve partnership and advocacy processes.

The challenge facing the design of this meeting was that the desired outcomes could only be achieved if participants were able to really share their experiences with one another, challenge past practice and arrive at new directions. Yet diplomatic convention dictated that a pre-drafted communiqué be given participants for their approval. In addition, tradition and politics meant that certain people would be expected to address the assembled group.

Our approach was to structure the meeting to group presentations together into four panels of three presenters each. These panels would spend part of an hour addressing an overall question relative to the conference focus, and then the mixed groups of participants would develop their own replies and questions and these were subsequently shared back with the panelists for their comments. This set up a series of dialogues at both the small group and whole group levels. Based on the dialogues and their own experiences, participants then created a set of recommendations for successful partnerships.

Rather than develop a memorandum of the expected outcomes in advance, speaker comments and participant replies were recorded in real time. A summary of the day was provided to participants by the end of the meeting and a full report followed several weeks later.