



A suggested cooperation framework for humanitarian INGOs working with local governments in disaster contexts

Speech by Richard Blewitt for the Study afternoon 'Cooperation with Government Structures in Humanitarian Assistance'

February 5, 2004, The Hague

Introduction

Who makes up local government?

- Local government departments, lots of opportunities for engagement
- Local political leaders
- Security and military authorities
- The influence of powerful business interests

What is the changing terrain within which humanitarians end up operating?

- Local/global connections
- Modern war economies
- More local government decentralisation
- Local religious groups/associations/burial societies, etc.
- Weak capacities of government to provide services
- More INGOs there before the disaster/conflict, some politicised
- Growing attention to a rights-based approach
- Varying donor interests

What about the notion of failing states? What are the implications for local government in such circumstances?

- Capacity gaps in local government are often a very significant constraint, and when mixed with the poverty of many contexts, the baseline within which one is intervening is often tough and shocking
- There are health challenges e.g. HIV/AIDS, access to clean water, etc.

- Local government officials are often frustrated by their own lack of resources and a sense of INGO overcapacity.

How might local government officials see INGOs?

- A sense that INGOs have a persona of misplaced superiority
- Expatiate dependency, some of who are inexperienced
- Insufficient use of local staff in key positions
- INGOs are foreign with political/donor-driven agendas, they often adopt geographically limited approaches
- They all too often pay limited attention to local partners
- An opportunity to gain employment/contracts

How do beneficiaries see and understand INGOs and local governments?

- A question that is insufficiently explored and hard to get at

Three strategies for working with local governments in conflict situations

1. Ensuring you have the capacity to understand and relate to your context and all the key local stakeholders

- Perception is everything, professional and personal morality and behaviour are critical to positioning
- Systematically work to build local knowledge and understanding, culture, power systems, political realities, security management arrangements, centre/periphery relationships are key.
- Make an ongoing investment in information to position your humanitarian action.
- Often the UN will be there, this needs to be factored into your analysis.
- Invest in relationship building (carefully).
- Local accountability often intertwined with security, political, humanitarian and development concerns. This makes positioning around neutrality, impartiality and independence difficult to do in the field.

2. Deciding on your role in “protection” and having the capacity/competencies to do this work

- 'Responsibilisation' to denunciation
 - Governments have responsibilities linked to laws and providing rights and meeting the needs of civilian populations.
 - INGOs can work with governments to support them to take responsibilities, care should be taken to avoid substitution.
 - There is a need to have a line in the sand and clarity of dialogue from the start on what are the limits of the INGOs response.

- Protection as a concept sounds good, but there are many practical nitty gritty realities (security, authority, understanding) that mitigate impact.
 - IHL and other protective legal frameworks/or guidelines on IDPs and the SPHERE humanitarian charter. The challenge is how to support front line staff to draw on legal/guidance frameworks.
 - Denunciation is a last resort.
- 3. Securing appropriate relationships to ensure the provision of independent humanitarian aid**
- The overall challenge of squaring the idea of independent humanitarian action, with working with the local authorities who often control access and the framework of response, is a big one.
 - The right relationship has to be built with local authorities around an agreed view on needs and the preferred targeting approach.
 - Substitution effects are a critical matter for local parties, as INGOs often leave legacies.
 - INGOs often engage insufficiently with coordination or cooperation frameworks, this is a complex area but the consequences of poor coordination/cooperation can be serious for the victims.
 - Working relationships with the authorities to secure management are necessary for effective humanitarian aid.

INGOs in emerging post-conflict situations, and their role in supporting local capacities

- **Managing exit**
 - “Transition” is a relative and contested concept
 - Often there is a poor fit between local government capacities and INGO directions and capabilities
 - INGOs often only face up to the question of the role of local parties after the event, this makes hand over to local government/other local parties very difficult, there are many failures that are currently not well documented.
- **Maintaining our presence: are we resources driven or needs driven?**
 - There are many drivers for INGOs, not all are principled in nature and we need to be honest with ourselves.
 - It is always possible to continue to justify substitution, but is this the right thing to do?

Conclusions

Local governments are not monolithic; there is a need for careful analysis and positioning. The environment has changed significantly in the last ten years with regard to local authorities and their environment. These trends and changes have serious consequences for INGOs, which are both positive and challenging.

INGOs continue to pay too little attention to local partners who can and should be playing much more significant roles in many humanitarian responses around the globe. Local capabilities can play a key role in reducing the negative effects of conflicts and can establish different relationships with local authorities.

It is important to take a stakeholder perspective that views INGOs through the lens of other parties, and then a better strategy to locate independent humanitarian action can be developed.

Investing in developing intelligence and maintaining capabilities for this work is critical to be able to uphold humanitarian principles. Complex local relationships are rarely ever fully understood by most INGOs, optimum ignorance is a useful concept. Networking and developing a strong political analysis and understanding is critical to be able to maintain humanitarian principles.

Having a clear policy framework on protection is critical, but equally as important is the calibre of the personnel we deploy in our front line operations. We all too often overstate our protection capabilities.

Independent humanitarian relief necessitates setting out some rules of the game and developing solid working relationships with local authorities. Moving into transition contexts is often poorly handled by many INGOs who leave the legacies of their activities for local authorities to deal with.

Clarity of positioning and the visibility of independent humanitarian aid are important, for both INGOs and local NGOs, but this should not equal non-engagement with local government.

The moral standing of our people and their actions lie at the heart of setting standards which local parties can identify with and respect. Being predictable and dependable are key characteristics that support effective humanitarian work and interaction with local governments.