

IASC Working Group
Session 5: Creating Essential Links: Diversity and Inclusivity
ICVA Background Paper as of 22 March 2017

Background:

Based on a request from the IASC secretariat, ICVA has developed this background paper to feed into the discussion of Session 5 of the IASC Working Group (WG) meeting on 5 and 6 April 2017 on *Creating Essential Links: Diversity and Inclusivity*. Consultations – focused on IASC partners – have been limited, given the short timeframe, but conversations were held with several individuals with long experience within the IASC.¹

Introduction:

The scope of the paper is limited to looking at diversity and inclusivity. These issues are considered in the current framework of the IASC and, as such, the paper does not address broader – although relevant – questions about how the IASC is structured, operates, its effectiveness, or its relevance. The paper focuses on three areas: 1) to what end diversity and inclusivity?; 2) what has been tried in the past and what lessons can be drawn; and 3) proposing some potential ways forward for the IASC WG to consider.

The discussion of how to create essential links with the broader humanitarian eco-system to ensure diversity and inclusivity is taking place in the context of numerous changes in the broader environment. Approaches by governments to humanitarian response are shifting. The UN Secretary-General is pushing for greater collaboration between the various parts of the UN system, the so-called “New Way of Working.” Advocacy on localisation continues by many and was further advanced at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). Humanitarian access and principles continue to face challenges. Focusing on how the IASC can create essential links to ensure broader diversity and inclusivity has great merit, – and the upcoming IASC Principals Retreat in April presents particular opportunities – but **it is a topic that needs to be informed by the broader context, past attempts to address the issue, and the overall framework of the IASC.**

Diversity and Inclusivity: To What End?

While the IASC was created by a UN General Assembly resolution, **it is one of the few UN entities to which non-UN organisations are invited to participate on a standing or ad hoc basis.**² The IASC currently consists of organisations and/or networks with a global footprint. Some of those networks, like ICVA, have increased their global reach over the years. There is often the perception – rightly or wrongly – that the IASC is an “exclusive club,” which provides some sort of humanitarian legitimacy, particularly with donors. At the same time, **those in the IASC are aware of its strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and limitations.**

With the WHS and developments in technology that enhance communications, the IASC seems to have come under greater scrutiny. There have been increased calls for more inclusivity and diversity

¹ Discussions took place with current and former IASC secretariat staff; ICRC; ICVA staff; current and former InterAction staff; FAO; SCHR; UNHCR; former UNICEF staff; and WFP.

² Paragraph 38, General Assembly Resolution 46/182, 1991: “38. *An Inter-Agency Standing Committee serviced by a strengthened Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator should be established under the chairmanship of the high-level official with the participation of all operational organizations and with a standing invitation to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the International Organization for Migration. Relevant non-governmental organizations can be invited to participate on an ad hoc basis.*”

of “non-Western” actors despite the fact that the IASC is a UN – and, therefore, global – entity. Over the years, there have been several conversations about how to make the IASC more inclusive and diverse. The IASC was set up to “strengthen coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance” and the IASC was called upon to meet “as soon as possible in response to emergencies.”³ **If more people are brought around the table for the appearance of inclusivity, it will not necessarily result in more effective humanitarian responses, which should remain at the heart of the IASC. However, ensuring a *diversity of perspectives and thinking* is essential to more effective humanitarian response.**

The IASC has an opportunity now to respond to the changing environment and to look for ways to bring in the experience, expertise, and knowledge of a variety of actors – whether donors, affected governments, representatives of affected populations in all the diversity, civil society organisations, regional organisations, private sector actors, etc. – depending on the emergency or topic. **A more flexible approach to IASC engagement with diverse and relevant actors – which has been discussed in the past – could go a long way to bringing in other perspectives and thinking.** The viewpoints of many actors can be brought to the IASC through different modes, even if they are not IASC members or standing invitees.

If all the various associated parts of the IASC are considered – i.e. not only the Principals, WG, and Emergency Directors Group (EDG), but also Humanitarian Country Teams, clusters, inter-cluster coordination groups, and regional IASCs – then **there are numerous opportunities and entry points to bring in different thinking and perspectives from a range of actors.** Technology now allows an even greater set of options and means to bring different actors into relevant conversations so that humanitarian response can be informed from different angles and perspectives. As the 2014 IASC review noted, the IASC “must allow for a degree of flexibility and decentralisation of its structures and view itself more as part of a network of partners and a versatile coalition of expertise that harnesses diverse experiences and perspectives to deliver a humanitarian response to those in need.”⁴ Ultimately, the answer to the question, “diversity and inclusivity: to what end?” is that **a greater diversity of thinking is necessary to effectively address the issues and challenges facing humanitarian action.**

Learning from Previous Attempts to Make the IASC More Inclusive and Diverse

Over the years, the IASC (in its different bodies) has tackled a number of issues and has made progress on many of them. Many of those issues started as ideas that were discussed at the Principals or WG, which then were taken forward in smaller groups or subsidiary bodies, where a range of actors – beyond the IASC organisations – were engaged.

Recommendations and agreements, dating back to the 2003 external review of the IASC, have been made on how to make the IASC more inclusive. A non-exhaustive list of different IASC discussions that have looked at inclusivity and diversity is annexed. Some of those have worked, for example, greater NGO representation in HCTs (although national NGOs continue to be underrepresented). There are also **numerous examples of how the different IASC subsidiary bodies (Task Teams and Reference Groups) bring together a broader range of actors beyond the formal “IASC membership.”** The formulation of the “IASC Plus,” which is being used in the follow-up to the Grand Bargain, brings together those represented in the IASC with donors and NGOs outside of the IASC. These meetings use on-line tools to allow participants to join conversations from around the world.

³ Paragraph 38, General Assembly Resolution 46/182, 1991.

⁴ Pantuliano, Sara et al., *Review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee: Requested by the IASC Principals Steering Group*, ODI, November 2014, p.6.

Other decisions, such as **increasing “the IASC’s engagement with regional organizations by inviting them to IASC meetings as relevant”⁵ or “External actors should be invited to join WG discussions on particular topics to encourage innovative thinking,”⁶ have not been moved forward consistently.** The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) was an example where greater inclusivity brought together a broad range of NGO heads from around the world with the IASC Principals. While successful in getting more voices around the table and adopting the *Principles of Partnership*, the GHP fell to the wayside largely because of a lack of interest and leadership.

Looking back at these various discussions, there was always a clear willingness to be creative and to find new ways to engage with a broader range of actors. Decisions were taken, action points agreed, but then the follow-up did not necessarily happen on a consistent basis. In other cases, like with the GHP, new leadership had different priorities.

Many of the discussions that have taken place related to inclusivity and diversity have been as a response to concerns. **What is essential to consider is how inclusivity and diversity of the IASC can lead to more effective humanitarian response, which is the main objective** (not the other way around).

A consistent and long-standing challenge is that of explaining what the IASC does, how it operates, and ensuring that the language is accessible to all. For years, the NGO networks, for example, have struggled to find ways to get their members interested in the IASC. Often times, a few topics at a meeting may be of interest to individual NGOs, but other topics may not be seen to have relevance to their work. Finding more flexible ways to engage with different actors on different topics is essential.

The modalities currently exist for the Chairs of IASC bodies to invite or engage non-IASC entities into discussions. There is also the option for the Chairs of the IASC bodies and IASC organisations to engage with different actors to better reflect ideas of the topics and issues that they would like to see discussed (within the IASC framework). While it has happened in the past – for example when the Executive Secretary of the Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel Region was invited to the IASC Principals meeting in December 2013 to discuss the importance of resilience to the humanitarian community – such engagement could happen on a more regular basis and be better prepared to ensure that there are more views and ideas brought in, beyond the IASC, and that those interacting with the IASC also get value from their engagement.

Potential Ways Forward

There are numerous ways for the IASC to reach out to the broader humanitarian eco-system to ensure more inclusivity and diversity of thinking. No single option provides a “silver bullet,” but different attempts can help to make the IASC more inclusive and diverse in its actions and responses.

- 1) **Improve Communications:** Find ways to better communicate what the IASC is, what it does, and what ways humanitarian organisations can engage (for example, through subsidiary bodies, through HCTs, through clusters, etc.). There should be more honesty about the role of the IASC and the fact that it is mainly a UN entity. At the same time, this fact should be complemented in communications by the opportunities to influence the way UN functions.
- 2) **Dispel the Myths around the IASC:** Many of the criticisms about the IASC are a result of the slightly “mysterious” nature of what it does. At its heart, the IASC is a UN creation set up by the General Assembly, with an explicit standing invitation to ICRC, IFRC, and IOM. The NGOs

⁵ *Summary Record*, IASC Principals Meeting, April 2012.

⁶ *Summary Record*, 87th IASC WG, 29-30 October 2014.

around the table bring an important perspective on humanitarian response. UN agencies have various other forums in which they can move agendas, but the IASC does provide an opportunity to engage with the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and some NGOs through their networks. Highlighting that unique function of the IASC can help put in perspective what the IASC can – and cannot – realistically achieve. The formality, terminology, and jargon of the IASC often can discourage engagement so there is a need to make the IASC more accessible to other actors. Engaging in regular conversations with governments (whether affected governments or donor governments), NGOs, civil-society organisations, private sector actors, etc. can help people understand what the IASC can/cannot do.

- 3) **More Inclusive and operational Agenda Setting:** When formulating agendas for IASC meetings, bring in topics that are of interest to actors outside the IASC and that are connected to field realities and current humanitarian responses, so that the IASC's thinking is broadened and linked to operational issues. The IASC has the breadth to tackle some of the biggest challenges to humanitarian action and on-going emergency responses, but to do so requires less bureaucratic management of the IASC to allow for more discussions and exchanges, as well as openness to different thinking. It also requires time to bring in the views of relevant players.
- 4) **Invite Different Actors Relevant to Particular Topics:** The Chair should use her/his position to extend invitations to relevant actors to engage on particular topics. They can be invited to attend in-person or by virtual participation at all levels of the IASC.
- 5) **Look to Relevant Regional Networks for Inputs:** (Informal) Regional networks were set up during the WHS, for example by OCHA and ICVA or by ODI, which can provide good examples of how to reach a broader audience and/or provide forums through which to engage a broader range of actors to get a greater diversity of thinking into the issues the IASC addresses.
- 6) **Find Ways to Represent the Current Global Nature of the IASC:** Most organisations sitting in the IASC have a global footprint and they are organisations with a worldwide reach and representations. Their staff comes from around the world. These facts are often not well-represented or acknowledged. IASC organisations can look internally as to how they can also counter the "Western" critique of the IASC, given that they are generally worldwide organisations.
- 7) **Consider What Changes Should be Made:** While outside the scope of this paper, it is important for the IASC (and the WG in particular) to consider what changes would be needed to enable the effective implementation of the different options. By reflecting on how it functions, the IASC could improve its efficiency so as to enable greater inclusivity and diversity.

Annex: Overview of Previous Attempts to Make the IASC More Diverse and Inclusive – Non exhaustive list

2016

- **IASC Principals Dec 2016-** decision to *Convene a Principals-only Retreat to explore propositions on how the IASC can ensure its continued relevance, including through refined working practice, enhanced advocacy and communication, increased engagement at regional, national and local levels and outreach to the diverse humanitarian eco-system.*
- **91st IASC WG**, 25-26 October 2016. “Changing the way the IASC WG works.”

2015

- **89th IASC WG**, 12-13 October 2015. IASC Priorities, Working Modalities And Draft Working Group Workplan 2016-2017

2014

- **ODI, IASC Review**, November 2014
- **87th IASC WG**, 29-30 Oct 2014
- **IASC Principal Steering Group**. Background Paper on IASC Membership, 10 June 2014.

2013

- **Ad Hoc IASC WG**, 18 July 2013, “Rebooting the IASC WG”
- **Ad Hoc IASC WG**, 24 May 2013 – proposal to have WG at Deputy level and to engage with regional organisations – both required further information so no decisions taken.

2012

- **83rd IASC WG**, November 2012: **VI Engagement and discussion with non-IASC actors in humanitarian contexts; VII Revitalizing IASC Working Methods**
- **Principals Meeting, April 2012** meeting: the IASC Principals decided to explore ways of ensuring greater inclusiveness and better regional representation and diversity in the IASC. The Principals determined to increase the IASC’s engagement with regional organizations by inviting them to IASC meetings as relevant.

2011

- **79th IASC WG, July 2011**. Making the IASC Working Group More Effective.

2009

- **75th IASC WG (Nairobi), November 2009**. Guidance for Humanitarian Country Teams.

2008

- **72nd IASC WG, 19-21 November 2008**. Towards a More Strategic and Relevant IASC; and Partnership and other issues from a humanitarian financing perspective.
- **IASC Principals, April 2008**. Note from the Emergency Relief Coordinator on IASC Membership.

2007

- **IASC Retreat, 17-19 September 2007**, Summary of the IASC April 2007 Principals’ recommendations for the Retreat and Record of recent IASC Discussions related to the Retreat; and Status of Recommendations from the External Review of the IASC (2003), Reference Document

2006

- **Principals Meeting, April 2006**, *Strengthening NGOs Participation in the IASC*, A Discussion Paper, and Proposed Outline of the Meeting “Enhancing the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Action, A Dialogue between UN and non-UN Humanitarian Organizations” (12-13 July 2006, Geneva, Switzerland), Prepared by ICVA, Inter Action, and SCHR.
- **64th IASC Working Group, March 2006**, *IASC Country Teams and NGO Representation*.

2003

- **External Review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee**. Commissioned by UNOCHA and produced by B. Jones and A. Stoddard (2003).

2002

- **51st IASC WG, 25-26 November 2002**, AP: “Supported the idea of teleconferencing with the whole country team on country issues, when feasible”.

2000

- **23rd IASC WG, April 2000**: IASC WG Recommendations for Strengthening of the IASC Mechanism and Process endorsed by the IASC on 5 April 2000 covered the mandate of the IASC and presented extensively the concerns of the membership and therefore it was used as the basis for this process of consultations