

Summary Note
IASC Reference Group on Revitalizing Principled Humanitarian Action
Retreat
6 December 2016

This note provides an overview of the main issues discussed at the workplanning retreat of the IASC Reference Group on Principled Humanitarian Action (RG) held in Geneva on 6 December 2016. Participants included: OCHA and NRC (RG co-chairs), WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, InterAction, IOM, Handicap International, Action Contre la Faim, European Interagency Security Forum, British Red Cross, ICRC as well as a representative of the IASC Secretariat. The retreat was facilitated by an external facilitator.

The retreat had three objectives: to develop a shared understanding of the role and added value of the Reference Group; to develop a shared understanding of current trends and priorities in the context of Principled Humanitarian Action; and to identify potential objectives and outcomes for 2017. Several concrete proposals for a 2017 work plan were produced, as well as ideas for further discussion and decision by the RG.

Role and added value of the Reference Group

The first session allowed participants to reflect on key achievements and challenges of the former Task Team on Principled Humanitarian Action. Key achievements were highlighted across the four workstreams of the Task Team: UN integration, counterterrorism (CT), civil-military coordination and risk management.

In terms of stocktaking of the work done by the previous Task Team and lessons learned, the discussion reflected that there were successes when there were concrete objectives and a shared sense of the issue. In addition to that, having a clear broader sense of the IASC agenda was very important. In this regard, regular guidance, dialogue and feedback on priorities and direction from the IASC Working Group (WG) and IASC Principals were seen as helpful.

The Task Team produced many useful deliverables, but often stumbled on follow up, which was usually either a consequence of capacity issues of organisations or unclear leadership and ownership of the issue or task. The wider tendency on the part of the IASC to not implement its own policies/guidance was also noted. In addition, it was reflected that a too broad and unmanageable work plan proved to be a challenge that caused the Task Team to lose focus.

Going forward it was agreed that tasks included in the RG workplan should be relevant to principled humanitarian action in the field, concrete, targeted – producing a tangible product or result – and have clear timelines with lead organisations/individuals to drive them.

The session also included a presentation from the IASC Secretariat highlighting the role of the RG, and how it differs from a Task Team. It was noted that Reference Groups are “communities of practice” loosely defined as platforms for dialogue, policy and guidance development and advocacy. RG are not required to report to the WG– they might be asked for updates but there are no formal requirements. RG’s are also not time bound, and do not have sponsors.

Trends and priorities

The session reflected on a broad range of constraints in the current landscape, including the following: proliferation of non-state armed groups, CT legislation and operations, lack of respect for IHL, funding for capacity in high risk areas; donor driven agenda/politicization of

humanitarian system. Enabling factors mentioned included: humanitarian leadership, distinction in roles and mandates, understanding of principled humanitarian action; integrating principles and programmes; capacity to manage risks; and proliferation/diversity of actors (seen both as a strength and a challenge). Supportive mechanisms that can be leveraged were also highlighted including: technology, academic resources and expertise, shared responsibility, dialogue and communication; the changing conversation from security to broader context of risk management. The need to better integrate humanitarian principles in decision-making processes (rather than decisions based on funding) was also noted.

Four key priorities, relevant for individual organisations as well as the RG, were identified as follows:

- Counter-terrorism (CT)/Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)
- Disparity between IHL in principle and practice [There was some discussion about reframing this as ‘improved protection of humanitarian action in accordance with IHL’ however no broad agreement was reached on this. There was consensus that this area needs to be more focused and relevant to PHA. It will require further discussion and a decision from the RG.]
- Donor-driven system and its effect on implementation of humanitarian principles.
- Awareness, application and integration at field level of humanitarian principles + humanitarian access

A number of other issues were discussed (PHA & development/relief nexus, security risk management, humanitarian system and lack of accountability, PHA and localization) but there was broad agreement these were either already addressed through other channels or could be addressed by the RG within its priority workstreams as listed above (for example the RG needs to consider localisation within CT, in terms of implications of CT for local partners). There was agreement that the RG needs to ensure it relates to relevant processes within the IASC (other Task Teams and Reference Groups) and outside the IASC framework which have an impact on humanitarian principles and can be leveraged (such as the Grand Bargain).

RG objectives and outcomes for 2017

The afternoon session identified possible concrete next steps for the key priorities identified. Participants broke out into small groups to identify outcomes, activities/outputs and key actors/platforms to engage with. The key activities were later discussed in plenary and it was agreed it would be developed further following the retreat at the next RG meeting in January 2016.

It was agreed that a draft proposal would be circulated to RG members who will be invited to send feedback to the co-chairs on specific activities, taking into consideration the following factors: relevance (how the activity is relevant to the RG? Where is the RG’s added value, and for whom?) resources (who is going to do it?), products (what tangible product/output is contemplated?) and timeline (by when will it be completed?).

As to Reference Group working arrangements, there was broad agreement to maintain regular short calls (and where possible video teleconference) to update each other on major issues and tasks of the RG. It was agreed to go back to a monthly frequency for the first three months of 2017 - and reassess this in April 2017. There was also some discussion about diversifying the membership of the RG to ensure a broader range of voices.

19 January 2017