

The World Humanitarian Summit: Putting people at the centre

ACT Alliance Humanitarian Policy and Practice Advisory Group (HPPG)
Position Paper for the World Humanitarian Summit



Photo: ACT/NCCP/Ulla Kärki

The ACT Alliance is a coalition of more than 140 churches and affiliated organisations – 75% from the Global South - working together in over 140 countries to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalised people. The Alliance is supported by 25,000 staff from member organisations and mobilises \$1.5 billion a year for humanitarian aid, development, and advocacy. ACT uses the extraordinary reach and trust of its network of faith-based and church-based organizations to promote community resilience at grassroots level, including in hard-to-reach locations.

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Summary

The countdown to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in April 2016 has begun. The aim is to create the momentum to make the humanitarian sector fit for future emergencies.

In this report, the ACT Alliance outlines the priorities for the sector, the need to integrate these priorities with global political processes on Disaster Risk Reduction, Sustainable Development Goals, Financing for Development and Climate Change taking place in 2015, and the actions that are necessary if the sector is to respond to key challenges facing vulnerable communities across the globe.

Following the Asian Tsunami in 2004 the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) called for a 'fundamental reorientation away from supplying aid to supporting and facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities'¹. Ten years later, the kind of radical re-orientation the TEC called for has yet to happen. The ebola crisis in West Africa is another example of why investing in preparedness and national disaster management capacity is essential for preventing and mitigating crises.

As we move towards WHS, the world is experiencing greater disaster risks and a growing number of conflicts due to factors like climate change, rapid urbanisation, poverty, ecosystem decline and diminishing respect for humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law. The lion's share of crises experienced by communities are everyday disasters that do not make headlines but keep people poor and increase vulnerability.

ACT's vision is for a humanitarian system with a bottom-up approach, where resilient communities define their own needs and where local actors (including people at risk themselves) lead the response.

In order to deal with the challenges facing the humanitarian sector, and with a strong overall emphasis on **putting people at the centre**, the ACT Alliance believes the WHS needs to deliver:

- 1. A shift in power towards locally-led response**
- 2. Greater integration and investment in resilience and reducing vulnerability**
- 3. Greater accountability to disaster affected populations**
- 4. Enhanced access to humanitarian assistance and protection in fragile states and protracted crises**

Delivering on these four priorities requires action along 10 lines:

ACTION 1 - Reform the international humanitarian system so it promotes locally-owned responses

ACTION 2 - Reaffirm the Principles of Partnership and apply them to all kinds of partnerships in the extended humanitarian system

ACTION 3 - Secure innovative, flexible and increased financing for locally-led responses, with a target of 20% of humanitarian funding channelled directly to national actors by 2020.

1 Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Synthesis Report, January 2007, J Cosgrave

ACTION 4 – Expand space for civil society in crisis-affected countries, so that empowerment of humanitarian actors and local communities enables improved community resilience and capacity

ACTION 5 – Provide longer term humanitarian funding to allow the necessary resources and time to build resilience and reduce vulnerability, with a target to increase preparedness and risk reduction funding to 10% of humanitarian aid

ACTION 6 – Ensure global events in the coming months take proactive account of the humanitarian challenges

ACTION 7 – Secure system wide standards for Quality and Accountability including certification of major assistance providers

ACTION 8 – Devote the first half-day of the World Humanitarian Summit to listening to the voices of beneficiaries, NNGOs and Southern actors.

ACTION 9 – Reaffirm globally the humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law in complex emergencies

ACTION 10 – Ensure a strong focus on protection led by affected communities’ own understanding of protection needs and priorities

These actions are not simple, but they are necessary if the summit is going to deliver the step change the sector needs.



Photo: ACT/Paul Jeffrey



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Introduction

This paper aims to provoke discussion around four priority areas for action at the WHS and the practical implications of what this would require.

- 1. A shift in power towards locally-led response** - This requires greater investment in local humanitarian capacity and leadership. It requires better support for partnership approaches to humanitarian programming. And it needs innovative financing models that build resilience and support locally-owned response.
- 2. Greater integration and investment in resilience and reducing vulnerability** - The humanitarian and development sectors need to work in a more integrated way to ensure a coherent approach to reducing disaster risk and building resilience within development frameworks and as part of response programmes. This requires including multi-risk analysis within development planning and more integrated approaches to addressing development and humanitarian needs in parallel.
- 3. Greater accountability to disaster affected populations** – This requires more accountable governance structures, greater awareness of gender dimensions, and better adherence to humanitarian accountability best practice.
- 4. Enhanced access to humanitarian assistance and protection in fragile states and protracted crises** – All people affected by conflict have the right to receive humanitarian assistance. This requires affirmation of the primacy of the humanitarian imperative in complex emergencies, and more support to locally-led responses.

Priority Area 1 - A shift in power towards locally-led response

ACTION 1 – Reform the international humanitarian system so it promotes locally-owned responses

ACTION 2 – Reaffirm the Principles of Partnership and apply them to all kinds of partnerships in the extended humanitarian system

ACTION 3 – Secure innovative, flexible and increased financing for locally-led responses, with a target of 20% of humanitarian funding channelled directly to national actors by 2020.

The ACT Alliance supports the idea of an ecosystem approach to humanitarian response where local and international civil society work coherently according to the principle of subsidiarity. At the same time, it is increasingly obvious that investment in local capacity is critical if the resilience and response challenges of the 21st century are to be met. International humanitarian actors have an important role as enablers and facilitators for building capacities of local governments and civil society.

Numerous evaluations of large-scale humanitarian responses have suggested that international actors have ridden rough-shod over local actors. Despite the efforts of the Transformative Agenda, the experience of the ACT Alliance is that the current UN-led humanitarian system is structured in a way that excludes or side-lines local actors. This approach costs and is widening the humanitarian capacity gap. Local capacities are under-utilised, beneficiaries are insufficiently involved and the quality of delivery suffers.

Whilst progress has been made, more effort is needed to ensure structures, decision-making and funding streams are inclusive of local actors. The international humanitarian system should be re-designed and give local actors, including affected populations, a meaningful and prominent role at the very centre of all aspects and phases of humanitarian action. The ACT Alliance asserts the right of local actors (both NGOs and community representatives) to participate in coordination and decision-making processes at local and national level. Local coordination should be the preferred option, with UN coordination structures reinforcing local coordination where local coordination capacity is not sufficient.

The Principles of Partnership must be taken seriously. The Principles go beyond collaboration between the UN and INGOs, and also imply collaboration by the UN with NNGOs, INGOs with NNGOs, between NNGOs and within civil society and communities. (ACT Forums are one positive example of how agencies from the North can collaborate with agencies from the Global South in a spirit of partnership).

For too long the humanitarian sector has been characterized by an aid financing model based on sudden inputs following public appeals which encourages an emphasis on rapid service delivery, exaggeration of the agencies' own importance and understatement of the role of local people. Such a model can create perverse economic and political incentives that work against the investment required to prevent disasters. Countries at risk of regular hazards may come to rely on international humanitarian aid to address crisis risks instead of investing in disaster mitigation strategies which would require domestic financing.

An additional constraint to strengthening local capacity comes from the centralised, risk-averse, top-down controls and procedures favoured by some Government donors, such as:

- **Donor administration cost constraints have unintended consequences** - Administrative cost pressures lead some donor governments to reduce in-house capacity and outsource transaction costs. This can result in preference for large-scale interventions which results in small numbers of large agencies and the UN dominating the response at the expense of smaller local responders.
- **Linear thinking stifles innovation and risk** – Increasing scrutiny of aid budgets in a time of austerity encourages donor governments to emphasize outcomes and payment by results and in arrears. Some donor programme planning approaches imply an unrealistic linear relationship between inputs, activities and results which does not resonate with experience in implementation in the uncertain arena of humanitarian response. The need for certainty of results stifles risk-taking and innovation in programme design and delivery. These approaches suit large actors, who can manage cash flow and financial uncertainty better than smaller local organisations with tighter margins. Donors should be willing to accept more calculated risk if it allows faster response.
- **Compliance requirements distort capacity building** – Meeting reporting, monitoring, evaluation and performance requirements is resource-intensive and requires a high level of skills. This is a challenge to small NNGOs in disaster-affected countries.
- **Unequal playing fields and barriers to entry** – Whilst everyone recognises the importance of local organisations, we have not succeeded in finding ways to fund their work sustainably. Civil society and local actors play the biggest role in the first important days after disasters, but struggle to find sufficient funding for preparedness or response. Direct funding to NNGOs remains at staggeringly low levels. According to Development Initiatives, only 1.6% of the humanitarian assistance that international donors gave to NGOs between 2009 and 2013 was directed to national and local NGOs – representing 0.2% of total humanitarian aid².
- **Simple practicalities block local access to funding** – A number of challenges centre around practicalities that simply block local organisations from accessing funding. Often donor governments fail to translate documents into appropriate working languages - and fail to publicize funding opportunities where NNGOs will see them. Restricted time-frames limit NNGO response. Minimum grant sizes preclude smaller NNGOs from engaging³.

2 *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2013, Development Initiatives*

3 *How can donor requirements be reformed to better support efforts to strengthen local humanitarian capacity*, Start Network discussion paper for the DFID NGO Forum, October 2014, D Hockaday, M Mosselmans, M Noyes, S Lowrie

Priority Area 2 - Greater integration and investment in resilience and reducing vulnerability

ACTION 4 – Expand space for civil society in crisis-affected countries, so that empowerment of humanitarian actors and local communities enables improved community resilience and capacity

ACTION 5 – Provide longer term humanitarian funding to allow the necessary resources and time to build resilience and reduce vulnerability, with a target to increase preparedness and risk reduction funding to 10% of humanitarian aid⁴

ACTION 6 – Ensure global events in the coming months take proactive account of the humanitarian challenges

National governments and international donors should invest in community-led programmes that support vulnerable populations to identify risk management priorities and action plans, and to engage with key stakeholders who can address these.

The ACT Alliance's experience has shown how critical community-based participatory approaches are to bringing together communities to discuss and identify the risks they face and capacities they have to manage them and to programme activities to address these. Participatory Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (PVCAs) are used by a range of aid agencies to support local approaches to disaster risk management and resilience building.

People have a right to be safe from preventable disasters, and delivering on this requires global political agreement and coherence across several development, DRR and humanitarian spheres. Disaster mitigation and resilience-building targets must be fully integrated into global agreements on development, through the post-2015 development process; on climate change, through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; and through the follow-up to the Hyogo Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction. WHS negotiations must reinforce the DRR and resilience-building targets in these 2015 global agreements. There should be a particular focus on commitments across these agreements that invest in local disaster management capacity.

Humanitarian and development donors and financial institutions must increase investment in disaster risk management and resilience programmes, building on what works at a local level.

The experience of the ACT Alliance suggests that **Faith Based Organisations** (FBOs) which work closely within local communities can use their unique strength—the unifying and ameliorative power of shared faith — to facilitate disaster resilience.

Local faith-based networks reach every corner of nations. We live in a global society that is not homogenous. Actors from different faiths must work together to translate spiritual teachings into concrete action for strengthening resilience, reducing risk and responding to disaster.

FBOs and local faith communities (LFCs) have material and social assets, which make them a natural locus for DRR action. Loudspeakers in mosques and bells in churches and temples can be the cornerstone of local early warning systems. Religious buildings often host community disaster planning events and serve as evacuation centres during emergencies. The social assets of FBOs and LFCs typically include volunteer networks and relationships with wider civil society actors.

⁴ *Reform of the international humanitarian system*, December 2004, Hilary Benn, DFID, UK addressing the Humanitarian Policy Group of the ODI

FBOs and LFCs are often first responders in emergencies. In many contexts, they are particularly well-placed to respond in the first few days. They are present even in very remote disaster-affected areas that may be physically impossible for external actors to access. They are also found in communities in weak, fragile or dysfunctional states.

FBOs and LFCs contribute to strengthening resilience by utilising their pre-existing local networks and infrastructure. Their shared identity, social vision, religious narratives and leadership can encourage stakeholders to mobilise, co-ordinate, train and resolve conflict.

The ACT Alliance also stresses the importance of taking into consideration psycho-social aspects in all sectors of humanitarian response, as outlined in the **ACT Guiding Principles on Community Based Psychosocial Support**⁵. Community-based approaches build on existing coping strategies within the community to enhance the resilience of individuals and families. When communities are able to rely on their own resources, long term sustainability for recovery, re-building and development improves significantly. The availability of collective coping strategies, such as funerals, rituals and ceremonies, and social support networks such as supportive families, friends, peer groups and religious and cultural institutions reduce the likelihood of lasting adverse effects after a disaster.

The ACT Alliance also asserts the particular importance of supporting community initiatives that promote women's participation in decision making.

Priority Area 3 - Greater accountability to disaster affected populations

ACTION 7 – Secure system wide standards for Quality and Accountability including certification of major assistance providers

ACTION 8 - Devote the first half-day of the World Humanitarian Summit to listening to the voices of beneficiaries, NNGOs and Southern actors.

Efforts to ensure a greater voice and more power for vulnerable and disaster affected populations must be a priority for the World Humanitarian Summit, including through its consultation process. This is not just because of the moral imperative to be accountable to the people whom we profess to serve, but also because emerging evidence indicates that greater accountability produces more effective humanitarian response⁶.

The ACT Alliance urges the WHS to call for sector-wide adoption of the Core Humanitarian Standard, including verification and an independent certification mechanism accessible to NNGOs, INGOs and other humanitarian actors. We stress the importance of ensuring **certification is accessible to NNGOs**. It is also important that UN organisations' quality and accountability are measured against the same set of parameters as other organisations. These standards can in themselves provide a better framework for coordinated action.

We hope that one verification system will be enough, will overtake the need for a separate institutional quality assurance by each and every donor for local actors, and will be a system which supports learning and dialogue. It is important that any certification model should be cost-effective and affordable by all.

The World Humanitarian Summit should prioritise the participation of disaster-affected communities and their representative bodies, NNGOs and Southern actors in the consultation and agreement of key outcomes. In order to demonstrate the Summit's commitment to shifting the centre of humanitarian gravity

5 *Community-based psychosocial support for ACT Alliance programmes: Guiding Principles*, December 2011, ACT Psychosocial Working Group

6 *Improving impact: Do accountability mechanisms deliver results?* June 2013, A Featherstone

toward the Global South and to putting the voices of beneficiaries front and centre of all humanitarian decision-making, the ACT Alliance calls for the first half-day of the Summit to be devoted to listening to the voices of beneficiaries, the grassroots CBOs that represent them, and other Southern actors.

Priority Area 4 – Enhanced access to humanitarian assistance and protection in fragile states and protracted crises

ACTION 9 – Reaffirm globally the humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law in complex emergencies

ACTION 10 – Ensure a strong focus on protection led by affected communities’ own understanding of protection needs and priorities

The ACT Alliance calls upon the WHS to strengthen commitment to International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the Humanitarian Principles, and the primacy of the humanitarian imperative. Upholding the principles is critical in guaranteeing access to conflict-affected populations in need and protection of civilians

The ACT Alliance recognizes the primary responsibility of states and other relevant authorities to protect and assist those affected by disasters and armed conflict. However, current and future humanitarian challenges emphasize the need for acceptance of cross-border or other ‘non-consensual’ operations to protect, support and assist civilians at risk and in dire need in situations where states do not respect the humanitarian imperative and IHL.

Protection of civilians affected by violence or natural disaster is increasingly recognised as a central component of successful humanitarian work, acknowledging that material assistance alone is not adequate to address the complex needs that people face in emergencies. Protection is concerned with the safety, dignity and rights of people affected by disaster or armed conflict, ensuring that they are free from violence and coercion and are not exposed to deliberate deprivation of the means of survival with dignity. It is the responsibility of all actors that engage in humanitarian work to ensure the protection of the communities they are working to assist. To be effective, protection must build on the needs, priorities and experiences of people at risk themselves. Protection must be central to all stages of response, including within preparedness efforts, immediate and life-saving activities, and longer-term programming.

The ACT Alliance believes that inter-religious dialogue can play an important role in helping to find the correct response in conflict settings. We affirm the potential of inter-religious collaboration to respond better to the needs of the affected population, especially in terms of protection and supporting the most affected and at-risk groups.

Humanitarian crises caused or aggravated by conflict and violations of IHL or international human rights law (IHRL) must have swift and severe consequences for the actors involved. Armed actors must be held accountable under international law for their conduct, and must be held responsible for the financial costs of humanitarian response, recovery and reconstruction.

The WHS must hold individual states as well as the UN Security Council, the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court responsible to end impunity for violations of IHL and IHRL that exacerbate humanitarian crises. States must unite globally around the need for swift, independent and transparent investigations into allegations of violations of international law, support for their findings and implementation of actions identified. (Humanitarian agencies are limited in their contributions by their humanitarian mandate and the humanitarian principle of neutrality).

The ACT Alliance calls upon the WHS to reinforce the centrality to humanitarian effectiveness of protection issues and adherence to humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.



Photo: Agri-Service Ethiopia/Dr Abayneh Leza

The ACT Alliance Humanitarian Policy and Practice Advisory Group comprises Arild Isaksen (NCA), David Korpela (FCA, Nairobi), Ellen Jaka (Christian Care, Harare), Evert van Bodegom (ICCO en KerkinActie), Jacqueline Koster (World Renew, Nairobi), Mark Ohanian (IOCC), Michael Mosselmans (Christian Aid), Minnie Anne Callub (NCCP, Manila), Rosa Maria Matamoros (CIEETS, Managua) and Takeshi Komino (CWS, Tokyo). This paper also benefited from inputs from Daniela Simm and Martin Quack (Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe), Katja Levin (DCA) and Marina Kalisky (Church of Sweden).