

## **Proposal: Piloting the Independent Commission for Voices in Crises (ICVIC)**

### **Introduction**

This note sets out a proposal to pilot an Independent Commission for Voices in Crises (ICVIC). The purpose of the ICVIC is to help shift the international humanitarian response towards one that delivers what people want rather than what it can provide. The ICVIC will pilot approaches to elevating and making more visible the priorities and needs identified by affected people to senior decision makers; and to independently evaluate how well the international humanitarian response delivers against those needs.

### **Background**

In 2021, one in 33 people worldwide needs humanitarian assistance and protection. Almost 80 million people are displaced by conflict and violence, with two-thirds of them displaced within their own country. In the wake of COVID-19, for the first time in over 20 years, extreme poverty is on the rise. This will push many more vulnerable people over the edge, and they will need humanitarian assistance.

The international humanitarian system has responded admirably. Humanitarian assistance and protection save millions of lives each year. But the system is stretched and overwhelmed as the international community consistently fails to tackle the root causes of crises. Humanitarians are responding to triple the number of people, in double the number of crises than 25 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Wars are twice as long as they were in the early 1990s. And the humanitarian system is staying longer than we have ever before.<sup>2</sup>

The cost is expensive. The Global Humanitarian Overview for 2021 seeks USD35 billion – an increase of 400 percent from 2010. Despite donors being more generous than ever, funding is insufficient. Absolute funding has increased but it has failed to keep pace with rising needs, with an average of 40% funding shortfall each year for the past 5 years.<sup>3</sup>

Conflict and geopolitics, climate change and deadly diseases remain the main drivers of humanitarian need. In the absence of a renewed and concerted global effort to address the root causes of crises, the trajectory for the decade is unlikely to change and needs are set to increase. Humanitarian organizations will continue to be in a position of responding to the symptoms of global crises, but never a means to solve them.

However, there is a fundamental weakness in our current international humanitarian system that we have the power to fix. Too often, the people most affected by crises are the people with the least power and influence over the system trying to help them. We need a humanitarian system that is focused on listening to people, delivering what they most need and one that provides them the opportunity to take control of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> UNOCHA, 25 years of humanitarian aid: a snapshot; [SECRETARY-GENERAL LAUNCHES YEAR 2000 CONSOLIDATED INTER-AGENCY APPEALS IN GENEVA | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNOCHA, 25 years of humanitarian aid: a snapshot

<sup>3</sup> [Appeals and response plans 2020 | Financial Tracking Service \(unocha.org\)](#)

If we can find ways to give more voice and control to affected people, we will significantly improve the lives of people caught in crisis, restore people's dignity in the face of dehumanizing circumstances, and make humanitarian action more efficient in the next decade.

Over the past decade there has been high-level recognition that people should have a determinative say over the type of assistance they receive and how they receive it. This has been translated into various commitments and initiatives and has been part of every reform agenda over the past twenty years.<sup>4</sup> Progress has been made. More information is being collected today from people on their needs and how they perceive the assistance they get. Mechanisms have been established to collect feedback and complaints. The use of cash has been scaled up, in part to provide people with more freedom of choice. Accountability to Affected People (AAP) has become a well-cited concept integrated into planning documents and workstreams. Almost 70% of Humanitarian Response Plans articulate an approach to improve AAP.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite these efforts, the impact has been limited. There has been no major change in people's perception of whether they feel listened to, able to influence the aid they receive or that their most important needs are being met. For example, a 2019 survey found that of the 8,400 people in seven countries that were questioned, more than 50 per cent of respondents felt the aid they received did not meet their *most* important needs.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, 56 per cent of people surveyed in Burkina Faso, CAR, Chad, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda, felt the aid they received did not cover their *most* important needs and less than a third agreed that it did. Successive independent annual reviews of the Grand Bargain workstream on the Participation Revolution show that many people still do not feel they are able to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Single organizations or programs may be doing a good job. However, the failure to bring about a collective and consistent improvement across the humanitarian response in most of our operations highlights the underlying and deep-seated obstacles to change that must be addressed.

The humanitarian system has a moral duty to tackle those obstacles. It is rational and efficient to do so. In a landscape of rising needs and less resources the international humanitarian system will not be able to meet all needs at all times. Humanitarian organizations will have to make decisions and prioritize. This makes it even more important for humanitarian agencies to ensure they are listening to people, delivering what people *most* need and how they need it, and can quickly adapt as those needs change.

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<sup>4</sup> Several of these high-level initiatives include: the IASC Principals Commitment on AAP, Core Humanitarian Standards on Quality and Accountability (CHS), commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit and the Participation Revolution Workstream of the Grand Bargain.

<sup>5</sup> HPG, *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020*, [Report Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020.pdf \(odi.org\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> Ground Truth Solutions (2019), [How relevant is humanitarian aid? - Humanitarian Voice Index](#)

<sup>7</sup> HPG, *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020*, [Report Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020.pdf \(odi.org\)](#), p.78; HPG, *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2019* [12734.pdf \(odi.org\)](#) p.47; HPG, *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2018*, [12256.pdf \(odi.org\)](#) p.49.

## Why does the humanitarian system fail to respond to the voices of affected people?

There are many initiatives that have sought to change the behaviour of organizations and the wider humanitarian system to become more responsive to what people are asking for but have struggled to bring about system-wide change for the following reasons:

- **Information is collected but not acted upon.** In many contexts, information is collected by a variety of sources on what people in crisis are asking for and their perceptions of the relevance and quality of aid. The problem is not a lack of information but pulling together the information, analysing it and then making decisions based on it. There is a lack of incentives within the system for humanitarian organizations to solicit and then respond to what people are asking for.
- **The approach is too piecemeal and ad hoc:** Listening and responding to people in crisis has been reduced to a set of activities or ad-hoc initiatives. This has led to some improvement at the individual organizational level, but it is piecemeal. Making sure the overall response is geared around what people are asking for requires a collective approach. Organizational level initiatives are important but not enough.
- **Conflicts of interest:** Operational organizations are the ones seeking feedback from people, determining how to integrate people's views into programs, and then assessing how well they have responded. When independent surveys do take place, it is still at the discretion of organizations on how to use that information.
- **People's priorities are easily dismissed:** Insufficient funding or priorities that appear to fall outside the scope of humanitarian mandates are used as reasons to put aside people's views rather than using them to advocate with other partners, to challenge and redefine the scope of humanitarian programming in a given situation or improving communication on what humanitarians are able to deliver.
- **Programming isn't adapted to evolving needs.** Shifting course and adapting programs to evolving needs can be difficult for large operational organizations. The development of the Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plan tends to be a linear process of needs assessment, planning, producing the documents and then delivery. The process then begins again the following year. As a crisis evolves, people's priorities change. People need to be consulted on a regular basis and programs and delivery methods adjusted based on feedback.
- **Organizations are incentivized to act on donor priorities.** Organizations are financially incentivized to program based on priorities that donors will fund rather than priorities people have identified. Donors have made political commitments but have not given the necessary financial incentives to operational organizations to change behaviour or provided sufficiently flexible funding that enables organizations to adapt programs and the response to changing needs and priorities.
- **No independent assessment or evaluation.** There is no systematic or independent process of looking back to identify how well the overall response and the objectives set out in the Humanitarian Response Plan actually responded to people's priorities. Where monitoring and evaluation does take place, it is largely done by operational organizations themselves.
- **No binding consequences.** There are no binding consequences on organizations or humanitarian leadership if humanitarian planning or response do not match with what people have identified as their most important needs.

- **Insufficient visibility and leadership:** The input of people and how they feel about the response is still considered optional rather than integral to planning and response. Initiatives that have been successful are often due to strong country-level leadership demonstrating those with decision-making power are critical to moving the system towards a response that ensures people are receiving what they most need and how they need it.

### **Independent Commission for Voices in Crises (ICVIC)**

To shift towards a humanitarian system that better listens to people and responds to what they are asking for will require behaviour change by senior-level decision makers and by donors; a collective rather than an organizational-level response; and different incentives at all levels to motivate change. This level of change cannot only come from within the system. The humanitarian system needs to be held to account by an independent body.

The hypothesis underlying ICVIC is that if affected people's priorities are elevated to senior-decision making levels, and a humanitarian response was independently assessed on how well it delivered against those priorities, it would over time lead to a shift in behaviour by organizations and ultimately lead to more people having their most important needs met in crises. To test this proposition an Independent Humanitarian Commission on Voices in Crises (ICVIC) should be piloted.

There are six principles that would underpin the ICVIC that aim to address the current weaknesses in the system:

1. **Independent:** The ICVIC will be independent from all existing operational agencies and organizations.
2. **Transparent and Visible:** The ICVIC will publish and make publicly available survey results, findings and evaluations. The ICVIC will give visibility to people's voices through elevating available information and analysis on their needs and priorities with global and country-level decision makers. It will 'hold a mirror' to senior-level decision makers as to how well people feel the response is meeting their most important needs.
3. **Timely:** ICVIC will publish findings in a timely manner to inform planning. Either at the start of a sudden-onset disaster or to inform the Humanitarian Programming Cycle for Humanitarian Response Plans. It will publish interim findings throughout the year to capture evolving needs and promote an adaptive humanitarian response.
4. **Connected:** ICVIC will use data on the needs and priorities of people collected by existing organizations and local networks, where possible, to avoid duplication and in recognition that communities are more likely to convey their needs and priorities to partners they trust. The ICVIC seeks to compliment, boost, and not duplicate existing communication and accountability mechanisms.
5. **Representation:** Through elevating the priorities and feedback of people with decision makers the ICVIC seeks to promote greater representation of people in decision-making. The ICVIC will consider ways to involve representatives of pilot communities in its processes.
6. **Evaluation:** The ICVIC will independently evaluate the humanitarian response according to how well humanitarian organizations responded and donors financed the needs identified by affected people.

## Goals of the Pilot

The pilot aims to demonstrate ways of improving the overall responsiveness of the international humanitarian system to affected people. The pilot aims to demonstrate that when:

- **People have a determinative say over the aid they receive**, they feel more listened to, are more supportive of the humanitarian response and feel their most important needs are being met.
- **Humanitarian response is demand-driven it offers better value for money** because it is targeted towards the activities most important to people and products and services are utilized.
- **Positive incentives are put in place, organizations are more willing and able** to deliver programs based on people's identified needs and to deliver a more adaptable response.

The pilot does not aim to address the full spectrum of actions required to improve the responsiveness of the humanitarian response to people in crisis, including feedback and complaint mechanisms and representation of affected communities in decision-making structures. The findings and lessons learned of the ICVIC pilot should, however, provide a valuable contribution to the wider Accountability to Affected People agenda.

## Duration

The pilot should run for three years. This would allow the pilot to be run in both sudden-onset crisis and in one or two protracted crises with a Humanitarian Response Plan. For countries with a protracted crisis, a longer pilot would allow for greater opportunity for course-correction by organizations and donors and for results for longer-term needs identified by populations.

## Scope of work

There are several options for products the ICVIC could deliver in the pilot phase in the countries that it operates:

- **Publish a public report on people's priorities and needs:** Data will be collected where possible, through existing initiatives and local networks, pulled together and analysed. The findings would be published in time to inform HRP planning.
- **Publicly grade the Humanitarian Response Plan** according to how well the planning and programming meets the needs identified by people. A grade could be given to the overall HRP and ICVIC could explore the benefit of grading at the Strategic Objective or Cluster level. This would be a separate document published at the same time as the HRP.
- **Publish interim findings on satisfaction and evolving needs.** Drawing from data collected by organizations and local networks where possible, the ICVIC will update findings to highlight changing needs and promote a flexible humanitarian response.
- **Publicly evaluate and grade the humanitarian response on a yearly basis to assess how response and financing matched people's needs and priorities.** The grade will also allow for a comparison between the grade given to planning versus actual response, providing a further incentive to organizations to improve performance.

**Creating positive incentives is critical to behaviour change.** The ICVIC will pilot and further explore what incentives could be used at the country and global level and by donors to make programming and resourcing decisions based on the needs identified by people. Incentives – financial or otherwise –

should reward organizations and senior-level decision makers for direction of travel and creating a culture of listening and adapting.

History has shown organizations are most incentivized to change when there are financial implications. To provide a financial incentive, the ERC should:

- **Commit to prioritizing allocations from the Pooled Funds to programs that directly respond to the needs and priorities identified by people**, including multi-sector programs that seek to address needs that don't fit within a specific agency mandate or sector or are adapting to new data on changed needs and priorities. Where necessary, Pooled funds could help to support assessments of need in order to factor them into allocation decisions.

The ICVIC could encourage donors to incentivize change through:

- **Funding by grade and results:** Fund programs that achieve a certain ICVIC grade in the launched HRP and/or achieve a positive assessment by the ICVIC in the end of year evaluation of the response.
- **Reporting:** Donors could require organizations to demonstrate how their programs have responded and improved in relation to the ICVIC findings in their monitoring and reporting. This would help reinforce the message that organizations should be programmatically accountable to people not donors.

ICVIC should also use the pilot to explore with partners what additional incentives may be required at the country and global level.

#### Governance

- **'Dotted' Reporting line to the ERC:** The ICVIC will be independent but with a reporting line to the Emergency Relief Coordinator. The reporting line will not compromise the independence of the Commission (see firewalls below) but aims to elevate the work of the ICVIC and ensure its findings gain the attention and traction they need within the international humanitarian system. The ICVIC will be housed within OCHA and administratively supported by OCHA.
- **Advisory Board.** The Advisory Board will be responsible for providing technical and political advice to the ICVIC. The Advisory Board would be chaired by a senior-level, respected person in the humanitarian community not currently employed by the United Nations or an operational organization. Members of the Advisory Board will have relevant experience to provide support to the ICVIC, such as audit and evaluation, community representation, operational and planning, donor, and national/ international NGOs. The Advisory Board will be responsible for selecting the members of the ICVIC, establishing TORs and provide a sounding board. The Advisory Board will not approve ICVIC findings or evaluations.
- **Firewalls to protect independence:** There will be a firewall between the ICVIC and the ERC/ OCHA and Advisory Board that will protect the independence of the ICVIC. Members of the ICVIC will not currently serve in OCHA, within an operational agency or organization, or the same organization as a representative on the Advisory Board, to ensure actual and perceived independence. Products of the ICVIC will be publicly published and not subject to approval of the ERC or the Advisory Board.

- **ICVIC will submit a report of its activities on an annual basis to the Advisory Board** and to the ERC for onward distribution to IASC Principals.

#### Financing of the Pilot

- A three-year Pilot would be externally funded through contributions from donors and foundations, etc.
- Once the pilot has proven proof of concept, the aim would be to shift towards a cost-sharing mechanism amongst IASC agencies that could provide reliable and sustainable finance to the ICVIC.

#### Metrics of success

The initiative would be considered successful if at the end of three years, in the countries in which the ICVIC was piloted:

- People's perceptions of how they feel they are meaningfully engaged and how their most important needs are being met have improved overtime.
- Humanitarian response – planning, programming, delivery, coordination and financing – is more informed and targeted by people's priorities.
- Positive incentives have been identified that can support organizations to respond to people's priorities and adapt their response as priorities evolve.
- A more accurate assessment of need has allowed organizations to better target program funding and efforts on the ground, with the potential of a response that offers better value for money.