

Power and Norms  
The UN Reform of the Humanitarian System

Wolf-Dieter Eberwein  
Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Grenoble  
Wolf.eberwein@iep.upmf-grenoble.fr<sup>1</sup>

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Due to a number of problems I have not been able to write my paper in time. This is an outline of the final paper to be delivered at the conference. I do apologize.

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1. Background

In spring 2005 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) developed the cluster leadership approach to address identified gaps in humanitarian response and to enhance the quality of humanitarian action by strengthening partnerships between NGOs, international

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organizations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and UN agencies. This particular “management approach” reflects the practical conclusions the IASC has drawn from the Humanitarian Response Review. It is part of a wider reform process aimed at improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater accountability; predictability and partnership.

Jan Egeland, then Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, it seemed, was attempting to set up this general structural framework as a means to centralize the coordination of humanitarian action both in the case of natural disasters as well as in so-called human-made disasters (i.e. armed conflict). This approach, by some perceived as “imperialistic” was not well received by the representatives of the other two pillars of the humanitarian system, the nongovernmental organisations and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement.

Coordination has always been a critical issue in humanitarian action. As one author pointed out at some point “everybody wants coordination but nobody wants to be coordinated”. The core problem of the reform by implementing the cluster approach is twofold:

- First, to what extent does it actually contribute to the improved performance of the delivery of emergency aid?
- Second, does this reform process contribute as well to strengthen the normative foundations of humanitarian action as embodied in the Geneva Conventions and the additional protocols?

Thus, this reform process relates to two interrelated and fundamental aspects of humanitarian action today, namely to what extent these reforms contribute in effect to strengthen jointly the partial humanitarian order (cf. Eberwein, 2005), both in terms of improved assistance and protection. The more recent developments do not necessarily lead to an optimistic view as the “war on terror” is at least to some extent overriding humanitarian principles.

The proposition at the core of the analysis is that if the conditions of reform can not be determined centrally but require the (non enforceable) approval and cooperation of the actors involved, the best blue-print is likely to fail. The idea of having both global and specific clusters, i.e. issue specific structures relating to different domains (such as water and sanitation, emergency shelter or early recovery) is fundamentally plausible. At the global level this requires close cooperation of the major actors of the three pillars (UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent, and NGOs) concerning available resources, at the field level adequate

structures and procedures concerning the assessment and the implementation of the programs needed to satisfy the basic emergency needs of the affected populations. But even if this very ambitious conception of emergency relief could be implemented, that would not resolve the basic problem of funding. Are the major donors willing to provide the necessary funding without imposing their particular objectives that are not necessarily congruent with the humanitarian imperative?