Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) annual meeting 2017, Addis Ababa
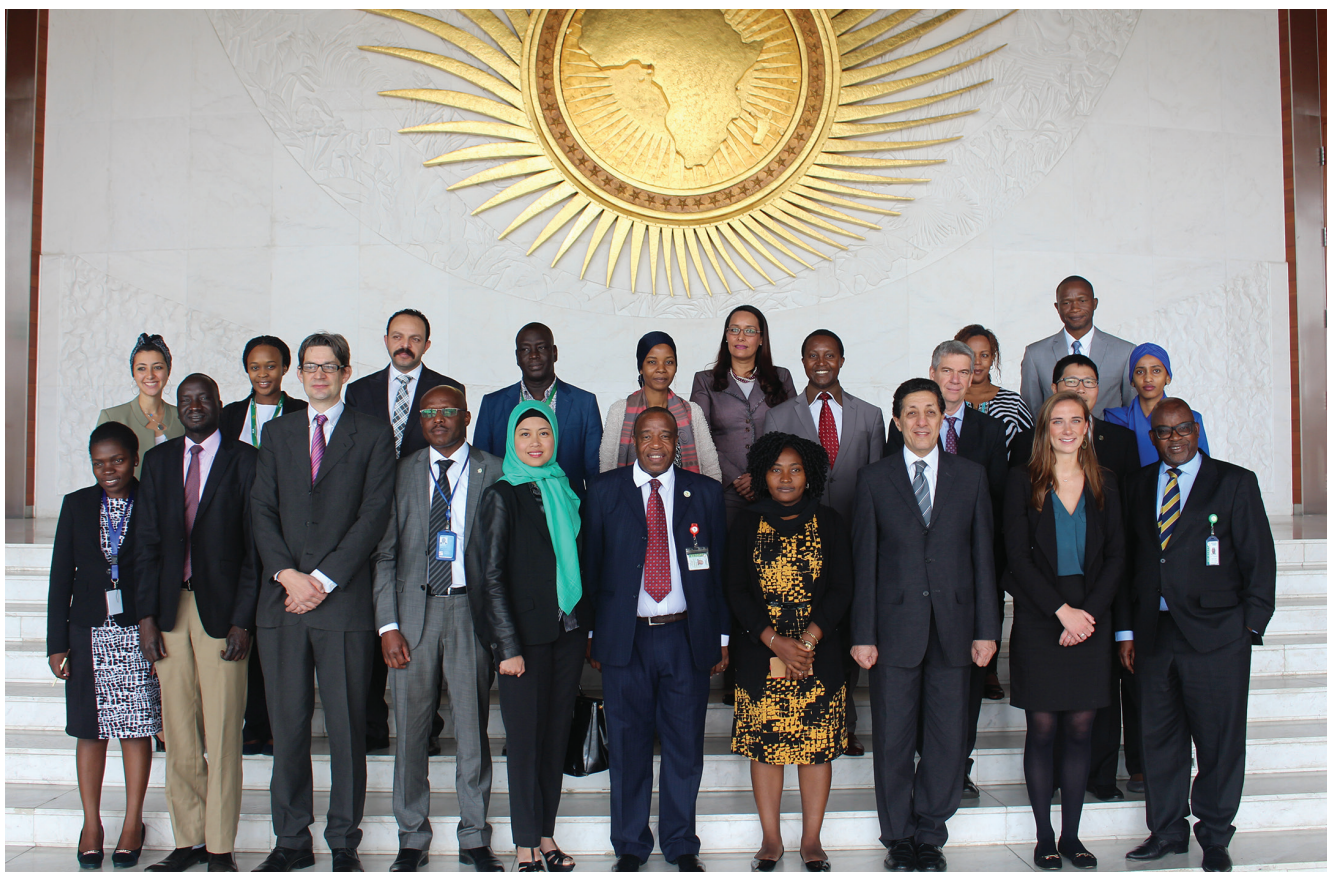
Introduction

The third meeting of the Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) took place from 7–9 November 2017 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, hosted by the African Union Commission Department of Political Affairs (AUC/DPA). Thirteen regional organisation centres and secretariats participated, with representatives from the African Union Commission, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de los Desastres Naturales en América Central (CEPREDENAC – Coordination Centre for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America), the European Union Commission Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), North African Regional Capacity (NARC), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the East African Community (EAC). Representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and Action Against Hunger participated in sessions on engaging external partners.

WHAT IS ROHAN?

The Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) is an informal network of 13 regional organisation secretariats and centres working in humanitarian action. ROHAN was established in February 2015 following discussions at a conference hosted by the International Humanitarian City (IHC) in Dubai, convened by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The 2015 Dubai conference – organised as part of a two-year HPG research project 'Zones of Engagement: Regional Action and Humanitarian Response' – aimed to provide a forum for regional organisations to share their experiences of humanitarian work. It resulted in consensus on the need for greater collaboration between regional organisations (LINK). As a result ROHAN was formed, and was formally launched in May 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul.

Supported by HPG as its informal secretariat, ROHAN provides a point of connection between regional organisations across the world. Although the network is primarily informal and its goals

are still being defined, ROHAN aims to bring representatives from the secretariats and centres of regional organisations involved in humanitarian work into regular contact with one another, fostering a network of peers who can provide mutual support and advice. A key element of ROHAN is the facilitation of information-sharing between regional organisations to enable them to deepen their understanding of one another's humanitarian activities, structures and approaches. The first ROHAN meeting after the World Humanitarian Summit was hosted by the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) in November 2016 in Jakarta (https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11271.pdf).

In addition to participants in the Addis meeting, members who have been participating in ROHAN include the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the League of Arab States (LAS) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Objectives of the meeting

The meeting aimed to bring together representatives from centres and secretariats of regional organisations involved in humanitarian action to exchange experiences, share knowledge and build relationships and networks. It also offered an opportunity to reflect on ROHAN's future role and how to take the network forward. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule to stimulate free and frank exchange.

Key discussion points from thematic sessions

ROHAN activities 2017

The network has continued to build links among members through regular quarterly coordination calls, knowledge-sharing through different platforms – including an online Dropbox information portal, Facebook group and mailing list. Members, and ODI as the informal secretariat, have provided updates on ROHAN to interested stakeholders, including the UN Agenda for Humanity reporting platform, the European Union presidency and the media. ROHAN also introduced regional organisations to each other – for example, this helped IGAD better understand the dynamics of working in disaster and conflict prone areas.

Introduction to different regional organisations

The introductions to their organisations participants gave demonstrated the diversity of regional organisation centres and secretariats involved in ROHAN – ranging from relative newcomers to humanitarian action, building on existing economic relationships, to operational centres with established protocols and capacities for disaster response and bodies operating more in the policy space and support-ing sub-regional bodies. Organisations from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Middle East were represented.

Further information on the regional organisations represented is available on their websites.

The role of regional organisations

Regional organisations have a unique place in the international architecture, with a number of comparative advantages in their relationships with both affected member states and international bodies. The discussion identified the following strengths and challenges:

- Speed: physical proximity and stockpiled goods can mean that ROs are able to respond very rapidly to

the needs of member states compared to more distant international responders.
- Flexibility: local knowledge, cutting costs and adapting to local needs allow ROs to be flexible in ways that enhance their operational effectiveness.
- Acceptance: cultural and political acceptance by affected governments and communities due to pre-existing relationships and greater proximity. ROs can convey difficult messages from the international community to member states, for example on international humanitarian law.
- Filling a gap: as the international community is increasingly overstretched, they are looking increasingly to regional organisations to fill the gap, in parallel with ROs and their member states taking leadership themselves, in line with their responsibilities.
- Convening power and capacity-building: some ROs are better able to convene NGOs and fundraise than it can be for their member states; they are also more capable of building capacity among their member states and local NGOs than was the case ten years ago.

These advantages are all the more important with the increasing number of disasters and conflicts ROs are being asked to respond to.

Challenges include difficult negotiations with member states in responding to conflict, as RO involvement can be seen as interfering in their internal affairs.

A number of opportunities were identified – regional organisations could be more engaged with a common voice at an international level, for example on issues such as localisation, where they could have a role in holding Grand Bargain signatories to account on the 25% target of funding to local organisations; or raise the issue of refugee burden-sharing, which disproportionately affects countries in regions with large refugee populations, comprising many of these organisations' member states.

Working in disasters

There are a number of different models for disaster response. Some ROs have a standing emergency response team (e.g. the AHA Centre, AU, ECCAS, CDEMA), and others coordinate rosters of national teams (e.g. CEPREDENAC); some have specific funds (for example the AU's special emergency assistance fund, AHA Centre Fund, ASEAN Disaster Management and Emergency Relief Fund), while others operate in a more ad hoc manner or have a special fund on a case-by-case basis (e.g. Singapore has donated 100,000 Singapore dollars

through AHA Centre to provide support for the mission in Rakhine, Myanmar). There is great scope for increased collaboration in disaster preparedness and response – this is already occurring, for example, between IGAD and the AHA Centre.

CDEMA shared specific lessons from the recent catastrophic Caribbean hurricane season. CDEMA had built capacity over the years with member states, but the impact of several Category 5 hurricanes overwhelmed aspects of the Regional Response Mechanism (RRM). Key issues included the support from the international community and the solidarity shown by countries from outside the region. Lessons learnt included a need for respect for sovereignty. States are ultimately responsible for the safety and security of their people. All external partners rendering support must operate within existing national response systems. This leads to issues of culture and ensuring that actions taken, relief provided and support given are culturally appropriate. CDEMA had a major role to play in managing and coordinating the national and international community. Impacted countries were at times overwhelmed by the extent of international aid. There is space for all to operate, but a healthy, well-coordinated operation depends on basic principles of mutual respect, trust and recognition of sovereignty. Since the meeting in Addis, CEPREDENAC updated the Central American Policy on Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management (PCGIR), harmonising it with the Sendai framework.

Working in conflict
Examples of working in conflict were highlighted from Africa, while the AHA Centre gave recent examples of where they had been asked by their member states to respond to 'human-induced' disasters in Myanmar and the Philippines. ECOWAS highlighted the success of its early warning system in triggering rapid response by the ECOWAS standby force.

Operational challenges faced in conflict situations include the security of aid workers and challenges around accessing affected populations. Fragmentation of the response among multiple entities can create misunderstandings and tensions, for example between military and humanitarian actors.

Common issues identified included the need for better needs assessment, with varying capacities across ROs; accessibility and sustainability of the response; building the right kinds of partnerships between NGOs and

international agencies; and building trust and confidence for partnerships between national agencies and donors.

Different ROs operate at different levels – both operationally, in responding on the ground, as well as more politically, for example around agreements such as the Kampala Convention on IDPs. For instance, with a view to facilitate the accession of the Kampala Convention and its implementation, IGAD has developed a Migration Policy Framework and a Humanitarian Policy Framework that support the adoption of appropriate national measures that address the root causes of displacement and provide durable solutions. This ultimately complements the AU's Continental Policy on Displacement.

Working with external partners – global processes, international agencies, civil society and the private sector
Many different relationships exist between ROs and their external partners. Several discussions provided the opportunity to share examples and insights among ROs.

Some local civil society organisations lack the capacity to function at a larger scale in many regions, and more structured agreements between ROs and civil society may provide a useful way to manage these relationships (e.g. the ASEAN AADMER partnership group). One key challenge is that, while civil society organisations (CSOs) have operational capacity, they have less fundraising capacity.

Private sector engagement has also proven beneficial, but there are challenges, including language, and 'private sector' is a very broad category covering a range of different organisations. Examples from (and beyond) technology and innovation include biometric registration, technical inventions such as solar energy for refugee camps, big data and ICT solutions (e.g. ASEAN or the IGAD REACT mobile application used in disaster response) and business fora (e.g. IGAD) and private foundations (e.g. Kenya's Safaricom), as well as operational agreements, as in the Caribbean for airline and shipping arrangements in disaster response.

ROs have also engaged with external partners through their work with global processes including the World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain and the Global Compacts on refugees and migrants. There is more to be done to engage ROs and ensure that their voice is reflected in these discussions, which are often perceived as 'top-down' and less consultative than would be ideal. Greater ambition should be expected from such processes, for example around reform of the international system. There is nothing to prevent regional organisations signing up to the Grand Bargain, but they need to reflect on what this would mean.

Next steps

Detailed discussions around ROHAN's future highlighted the value that members placed on the network, but also the need to change gear over the next year and take ROHAN to the next level in the following areas, with a focus on ensuring ROHAN is adding value for ROs:

- Expand ROHAN's ambition – increase joint activities among the membership, and 'brand' joint activities between ROs as ROHAN activities to increase awareness of the network.
- Move to using knowledge as well as just sharing it – find ways to offer expertise, for example following/ during a disaster; participate in exchange programmes.
- Meet on the margins of important events such as UNGA.
- Network engagement – engage at different fora, for example with member states, thinktanks and regional consultations; compile a calendar of events for each RO, which can then be used to plan mutual exchanges/side meetings.

- As USAID funding for ROHAN is coming to an end, this is an opportunity for ROs to come together and prepare a joint funding proposal (the main expense is likely to be international travel/accommodation costs for the annual meeting).

Specific action points:

- Compile information on how ROs already cooperate with each other.
- Consult on the next host of the ROHAN annual meeting, and rotating chair (ROs).
- Compile an overarching document about ROHAN which can be used for both internal and external advocacy – one-page key messages/mission statement (HPG),
- Produce an options paper on role of Secretariat and different funding models (HPG).
- Develop a funding proposal for existing/new donors (ROs/HPG).

Conclusion

Regional organisation centres and secretariats are playing increasingly important roles, with growing response capacity, but awareness of their role is still limited, and they face a number of common challenges, in particular around capacity.

They are also increasingly working collaboratively as ROs; key areas of collaboration include setting up operational agencies and around thematic issues such as displacement, but there is scope for a higher level of ambition for ROHAN, which can be taken forward over the coming year.

As a vehicle for collaboration ROHAN is growing in momentum, and the next step is for ROs to take increasing ownership and build the network's identity, deepening the relationship beyond information-sharing by developing further areas of collaboration, strengthening ROHAN as an institution through a joint funding proposal and rotating chair, and finding opportunities to raise awareness of the network.

Acknowledgements