



Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) annual meeting 2016, Jakarta

Introduction

The Regional Organizations Humanitarian Action Network (ROHAN) is an informal network of 13 regional organization secretariats and centres working in humanitarian action. ROHAN was established in February 2015, following discussions between regional organisations at a conference hosted by the International Humanitarian City (IHC) in Dubai, and convened by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The 2015 Dubai conference – convened 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 and resulted in consensus on the need for greater collaboration between regional organisations.¹ 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. Though the network is primarily informal and, as discussed below, 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

¹ See Steven A. Zyck and Lilianne Fan (2015) ‘Regional humanitarianism in action: how regional organisations are enabling emergency response and preparedness’; and Sherine El Taraboulsi, Hanna B. Krebs, Steven A. Zyck and Barnaby Willits-King (2016) ‘Regional organisations and humanitarian action: rethinking regional engagement’.

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HPG is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

This conference was made possible with the generous support of USAID.

mutual support and advice. A key element of ROHAN is the facilitation of information-sharing between regional organisations to enable regional organisations to deepen their understanding of one another's humanitarian activities, structures and approaches.

On 16-17 November 2016, representatives from nine regional organisations met for ROHAN's annual meeting in Jakarta, co-hosted by the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and HPG and supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The meeting coincided with celebrations to mark the five-year anniversary of the AHA Centre and the opening of its new Emergency Operation Centre.



The meeting was attended by representatives from the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),² the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), the European Commission Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Community (SPC). Representatives from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mercy Malaysia, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) also joined proceedings for a session focused on partnerships and external engagement.³

Setting the scene

The meeting opened with welcoming remarks delivered by H.E. Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee, Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for Socio-Cultural Community, who set the context as a changing humanitarian landscape

involving increasing recognition of the role of regional organisations in responding to crises, as shown by attention paid to ROHAN at the WHS. H.E. Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee highlighted ROHAN as a unique platform for regional organisations, a point reiterated in subsequent remarks by Mr. Dody Ruswandi, Secretary-General of the Indonesian National Disaster Management Authority (BNPB), as Chair of the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), who expressed hope that regional organisations will use ROHAN to exchange lessons learned and identify common challenges, promoting humanitarian action that starts from the national and local levels.

Mr. Said Faisal, Executive Director of the AHA Centre, built upon these remarks to put forward the case for regional organisations' role in humanitarian activities. Mr. Faisal elaborated that, from the AHA Centre's perspective, regional organisations have three distinct advantages: speed, efficiency and acceptance. Namely that, compared to multilateral bodies, regional organisations can mobilise quickly, use local knowledge to cut costs, and leverage political and cultural acceptance with member states and affected populations. Mr. Faisal positioned ROHAN as a vehicle for exchanging knowledge, expertise and information that fed into a model of nationally led response backed by regional organisations and supported by international organisations; this equation, he emphasised, only works if regional organisations are strong.

2 ASEAN was represented by senior members of the ASEAN Secretariat, in addition to representatives from the AHA Centre.

3 This conference report is an independent production by HPG, and although attempts were made to present the proceedings with the greatest possible accuracy, nothing documented here is necessarily attributable to the participating persons or organisations.

These comments were followed by remarks by Dr. Sara Pantuliano, Managing Director at ODI, who highlighted growing interest and expectations around ROHAN in numerous multilateral fora. Dr. Pantuliano emphasised that an expectation exists that ROHAN proves the increasing role that regional organisations can play, and that this should be grasped as an opportunity, coming at a time when the international community is struggling to cope with the scale of modern crises.

The World Humanitarian Summit: recap of commitments and reflections

HPG presented a recap of the WHS ROHAN special session, featuring a synthesis of commitments made by participating regional organisations.

The presentation outlined that during the WHS special session, participants praised opportunities offered by ROHAN. As ECOWAS put it, ‘ROHAN is a forum for [regional organisations] to engender collaboration, share best practices, and mainstream lessons learned from humanitarian related programs.’ However, as the AU highlighted at the WHS, for ROHAN to be effective in strengthening regional organisations’ humanitarian

activities, formation of the network must be accompanied by reforms to the international architecture to allow regional organisations to play a more robust role in crisis response.

HPG’s analysis showed five areas of consensus among ROHAN members at the WHS special session:

1. ROHAN is important as a vehicle for networking, building partnerships and promoting linkages between regional organisations, and members are committed to supporting its growth.
2. Regional organisations have an interest in knowledge exchange and mutual learning, and are committed to exchanging knowledge in areas ranging from disaster management to conflict early warning.
3. Supporting the role of local and national actors in crisis response, from member states to civil society, is important.
4. ROHAN can be a vehicle for promoting humanitarian principles and respect for international humanitarian law.
5. Members are particularly interested in using ROHAN to improve disaster response and disaster risk reduction.





Good practices for disaster management

Areas of consensus arising from the WHS special session were taken up in a series of plenary discussions, the first of which focused on good practices for disaster management. Discussion was prompted by presentations by the AHA Centre, IGAD, PIFS and CDEMA, each reflecting on experiences of disaster management in their respective regions.

The AHA Centre presented a short history of ASEAN's increasingly sophisticated disaster management landscape over the past decade, highlighting three key turning points: the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004), Cyclone Nargis (2008) and Typhoon Haiyan (2013). The AHA Centre detailed how each of these turning points have spurred institutional shifts, from the legally binding ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Response (AADMER) developed after the Indian Ocean Tsunami to the formation of the AHA Centre after Cyclone Nargis – to enhance implementation of AADMER. The AHA Centre explained that the 'One ASEAN, One Response' declaration represents the latest such development, prompted by challenges encountered during Typhoon Haiyan, a crisis of hitherto unseen magnitude and complexity.

IGAD followed with a presentation on challenges faced in East Africa. IGAD outlined a number of initiatives it has developed to respond to disasters, emphasising its role

in relation to drought, an issue which other participants identified as a possible future area for knowledge exchange. Attention then turned to the Pacific, as PIFS presented its mandate and activities, highlighting the Pacific as a region on the forefront of climate change and one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. SPC complemented these comments by explaining the scope of its own organisation within the Pacific, indicating that while neither SPC nor PIFS are directly involved in disaster response, they both provide input during the response phases following a disaster. SPC also highlighted its perspective: that ensuring a clear link between all aspects of the disaster management cycle is important. Comparisons were drawn between ASEAN's AADMER and the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, which aims to support linkages between disasters, climate change and development; however, it was stressed that, unlike AADMER, the Pacific framework is not legally binding. Other regional organisations discussed the benefits of adopting a common legal position on disaster management across member states.

Finally, CDEMA presented lessons learned from the 2010 earthquake response in Haiti, stressing that the Haiti earthquake caused more devastation than it should have, due to the scale of vulnerability, and thus that effective disaster management is inextricably linked with addressing poverty and building resilience. CDEMA detailed the challenges it faces as a regional organisation

acting in a context where national frameworks and institutions are unable to deal with disasters on such a scale. Lessons learned included the need to improve coordination and communication and to build national-level disaster response capacity.

In the discussions that followed, speakers highlighted disaster management as a continuous cycle, of which no part could be considered in isolation. One speaker noted that, though very different experiences have been seen in different regions, one common element is the key role of national governments in disaster response, and that part of regional organisations' added value lies in their ability to support states to take greater ownership. Speakers agreed that the ultimate responsibility for disaster response lies with national governments and that regional organisations can support them in different ways, including by pushing for coordination between ministries within a country. Discussing regional organisations' role in supporting state-led responses, one participant highlighted a distinction between operational and political coordination, suggesting potential for regional organisations to play both roles but in different ways.

Substantial attention was paid to the question of visibility, with speakers questioning how regional organisations can strike the right balance amid an evolving 'visibility game', which has seen ever-growing political demands to increase organisational visibility in disaster response. Speakers

identified that greater visibility of regional organisations' own humanitarian work may play a part in undermining the credibility of national governments' responses. One speaker suggested that instead of chasing visibility for their own activities, regional organisations should instead be guided by a sense of solidarity with their member states.

Conversation turned to the role of the international humanitarian system in disaster response and relationships between international organisations and regional organisations. One speaker expressed the view that regional organisations valued international assistance in such situations, but that regional organisations should have a greater say in setting the terms of cooperation.

Finally, regional organisations highlighted pressures they have experienced from member states and the international community to take on an ever-increasing workload, in particular responding to new kinds of disasters when they occur, even when this goes beyond their current experience. ROHAN was identified as a possible means for strengthening abilities to cope with such demands, with one speaker highlighting potential for cooperation and information exchange in areas where some regional organisations have gaps and others substantial experience.

Civilians in conflict: regional approaches to IHL and displacement

The next session focused on the issue of civilians in conflict, exploring how regional organisations have addressed violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and displacement. Again discussion was sparked by short presentations, in this case from the OIC and the AU, who discussed different ways in which regional organisations have approached these themes.

The OIC presentation set the scene for the discussion, detailing a context involving increasing violations of IHL by a number of parties to numerous conflicts and a growing sense of impunity. As a result, many states have been compelled to receive hundreds of thousands and even millions of refugees as a result of geographical proximity to conflict areas while many others have been reluctant to keep their borders open to large flows of refugees. The OIC highlighted the advantages of regional organisations in these difficult contexts, allowing for responses guided by detailed understanding of the region in question, its historical background and the relevant stakeholders, a point with which other



regional organisations concurred. However, the OIC also addressed the constraints faced by regional organisations engaging in conflict scenarios, particularly where member states have been involved in violations. In doing so, the OIC illustrated how issues such as IHL and displacement have proved far more difficult for regional organisations to tackle as compared to disaster management, a point with which others agreed.

The OIC presentation emphasised the possibility for regional organisations to negotiate with stakeholders behind closed doors on these issues, to support organisations working to address these issues on the ground, and to build capacity at the national level on topics like IHL. The AU then elaborated a contrasting model by which it has approached IHL and displacement through a number of common legal positions. These have ranged from the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which allows for AU military intervention in member states, to the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention, both of which have addressed gaps in existing international legal frameworks by, respectively, widening the ‘refugee’ definition and recognising obligations for non-state actors regarding internal displacement. The AU detailed their perspective that regional organisations’ role should be to help member states respond to these issues in a more robust way by advancing common legal frameworks, but also by coordinating international support where it is needed, ensuring that member states remain in the driving seat for the response.

Plenary discussions picked up on the issue of regional legal frameworks, with various speakers expressing thoughts on the issue. One speaker expressed their perspective that in some regions member states have pushed back against international legal frameworks, such as those involved in IHL, arguing that these are western concepts and thus not applicable to them. The speaker suggested that in such cases the development of regional frameworks, such as those seen in Africa, may pose a useful approach, presenting a set of norms with a clear regional basis, and thus potentially carrying greater traction in negotiations with member states.

Discussions also picked up on the theme of regional organisations as intermediaries between member states and the international humanitarian system, with one speaker

elaborating their perspective that part of the value of regional organisations is to put member states’ concerns on the table for global partners. Discussions also broached the value of inter-regional cooperation where issues bridge regions. However, one speaker cautioned that humanitarian motivations might be lost to national interests during such cooperation, giving the example of migration compacts between Europe and Africa.

In discussion, speakers identified humanitarian negotiations and early-warning mechanisms as areas of interest, although one speaker issued caution on the latter, elaborating that to date the greatest problems have been with early action as opposed to early warning. Inter-faith dialogue was put forward as a key tool at regional organisations’ disposal, with speakers from different regions highlighting its utility in dispute resolution. One speaker also highlighted the need for regional organisations to address the issue of civil-military coordination, exploring how in some cases engagement with national militaries may prove the best route to maintaining protection space.

Finally, displacement was proposed as a common area of interest on which organisations from different regions could engage from different angles. Though the session began with looking at displacement during conflict, regional organisations that have traditionally focused on disasters expressed their interest in the topic, primarily due to the connection between disasters and climate change. One speaker questioned whether it is time to start dialogue around climate-driven displacement, given





its rising prominence. Though one speaker articulated international leaders' reluctance to act on issues that have not yet hit 'crisis' point, others expressed that climate-driven displacement is fast becoming a crisis in select areas of the world, and that legal precedents are beginning to evolve.

Regional organisations and humanitarian architecture: partnerships and external engagement

The final thematic session explored the issue of partnerships and external engagement with a discussion of regional organisations' relationships with the international humanitarian system. As a case study to spark discussion, the model of partnership utilised by ASEAN was presented by speakers from OCHA, the AHA Centre, Mercy Malaysia (representing the AADMER Partnership Group⁴) and ICRC.

OCHA, the AHA Centre and Mercy Malaysia evidenced a model of partnership in Southeast Asia that has proved

beneficial. Through different channels of engagement, ASEAN has partnered with the UN, other international actors, civil society, Red Cross and Red Crescent and the private sector, with benefits including the sharing of resources, technical advice and innovations. Speakers emphasised the importance of personal friendships in establishing partnerships between ASEAN bodies and other actors in the region, with engagement founded on a long process of trust-building in which close personal relationships have given rise to positive professional collaboration.

Following this, the ICRC welcomed the launch of ROHAN and acknowledged the important role of regional organisations as first responders in their respective regions, highlighting how ICRC has developed multilateral dialogue with regional organisations in Asia Pacific such as ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum, in addition to various other regional organisations worldwide. The ICRC's presentation made clear that such partnerships work best when each side has valuable capabilities to offer, highlighting the ASEAN-ICRC partnership: the utility of ICRC's technical expertise (e.g. management of dead bodies and protection in complex emergencies) and ASEAN's position as an actor well-placed to influence countries in the region. Discussions touched upon the role of the WHS in setting

⁴ The AADMER Partnership Group (APG) is a network of non-governmental organisations working with the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM), the AHA Centre and the ASEAN Secretariat to ensure the people-centred implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)



the stage for regional organisations' collaboration with the international humanitarian system. One speaker noted that WHS regional consultations were helpful in elucidating areas of focus, in particular consensus on ceding power to local actors. However, they expressed the view that regional organisations could not sit back and wait for WHS commitments to be implemented from above; instead, implementation of WHS commitments would largely depend on regional-level activities.

Though speakers agreed there was growing impetus within the international system towards 'regionalisation', one speaker perceived a tendency in the international community to discuss regionalisation as a way of avoiding responsibility for addressing major crises. One participant suggested a possible model for partnerships, whereby regional organisations' role would be to assist member states by mobilising resources already in the region, whether from local or international actors. Participants returned to the theme, raised in introductory remarks, of a model of nationally led response backed by regional organisations and supported by international organisations.

Plenary discussions revealed consensus that there are partnerships that work well at the regional level with bodies such as the UN but that some of these relationships break down at the global level. International

bodies' regional offices were seen as more approachable by regional organisations than were headquarters in New York or Geneva, primarily due to the personal relationships built with regional offices, but also due to perceptions that regional offices had a better understanding of regional contexts. In view of this discussion, one speaker expressed concerns that, given the value of trust and relationship building to international-regional partnerships, international staff holding regional posts are frequently rotated.

Various speakers expressed concern about a 'cookie-cutter' approach used by international agencies, though they acknowledged that some international bodies did better on this front than others. Speakers advocated that approaches be tailored to contexts and that the international system prioritises national ownership of crisis response wherever possible. Speakers highlighted that in some contexts there may be advantages to more internationally led approaches, including contexts where international actors are better placed to negotiate access, or where member states' vested interests limit regional organisations' ability to engage on certain issues. ASEAN was discussed as a model in which member states have very clearly articulated their expectations of collaboration with the UN system, with ASEAN ensuring that joint activities with the UN follow ASEAN and member state priorities. According to the AHA Centre, ASEAN has a 'menu-based'

approach, whereby ASEAN determines its priorities and then identifies the partners best suited to assist.

Finally, participants agreed that international organisations were not the only key partners for regional organisations and that a variety of other partnerships should be sought, including with academia, civil society and research institutions. One speaker expressed the value of bringing various such stakeholders together for discussions, while another shared the value of pursuing implementation through local partners.

ROHAN: vision for the future

In the final session participants turned to discussion of ROHAN, to share perspectives on their vision for the network and its future progress. Regional organisation representatives agreed on the value of ROHAN as a vehicle for networking between regional organisations and as a forum for information-sharing. They agreed on the potential for knowledge exchange, both directly through ROHAN and through bilateral connections.

Discussions revealed the following areas of shared interest, which may form the basis for future cooperation and information-sharing:

- localisation and support to national response capacity
- engagement with global processes (e.g. Grand Bargain, WHS process, migration and refugee compacts)
- resource mobilization
- visibility
- innovation and technology.

Though some regional organisations saw ROHAN's function as limited to information-sharing and network-building, others detailed a wider vision. One speaker expressed that ROHAN should move beyond information-sharing to become a coalition of interests. Others talked about ROHAN providing a means for regional organisations to drive a common agenda, both on global processes and more broadly in their relationships with the international system.

Participants agreed to the following next steps:

1. **Consolidate communications between ROHAN members and ODI as ROHAN's informal secretariat.** Regional organisations agreed to re-confirm ROHAN focal points, and ODI agreed to initiate quarterly check-in meetings with focal points from January 2017 onwards.
2. **Develop new channels for communication between ROHAN members.** ODI agreed to establish a ROHAN Facebook page and mailing list, both of which are now in operation.
3. **Continue information-sharing among ROHAN members.** ODI and ROHAN members will share relevant documents and event invitations with one another through the above channels.
4. **Explore possibilities for new modes of knowledge exchange** including developing a more sophisticated web platform for ROHAN information-sharing (building on the current Dropbox page) and coordinating staff exchanges or secondments.
5. **Continue to meet on an annual basis.** The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for July 2017, to be co-hosted by ODI and the AU. Participants agreed that the 2017 meeting should be longer than the Jakarta meeting in order to give scope for deeper discussions.
6. **Produce materials conveying ROHAN's progress to external stakeholders,** including a report on the Jakarta meeting and a one-page summary document if deemed necessary following publication of the meeting report.

Conclusion

In summary, the ROHAN 2016 meeting in Jakarta marked an important step in the evolution of this informal network of regional organizations. Through a process of sharing knowledge and building trust, ROHAN can serve as a platform for deeper engagement both among regional organizations and with important partners in the international community who share the same objectives of supporting people affected by crisis.



Photographs: AHA Centre

The views presented in this roundtable note are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI.

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