INTRODUCTION

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This year marks the end of the first five-year phase of the Humanitarian Response Index (HRI). Since the initiative began, we have learned a great deal about the challenge of effectively providing humanitarian assistance in an increasingly complicated operating environment and the strengths and limitations of the different actors involved in the humanitarian sector. We have found that huge difficulties exist in translating our collective commitment to increase the impact and effectiveness of aid efforts into actual changes in policy and practice.

When the first edition of the HRI was published in 2007, no one was sure what the impact of the HRI would be, but I think it is safe to say the HRI has earned its place among the key initiatives in the sector to increase knowledge and promote greater transparency, accountability and impact. While the HRI has primarily focused on the role of donor governments in humanitarian action, our scope and ambition has always been to look beyond this to see how we can collectively do better for those suffering from crises.

The context in which humanitarian action takes place has evolved substantially over the past five years of the HRI — the Arab Spring is evidence of just how quickly the dynamics can shift. At the same time, too many crises, like the Horn of Africa, remain sadly familiar to us despite our pledges to avoid mistakes of the past. This reinforces the need to constantly track trends and assess the implications for the sector.

Through the HRI's extensive research over the past five years, we have been able to gather evidence on how the humanitarian sector is functioning, and from this, raise concerns about important issues that affect the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action. This ranges from the importance of need-based approaches and the dangers of aid politicisation, to the need for better prevention, preparedness, and risk reduction, and support for protection and access. All these issues are by no means new for the sector, but as our research shows, much more effort is required to address them in a lasting and meaningful manner.

In this year's report, we turn our attention to the challenge of incorporating gender more effectively into programming, and the role that donors can play to push the system to improve in this area. For years, there has been a general consensus that humanitarian actors must develop greater sensitivity to gender issues, both in the emergency response and in long term-recovery efforts. However, our HRI research over the past five years in crises such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Somalia and Haiti, have clearly demonstrated that advances have been too few and too slow, despite important efforts to raise awareness of these issues.

In the HRI 2011 report, we have gathered and analysed data regarding the way in which donor governments address gender in their policies and funding, and provide field actors' perspectives of donor commitment to gender. We hope the report makes a modest contribution to a growing body of evidence on the critical importance of gender sensitive approaches in all aspects of humanitarian action. This includes the continuing work of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Sub-Working Group on Gender in Humanitarian Action to develop tools and raise awareness of gender issues in the sector, a recent study from Tufts University on the importance of sex and age disaggregated data, and an ongoing evaluation sponsored by UN Women, UNICEF and UN OCHA on gender outcomes in the responses to different crises (which DARA is conducting).

This body of work, together with the findings from this year's HRI, point to the need to scale up efforts to ensure gender sensitive approaches are integrated into all aspects of humanitarian action. We have found that much more needs to be done by humanitarian organisations and donors alike to ensure gender is properly addressed in their programmes in ways that meet the different needs of all within the affected population.

From our perspective, the issue of gender in crises is simple: we will never be able to achieve principled and effective responses unless we can show that assistance is based on, and in proportion to the needs and priorities of all parts of the affected populations, and provided impartially. The only

way to achieve this is by ensuring needs assessments and programme design adequately integrate gender analysis, and by constantly monitoring and evaluating the results of our actions to ensure gender concerns are addressed properly. The chapters contributed by UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, and UN Women Executive Director, Michelle Bachelet, highlight just how difficult the challenge will be to achieve this, but also the urgency of making this top priority for all of us. We are extremely grateful for their thoughtful insight and contribution to the debate.

This year's report includes expanded analysis of individual donors' policies and practices, based on key elements of the declaration of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD). We have also expanded the donor classification into groups to show which donors share similar characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. This is based on statistical analysis of donors' humanitarian policies and funding, and the perceptions and opinions of hundreds of senior representatives of humanitarian organisations at both the field and headquarters level.

The results show three distinct groups of donors, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, but all making an positive contribution to humanitarian actions.

Group 1 donors are referred to as "Principled Partners". They are characterised by their generosity, strong commitment to humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, and for flexible, funding arrangements with partners.

Group 2, the "Learning Leaders" have often taken a leadership role in terms of their capacity to respond, field presence, and commitment to learning and improving performance in the sector.

Group 3 donors are "Aspiring Actors". As a group of donors, they are diverse in terms of their size and capacities, but often have a focus on building strengths in specific "niche" areas, such as geographic regions or thematic areas like preparedness and prevention, and their aspirations to taking on a greater role in the sector.

The classification deserves some explanation. First, the GHD attempts to provide a common framework to guide donors' action, and outlines a series of principles and good practices that donors themselves believed important in order for their aid to have the greatest impact in the response to crises. Donor governments often claim that they work in coordination and in compliance with the principles and practices outlined in the GHD declaration. However, as the HRI's research shows, the reality is different. Donors do not act as a unified collective, but often follow individual priorities and interpretations of what they consider to be the best approach to providing humanitarian assistance, depending on the crisis, and, as we outlined in the HRI 2010, are often influenced by domestic or international political objectives. The classification into groups helps to show more precisely where donors converge and where they diverge in their policies, practices, and how they are perceived in the field.

Second, while the focus of the HRI is on the role of donor governments, this does not mean it is an evaluation of the performance of individual agencies responsible for managing government humanitarian assistance. Over the past five years, we have spoken to and interviewed dozens of representatives of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) donor agencies in our field research, and many others in donor headquarters. Our overwhelming conclusion is that staff of donor governments' humanitarian departments are fully committed to achieving the aims of the GHD principles, and are actively engaged in making the sector work more effectively. Unfortunately, their work is often undermined by bureaucratic legislation and procedures, a lack of resources and capacity, and by political indifference or interference. The HRI's analysis attempts, to the extent possible, to highlight these issues so that governments can work to improve the quality, effectiveness and impact of their assistance, and respect and support the work of their humanitarian departments and partners to achieve these aims.

Third, no performance measurement system or index can fully capture the complexities of reality, and the HRI is no

different. As we have pointed out in every edition of the report, there are limitations to the data available, in the indicators we have selected, and the depth of analysis we can provide. The research process, for example, uses financial data from 2010, which means, as is the case today, that dramatic cuts to aid budgets by many donors, such as Spain, Ireland and others, are not reflected in the analysis. Equally, many of the recent positive moves taken by donors, like the UK and Australia, to update and improve their humanitarian assistance policy frameworks are not reflected in the data. These changes, both positive and negative, will take time to manifest at the field level, so any findings need to be contextualised.

Finally, the HRI research process includes extensive interviews and surveys to capture the views of senior field staff from UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the quality of support provided by donors that fund their programmes. The perspectives from the field are critically important to understand how donors' policies and practices are facilitating or impeding effective crisis responses. This year, as part of the research process, we also followed-up with interviews at the headquarters level, and found that the perspectives from the field were largely corroborated by their headquarter colleagues. The HRI therefore offers a unique window for donors to get a broader overview of how they are perceived and where they could do better to support their partners.

In summary, it is critically important to consider the HRI's findings and analysis, not as absolute truths, but as evidence of trends in donors' practices that can help policy makers and their partners reflect on what is working well and what can be improved. Sometimes the HRI data and findings may support and reinforce other research and evaluations – as indeed is the case, for example, with many OECD/DAC peer reviews. Sometimes, the findings may contradict other research, or offer results that may be surprising to us, as they run contrary to our own personal experiences or points of views. The aim is that the HRI is a tool and an entry point to promote more discussion and debate about how donors can contribute positively to greater accountability and impact for people in situations of crisis.

As we look forward to the next phase of the HRI, it is clear that both the new operational contexts and developments in reforming the structure and tools of the humanitarian sector, call for a period of reflection to redefine good practice. The challenges posed by climate change, rapid population growth and tighter financial budgets will require the humanitarian sector to be prepared for even greater challenges. The growing importance of new operational actors and donors is a reality that "traditional" actors need to acknowledge and embrace as part of the growing aid community. We look forward to continuing to engage with the whole donor community in the next phase of the HRI to get as complete a picture as possible of what is needed to ensure we build capacity and resilience to anticipate and prepare for new challenges.

We need to make sure we get it right. The challenges that lie ahead will require us to think outside the box. We should encourage, and not fear, innovation. For starters, the current crisis in the Horn of Africa shows just how crucial support for preparedness and prevention is. We need to invest significantly in building resilience to crises, as the effects of climate change will make this increasingly important. We also need to avoid gender blind approaches, which do not account for the different needs of women, men, boys and girls. Humanitarian responses that do not understand the different ways in which they are affected cannot possibly be effective in meeting their needs.

From the start, we have hoped that the Humanitarian Response Index serves to inspire greater dialogue regarding this and other best practices. As we move forward into the next phase of the HRI, I sincerely hope you will join us in widening the debate to include new actors and contexts, consider the future challenges facing the sector, and look for practical solutions on how we can maximise the resources and support of donors and humanitarian organisations to meet the needs of people affected by, or at risk of crises.