



Mission Report

An NGO Perspective on the Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Northeastern Nigeria

March 28 - April 9, 2016



I. Background

The violent conflict in northeastern Nigeria has led to widespread displacement, violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and a growing humanitarian crisis. Now entering its seventh year, the crisis shows no sign of abating.

Since the start of the conflict in 2009, more than 20,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million people have fled their homes: 2.2 million are internally displaced, and 177,000 are seeking refuge in the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Ninety-two percent of internally displaced people have sought refuge among host communities, where resources and basic services are being exhausted, leading to risky coping strategies. An estimated 262,324 people have returned to their places of origin in northern Adamawa to find their communities devastated, houses and public infrastructure destroyed, and the security situation still fragile.

In the four worst-affected states - Adamawa, Borno, Gombe, and Yobe - 3 million of the 7 million people are in insecure and inaccessible areas, and are estimated to be in need of emergency, life-saving assistance.

II. Scope of Mission

Upon the invitation of the NGO Forum in Nigeria, InterAction team members Patricia McIlreavy and Julien Schopp¹ traveled to Nigeria from March 28 through April 8, 2016. Visiting both Abuja and Maiduguri, the team reviewed humanitarian practice and policy issues, including inter-agency response leadership; NGO coordination structures; the implementation of Transformative Agenda best practices; and humanitarian access and delivery modalities.

Within this report, written by the mission participants, InterAction provides observations, key findings and recommendations for Nigeria and the wider Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

III. Nigeria Mission Observations and Findings

Leadership

Main Observations

Following the growing displacement in northeast Nigeria, in November 2014 the resident coordinator (RC) was double-hatted with clearly defined humanitarian coordinator (HC) responsibilities. Furthermore, in January 2015, the Emergency Relief Coordinator appointed a deputy humanitarian coordinator to bolster the collective response to the growing humanitarian crisis. The actual scale and quality of the humanitarian response, partly because of a collective desire to “look the other way,” has however been grossly insufficient. In this sense, the leadership of the humanitarian response was not effective through 2015.

A sea change is now underway, with the arrival of a new humanitarian coordinator in January 2016. Competent and determined, the new humanitarian coordinator appears ready to lead and challenge the humanitarian community. With the support of other UN officials, the NGOs, and donors, the HC’s priority of shifting the center of gravity closer to the field will be an essential test to the operationalization of a stronger response in northeast Nigeria.

¹ McIlreavy is Vice-President for Humanitarian Policy and Practice, Schopp is Director of Humanitarian Practice.

Related to shifting the center of gravity, the deputy humanitarian coordinator (DHC) position is a role that the majority of humanitarian response actors in Nigeria agreed can provide added value, but only if based in Maiduguri. Movement of senior UN leadership to Borno State would provide an opportunity to coordinate the humanitarian response from the crisis' epicenter, with a clear line of connectivity to the federal capital and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). Within Nigeria's decentralized federal system, this move would also ensure an appropriate level of representation on behalf of the international actors to Adamawa, Borno, Gombe, and Yobe state officials, and to the federal government responders based at state level.

It was noted that maintaining the DHC position in Abuja would result in potential crowding amongst the senior leadership positions of RC/HC, DHC, and the head of OCHA, resulting in duplicative and overlapping responsibilities and mandates, possibly complicating information-sharing and decision-making.

On leadership more generally, there was a broad consensus that the level of experience amongst humanitarian actors in Nigeria and the quality of national staff was an asset that should be further leveraged by all within the response. While some noted that their organization's humanitarian work was only a part of their overall Nigeria portfolio, we observed that the hindrances this created in providing the necessary leadership could be remedied with appropriate delegation of authorities, transparency, and allowing alternative representation .

Recommendations

- The humanitarian coordinator needs to be given every support by the HCT in her efforts to shift the center of gravity from the response to the northeast.
- The deputy humanitarian coordinator position should be renewed if and only if it can be based in Maiduguri, and is responsible for leading the collective operational response and interfacing with state government officials on behalf of the whole humanitarian community.
- All leadership within Nigeria could benefit from moving away from unhelpful and often erroneous generalizations. The result of judging each other by the faults of the past year, or the prejudices and inaccuracies of each other, or different contexts is lost time, energies, and frustration. Focus needs to be kept on commonalities – values and goals.

Humanitarian Country Team

Main Observations

The majority of HCT participants interviewed stated that the two latest HCT meetings, under the leadership of the new humanitarian coordinator, were the most productive ones in which they had participated. However, they also all noted that prior HCT meetings had set a very low bar, as they had been poorly managed and rarely led to collectively agreed upon decisions that furthered humanitarian analysis or the response.

It is worthy to note that few members of the HCT – which exists as an open forum in Nigeria – clearly understood what the expectations of such a body should be, thus underlying the limited prior humanitarian experience of in-country UN and NGO leadership. Many also mentioned that the HCT was “a place where everyone wanted to be.” Yet this seemed to be more connected to at worst, being seen, and at best, being informed on what every individual agency was doing or planning to do, rather than a place to define the collective response. There was a perception that agency/organizational leadership gave precedence to their long-standing development programs and portfolio over their humanitarian response activities.

As noted above, the HC's push to move the center of gravity to Maiduguri is a welcomed one. The will to displace the HCT to the northeast every other month, however, seems to be potentially a “fake good idea.” While this relocation undeniably may have a strong symbolic value – pushing the Abuja-based leadership to get a better sense of the realities on the ground in the northeast – it was also perceived by many in the field as creating an increased burden on

field staff with very limited direct benefits for the response itself.

The HC and HCT, including main donors, seemed rightfully encouraged and emboldened by the recent Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment (RPBA) in Borno State and the positive engagement of the World Bank in upcoming reconstruction activities in an area underserved by development actors, even before the scorched earth campaigns of Boko Haram. There was, however, also concern expressed at the perception by some that this RPBA was going to be a panacea that would replace the HRP, and, more importantly, the necessity to abide by humanitarian principles and serve the needs of the most affected populations where they are, rather than where some would want them to return to.

Recommendations

- The HCT meetings should be strengthened by clearly defining its objectives, its composition and its decision-making processes. Likewise, agendas should be shared well in advance of actual meetings to ensure meaningful engagement of all members.
- HCT members should support the HC in her efforts to develop strategic methods of progressing on HCT position development and decision-making (e.g. time-bound sub-HCT task team approach).
- Any shift in the center of gravity that does occur requires the HCT to revisit different modes of support, ensuring expectations are understood and that terms of references are clearly defined. For example, some expressed concern regarding the potential of HCT meetings rotating through field sites. This was seen as a potential disruptor with limited value to the response, and approaches of this sort need to be examined for value beyond the appearances.
- The HCT needs to ensure that there is clarity on the points of connectivity, and those of disconnect, between the Humanitarian Response Plan and the Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment for the northeast. There is a risk that reconstruction will become the dominant conversation and humanitarian activities will not receive the fundraising required.
- The HCT needs to proactively and collectively articulate positions on issues arising within Nigeria that impact the response, so as to ensure agreement at best, and at least, a common understanding of diverse views.

Coordination

Main Observations

The overall coordination of the humanitarian response was deemed insufficient by almost all actors. A lack of information-sharing was noted by some, though there was great inconsistency in what this meant. It appears that program information either gets lost in the sharing process, due to disparate collection, or isn't gathered at all, leading to an assumption that it isn't shared, rather than having an agreement on what should be collected. The lack of analysis of the needs was also problematic, with little being fed back to those providing information. Strengthening the OCHA office was welcomed by everyone, though questions were raised as to why this has taken so long.

Regarding sector coordination, apart from a few exceptions such as food security and livelihoods (FSL), the performance and relevance of sectoral leadership in Abuja was questioned by many with whom we spoke. InterAction believes the issue that plagues the sector working groups originates from a structural mismatch: the large majority of sectoral experts and implementers are based in the field, thus meetings are created in Abuja, at which the relevant people are not present. NGO country directors (CDs) noted that they run from sector meeting to sector meeting to try to ensure that their field colleagues' perspectives are taken into account, and are often asked questions that they are unable to answer. A situation which is neither the best use of CDs' time, nor productive for sectoral coordination. Likewise, staff based in Maiduguri or Adamawa – UN and NGOs alike – complain that their reliance on Abuja and the sector working groups based there create a detrimental delay in decision-making and unnecessarily complicates a coordination system that should be lighter. As a result, the Inter-Sector Working Group (ISWG) is not provided with useful actionable data to analyze, and in turn, provide to the HCT for strategic decision-making.

Recommendations

- The Humanitarian Country Team should consider shifting the sectoral center of gravity to Maiduguri to strengthen the relevance, flexibility, and responsiveness of the humanitarian response. Daily operational decision making for all agencies should be as decentralized as possible, leaving the inter-sectoral analysis, HCT decision-making, and federal government liaison centered in Abuja.
- While all actors support the scale-up of the coordination structure, both through OCHA and through sector lead agencies, InterAction is concerned that, under current pressures, the UN system will over-compensate and set up a cumbersome and unwieldy structure. The scale-up should focus on critically identified needs such as civil/military communications and centralized data collection and analysis, rather than trying to roll-out the full “cluster” structure machinery. In this sense, InterAction is somewhat concerned by the Humanitarian Coordinator’s request for \$7 million USD for coordination alone. There must be a balance between coordination and delivery in our collective fundraising efforts to avoid recreating an imbalance between response and coordination, akin to the situation in Central African Republic.

Humanitarian Access / Humanitarian Action

Main Observations

The beginnings of a conversation on access restrictions and access negotiations have finally started in Abuja and Maiduguri levels, with the support of NRC and now with investments by WFP. The main conclusions of these discussions however seem to be a recognition that very little is known by the humanitarian community and that much more work and analysis needs to be done to understand the context and the real barriers to access before making decisions.

In this sense, the NGO community is gravely concerned by the expressed intent of the United Nations agency to proceed with the use of military escorts in Borno State. While the needs are undeniable, more reflection and discussions should be had around the adverse consequences of the use of military escorts and association with a party to the conflict, especially when that party is responsible for the exactions and forced displacement of its populations. The marginalization of populations in the northeast of Nigeria was first expressed through police and military brutality and in part has led to the insurgency that eventually morphed into Boko Haram. The humanitarian community should tread carefully to ensure the centrality of protection within its programming, including maintaining access not necessarily for today alone, but for the tomorrows as well.

Furthermore, it is also painfully clear that the response in areas where humanitarians do have access, such as Maiduguri town, is not at the scale it should be, providing, at best, minimal assistance to an estimated 1.5 million IDPs.

Recommendations

- The HC should table a discussion on armed escorts at the HCT, using the IASC guidance developed for this purpose, and ensure that the conversation is one of understanding and willingness to agree to disagree. Differences of positioning will most likely occur among members of the humanitarian community and all sides should respect differing approaches so as to not create detrimental divisions.
- More needs to be done in terms of bolstering NGO and UN presence and action in Maiduguri town, focusing heavily on the IDPs hosted by the local communities. By all accounts, the solution is not a plethora of new actors, but rather a bolstering of organizations already on the ground, which have the institutional capacity to scale up and have a larger footprint.
- Donors need to recognize the magnitude of the crisis as well as of the need and to start funding the humanitarian response at appropriate levels (in Nigeria as well as throughout the Lake Chad basin).

NGO Forum / NGO Voice

Main Observations

All NGO country directors expressed commitment and support to the NGO Forum; conversely recognizing that they did not do justice to this commitment through investing the requisite time and energy. It is also worthy to note that all actors value the role and voice of NGOs responding to the northeast emergency. The Forum should build upon this goodwill and be a stronger voice for the NGOs.

The recent growth of the Forum and relative instability in staffing has, however, exacerbated some underlying issues regarding the functioning of the Forum. A desire to try to be everything to everyone has led to a lack of collective agreement on the goal or objectives of the Forum. For some, its main role is to advocate on humanitarian needs and situations, for others, to influence and define policy implementation. Some also see it as an operational coordination body for NGOs. Given the limited bandwidth of the NGO Forum staff, this lack of focus has led to frustrations and, at times, failures.

In turn, without a clear collective vision of the Forum's purpose, there remains uncertainty on what type of structure and representation the Forum would need to be most effective. Is the best model a secretariat, which is very dependent on the NGO country directors carrying the burden – or a collective NGO representation, which requires a more senior peer who has authorities to speak on behalf of the collective, based on bilateral, group discussions as well as on his or her own experience and knowledge-base?

Recommendations

- The NGOs need to get comfortable with their diversity, in terms of programming approaches, longevity and status in Nigeria, etc. A culture of sameness and consensus is not required to be successful.
- The NGOs need to define how they will manage decisions, so as to not cripple decision-making through unrealistic or unobtainable goals. NGOs must seek a flexible approach to governance, including good-faith consultation efforts, informal information collection, proxies, and small group sign-offs (vs. whole).
- While the most senior-level representation is welcomed, allow NGOs, especially those with multiple mandates, to nominate the most relevant decision-maker from their senior staff to be their representative, as necessary.
- The Forum should define representation parameters, so that the expectations and responsibilities of those representing others are clear.
- Consider creating buy-in mechanisms to ensure consistent engagement by NGOs in the Forum – fees, suspension for non-engagement, etc.
- The Forum needs to define its current and future relationship with national NGOs.
- The Forum should encourage NGO meetings at field level and ensure that these serve the purpose and needs of the NGOs, and do not become subsumed by other needs within the response.

V. Concluding Remarks

When humanitarians denounce the “politicization” of aid, they are usually referring to the instrumentalization of humanitarian assistance to serve political goals – be they from the host or from the donor government – rather than the alleviation of human suffering, its stated goal. However, the case of the crisis in northeastern Nigeria illustrates another facet of the politicization of aid: ignoring the severity and magnitude of a humanitarian crisis in order to not ruffle the feathers of a government that many actors wish to appease. This results in a de facto “looking the other way” policy that has influenced the willingness of donor countries to accurately portray the seriousness of the displacement crisis and has therefore stunted their ability to appropriately fund the humanitarian response in northeast Nigeria. The reason for such choices can be manifold, ranging from politics to economics, and were exacerbated by the fact that the crisis worsened during a two-year period that included national elections and a change of political leadership at the federal level. Similarly, most international organizations present in Nigeria prior to

the escalation of the displacement crisis in the northeast appear to have chosen to prioritize their relationship with the government of Nigeria – essential for the continuation of their large development programming portfolios – over raising the alarm over the severity of the crisis. And, this behavior took place in an environment where the government, while rightfully assertive and critical, did not appear to be overly obstructive of humanitarian actors.

In this sense, it is rather ironic that the country that is considered by many as the birthplace of modern humanitarianism with the Biafran war in the end of the 1960s, just witnessed a less than empathetic and effective response to a grave humanitarian crisis.

VI. Annex

A. List of Bilateral Meetings

Organization/Agency
Action Against Hunger (Country Director, Maiduguri Field Coordinator + 3)
Catholic Relief Services (Director, Yobe State Emergency Coordinator)
COOPI (Child Protection Coordinator, Logistics Manager)
Danish Refugee Council (Abuja Head of Office)
DFID (Sr Social Development Advisor, Conflict Advisor, +1)
European Commission Humanitarian Office (Head of Office, ECHO)
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Representative)
International Medical Corps (Country Director)
International Office of Migration (Rapid Response Officer, Maiduguri HoSO)
International Rescue Committee (Country Director; Maiduguri Field Coordinator & program staff – at office & visits)
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-OCB Head of Mission)
Mercy Corps (Director of Humanitarian Programs, +1)
Norwegian Refugee Council (Country Director, Advocacy Head x2)
NGO Forum (Coordinator)
Oxfam, (Humanitarian Head + team)
Plan International (Country Director)
Save the Children (Director + 6, Maiduguri Field Coordinator)
UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (x2)
UN Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator
UNDP (Communications Specialist)
UNFPA (field staff)
UN OCHA (Head of Office x2, Humanitarian Affairs Officer)
UN World Food Programme (Senior Coordinator, Tech Cooperation with NEMA)
UNHCR (Deputy Representative Protection, Protection Cluster Coordinator, field staff)
UNICEF (Representative, Health Specialist Maiduguri)
USAID Mission (Deputy Mission Director, Supervisory Program Officer)

B. List of Multilateral Meetings

Organization/Agency
NGO Forum – International NGO Steering Committee (4 + 1 Forum Staff)
Action Against Hunger; IRC; Christian Aid; IMC; NGO Forum staff
Humanitarian Country Team (observer)
Debrief with NGO Forum
Action Against Hunger; IRC; DRC; CRS; Save the Children; Mercy Corps; Plan; NGO Forum staff x 2