

Closing remarks on VOICE– BOND meeting ‘Risk sharing to reach the Grand Bargain’

Dominic Crowley, VOICE President

Christian Aid office, London, Wednesday 20th March.

Thank you

Before attempting to try to summarise some aspects of the discussions, I would like to sincerely thank:

- The BOND humanitarian working group and the VOICE secretariat for co-organising this meeting
- All of the speakers and facilitators who have provided us with consistently excellent presentations
- Christian Aid in general and Michael Mosselmans in particular for hosting the meeting today – and for hosting the VOICE Board on Monday and Tuesday
- The Belgium MFA for funding the VOICE Grand Bargain project
- Everyone who attended – especially those of you who have stayed. Your active engagement has been essential for ensuring that we have had an interesting and informative day

Reaching the Grand Bargain

VOICE and BOND chose to focus the day on ‘risk sharing to reach the Grand Bargain’ – they obviously felt that they – and we – needed the challenge of not one, but two issues that are broad, deep and essential to the future of humanitarian action – and that was before they added nexus to the mix.

I have been tasked with trying to offer a summary of the day and to highlight some issues from the VOICE perspective and I will try to deal with the Grand Bargain and the issues of risk in turn.

The Grand Bargain offers us an opportunity to make meaningful changes to the way in which humanitarian aid is funded and delivered. It is an agreement of great – but yet unrealised – potential. The challenge for us all is – in the words of Kathrin Schick this morning – to ensure that it does not become just another talking shop – we have had too many of these already.

What we need to agree upon is how we ensure that the intent and commitments of the Grand Bargain signatories are realised.

It was worrying to hear Matthew from CHASE saying that there are those who are suggesting that the Grand Bargain has had its day and should be grandfathered. This is an agreement that seeks to make systemic and systematic changes to the way humanitarian aid is delivered and it is only in its infancy. As such, it was reassuring to hear Nasra note the many positive intended – and unintended – consequences that the Grand Bargain has generated in Somalia. It was great to get such a positive view from someone who is working in one of the most challenging contexts for humanitarian actors.

Matthew’s comments about the challenges of grasping the ‘high-hanging fruit’ were also interesting. It is one thing to do the easy things – to pick the ‘low-hanging fruit’ - to have some quick wins for the process. It is quite another to address the deeper challenges. But we should not shy away from doing so simply because these ones are hard to grasp. Indeed, it is precisely because they are hard that we should grasp them. If we do not do so we will not be able to deliver the changes that are needed.

It was also reassuring to hear Nasra speak of collective action between national and international NGOs. We have, I hope, moved on a long way from the divisive and divided engagement between NGOs that characterised too much of our discussion at the WHS. It is important that we have done this, as for most international NGOs, co-operation and working with national and local partners is central to all that we do and it is the only way that we will make progress on the Grand Bargain and so meet the needs of disaster affected people.

I was also very taken by Michael’s call for donors to be both more flexible and more consistent in how they considered risk – and engagement with national and local organisations. But we also need to recall that it is

not necessarily the 'donors' who are constraining this – it may well be politicians and other ministries that are having this impact.

The issue of risk

The presentations from Vickie from ODI and Lyndsay from InterAction showed the importance of evidence, gathered from or generated by practitioners. The development of the ODI report also highlights the challenges of identifying and generating consistent data from a diverse range of actors – and ensuring that those actors then provide the data that is needed.

But I would suggest that the reports (albeit that new ODI's Grand Bargain report is yet to be written) have generated a range of issues that is so broad and deep that we need to identify a manageable numbers of the essential ones that we could all work on together.

Risk is broad, complex and changing and – as noted by Nasra – our understanding of and response to it must also change. The challenge is that while it is a word in very common usage, it is not one for which there is an easy or a shared definition. To hear Matthew say that DfID is a risk tolerant donor may be true in some respects, but may not be in key senses from which NGOs perceive and seek to address risk.

If the ambition of the Grand Bargain is to be realised, we must address the nature of risk in its many manifestations. If we fail to do so, then we will not succeed in delivering on the Grand Bargain. It really is that simple.

But risk also manifests itself in other ways to challenge the realisation of the Grand Bargain – donor demands for ever more and more detailed information on an ever widening range of issues seems to fly in the face of the commitment to simplification.

The fears of the new and evolving counter-terrorism legislation is impacting on where and with whom international NGOs work. It has also been used by some banks to justify their unwillingness to facilitate NGO operations in too many challenging contexts, when it often seems that it is more the bottom line than this legislation that is driving this – banks can generate more profit more easily from other customers and, for some, it would seem that the challenges of working with NGO customers is simply not worth the hassle.

Late last year, the VOICE board and secretariat presented to the Development Committee of the European Parliament. The issue of banking was probably the one issue from the many that we raised that they seized upon. It was not necessarily the one that we would have prioritised and it suggested that we had much work to do in clearly identifying and sharing key messages, challenges and 'asks' in a way that non-aid practitioners can understand and take action on.

On a related note, the current counter-terrorism resolution that the French government is seeking to rush through for approval at the UN Security Council next week is one that could deeply impact on the delivery of humanitarian aid in the very many conflict contexts in which so many of us work. It is vital that the intense efforts by NGOs or other humanitarian actors, over the last week result in provision being made in the resolution to allow for the continued delivery of humanitarian aid.

As has been evident today, the NGO community has a lot to say on the issues of the Grand Bargain and risk management, and it is essential that our voice is clear and that it is heard. We look forward to the next Grand Bargain meeting in Geneva, and the upcoming ODI report, and hope that they both will provide clear and actionable recommendations in relation to these issues.

Many thanks.