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The world needs help: that's why we must coordinate our efforts

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In Dubai on Friday, leaders from academia, business, government and society will come together to discuss solutions to some of the most critical challenges facing humanity at the World Economic Forum's "Summit on the Global Agenda".

No doubt the global financial crisis will be at the top of the agenda. The recent turmoil threatens to affect nearly all countries in one way or another. But during this tumultuous time, we must not overlook the needs of those who continue to suffer acutely from crises not of their own making. While global headlines focus on financial troubles, wars, floods, droughts and food shortages continue unabated on nearly every continent. Millions of people around the world still need immediate, life-saving assistance. If anything, the challenge of meeting their needs is becoming more acute than ever.

The humanitarian community was already struggling to cope with increased demands for aid even before the financial world went into a tailspin. Extreme weather events associated with climate change, coupled with dramatic food and fuel price rises, have pushed millions more to the margins of survival while at the same time making it harder and more expensive to deliver the assistance they need. The Middle East is not exempt. Parts of Syria, Jordan and Central Asia are experiencing severe drought, placing further strain on already scant food resources and pushing millions more into food insecurity.

Over the past months, the Governments of Syria and Tajikistan have issued appeals, partly to address the humanitarian needs brought on by drought. Earlier this year, it was estimated that an additional six per cent of Yemenis had dropped below the poverty line as a result of the rise in the price of staple foods, joining the 40 per cent of the population living on less than US\$2 per day.

The need for effective, coordinated action to help those in need has also never been more critical. All humanitarian actors – aid agencies, governments and NGOs – must work together to ensure the most efficient use of precious time and resources. No one humanitarian actor or donor can adequately meet all needs. We need to harness the diversity of the humanitarian community, close gaps and avoid duplication.

Coordination does not mean pulling all humanitarian actors and donors into a single command structure. Rather, it reflects the reality that by working together, the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts. Together, we can accomplish more than any one of us could achieve individually. From aid workers on the front lines of a crisis to policy makers and donors in government offices, we can all play a part in ensuring that aid is delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible.

There is still clearly a role for well-targeted bilateral aid based on need. However, I am concerned that many countries, in this region and elsewhere, underestimate the fundamental benefits that come with the multilateral humanitarian approach, based on agreed priorities set out in a coordinated plan for a particular country in crisis.

This helps to ensure that aid reaches those who need it most, and that there is clear financial accountability for aid expenditures. By working through multilateral channels, we can also ensure that the full range of humanitarian assistance – shelter, health, water/sanitation, food,

right kind of aid at the right time.

Important steps are being taken in this area. Later this month, in partnership with my department at the UN – the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – the UAE is hosting an international launch for the 2009 Humanitarian Appeal. This annual appeal is central to our efforts to ensure that the humanitarian community – NGOs, governments and the UN – act as one when delivering life-saving assistance to millions of people around the world.

Earlier this year, the UAE also announced the establishment of its Aid Coordination Office, which is designed to track the considerable sums of money that are being donated from this country and ensure that they are being used in a targeted way.

I hope that such structures will allow these governments to coordinate better with other humanitarian actors so that they know which needs have already been catered for, and which countries, regions or projects are most in need of their assistance. I also hope this process will encourage greater interaction with the multilateral system, and greater channelling of funds through multilateral agencies and funds.

Countries in the region have demonstrated time and again their generous impulses on humanitarian issues, and their understanding of the need for international solidarity between the rich and the poor. In hosting the Summit on the Global Agenda for the World Economic Forum as well as the launch for the 2009 Humanitarian Appeal, the UAE is again proving its willingness to harness creative thinking to find innovative solutions to the world's most pressing problems.

These efforts have never been more necessary. The lives and well-being of millions of people depend on our ability to work together to overcome the challenges ahead.

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