

**Speech by NGO Consortium Representative
2008 Somalia CAP Launch
11 December 2007**

At the CAP workshop in September, I made reference to the Somali men and women, staff of national and International NGOS who are working against mounting odds.

When we are launching a plan this big, this ambitious, we need a few basic things that we can depend on:

- Acceptance and cooperation from authorities to be able to implement programs with local communities;
- an assurance from authorities that staff and equipment will be safe;
- confidence that it is possible to move supplies, equipment and staff from one program area to another without risk of attack or harassment;
- an acknowledgment that NGOs make a positive and necessary contribution to the wellbeing and prosperity of a community;
- We, as humanitarian actors, must also accept that we don't always get it right. We have to be open to dialogue and discussion and in certain circumstances, negotiation, but not at the expense of those who are suffering.

We talk a lot about humanitarian space but we don't really explain what that is.

Humanitarian space does not mean that NGOs are above the law and can do what we want. It means that where people are in need and where NGOs have the means and the capacity to respond, we will be allowed to do so and in many situations, we are actively supported by authorities, who create a conducive environment for the delivery of aid.

And what does this entail?

In the context of Somalia, it means recognition of a problem and cooperation to be able to address it. In parts of the country, we are facing ever increasing complications in getting assistance to people. Travelling around Somalia is not for the faint-hearted. Aggrieved communities and often individuals within otherwise welcoming communities see kidnapping, threats and various kinds of attacks as a way to make a point or force an issue, believing that the NGO might stop for a while but will come back eventually so there is no real harm done. We walk a precarious line when this is seen as an acceptable way to work. It also costs us severely in time, money, morale and credibility.

This year, we have seen NGOs faced with increasing demands for payments at checkpoints – the number of checkpoints varies, depending on the time of the day and on particular roads. These payments are not always authorised or official and they are not consistent demands so no one is prepared for how much it is going to cost to move supplies from one point to another. This is time-consuming and stressful and unnecessary, when people need food, water, shelter and recognition of their plight.

NGO staff are worried when they have to move, because they do not know what questions they will be asked, what equipment will be taken from them, if the vehicle

will be seized and whether things will get out of control and shooting will start. In many cases, we do not even know what group is at the checkpoint, which leaves people exposed and vulnerable. That is not a good way to work and it is an awful lot to expect people to do so on a daily basis. If this is what a person who is identified as a staff member of an NGO and carries an ID card, in a clearly marked vehicle has to face, what must it be like for someone just going about their business, or someone trying to move with all their belongings and their children to find a place of safety?

All the NGOs that are members of the NGO Consortium have by their membership agreed to the Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct.

We commit to our obligation to provide humanitarian assistance as and where it is needed. Our motivation is to alleviate human suffering in a non-partisan and non-political way.

Since January 2007, the NGO Consortium has been negotiating registration procedures for NGOs. It is important that we have a structure to work within and we are committed to addressing the concerns of authorities on how NGOs operate. However, registration mechanisms should be designed to complement aid activities and ensure that aid reaches those who need it most, when they need it most.

A registration mechanism must also respect the right to receive assistance and the principle of impartiality and independence.

In return, as NGOs, we have a responsibility to hold ourselves accountable in an open and transparent manner, from a financial perspective but most importantly, from an effectiveness perspective and we can all be honest in admitting that this is a weakness and something we must continue to address in our work in Somalia.

As NGOs, we are accountable to those who wish to assist, and invest in us the capacity to assist, and equally importantly, we are accountable to those who need assistance. We recognise that we do not work alone, and that coordination, complementarity and good practice are key to getting a job done, and done well.

Monitoring the work of NGOs and developing a structure to be able to understand who is doing what and where, and if they are doing it well is a very important process, and NGOs can make a strong and positive contribution to such a system. We work within regulatory systems in other countries and it is in our interest to have a mechanism that supports us and allows us to carry out our work safely and effectively. However, this cannot be done over night and not at the expense of those who continue to badly need assistance. It doesn't have to be an either/or process. It can be both, in a constructive and collaborative fashion.

One of the response plans outlined in the CAP is that of Access and Security. One of the objectives is to 'Enhance and ensure the safety and security of humanitarian staff and operations'. This is just one of four objectives. On its own, it will be a difficult task in a country that is reportedly 'awash with weapons'.

Outside of the limiting confines of the current discussion on access is the fact that when there are so many weapons in the country, the risk of accidents happening is huge. An example of this resulted in the death of Medina General, an exemplary

Somali woman, a few weeks ago when she died tragically trying to deliver aid. A bystander was also killed in the accident – one bullet killed 2 people. I would like to use this opportunity to honour her and the thousands of people like her, who try their best, in a very dangerous and complex environment.