

“Prevention of Corruption in Humanitarian Actions”.

The Swedish Red Cross and Transparency International (TI) Sweden jointly organised, on May 23rd 2011, the seminar “Prevention of Corruption in Humanitarian Actions”. The aim of the seminar was two-folded; to raise awareness of potential risks of corruption in humanitarian aid as well as to identify preventive mechanisms to minimize the risks. In addition, Transparency International presented their pocket guide of good practices for preventing corruption in humanitarian operations.

The seminar gathered around thirty participants from a number of civil society organisations, including representatives from the Red Cross, Save the Children, the Swedish Organisations of Persons with disabilities International Development Cooperation Association (Shia), the Swedish Church, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and Médecins sans frontières (MSF). Representatives from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish development agency, Sida, were also attending the seminar.

The seminar was opened by Ulrika Årehed Kågström, Secretary General of the Swedish Red Cross, who drew on the organisation’s own experiences in relation to the now enhanced internal control system, which includes several wide-ranging functions, such as staff training and a whistleblowing mechanism. Årehed Kågström pointed out the importance of continuous training and daily awareness raising activities as central tools in the prevention of corruption occurrences. The main lesson learned, according to her, was to handle the issue in a broad aspect. Comprehensive awareness raising, open discussions and continuous training were found to be key elements for mainstreaming the issue into daily operations and to bring awareness of corruption consequences to all levels in the organisation.

Lars-Göran Engfeldt, Chairman of TI Sweden, emphasized that corruption has been characterized as perhaps the single greatest threat to development. Hands on guidance on preventing corruption in humanitarian operations acquired an ever increasing importance as the frequency of humanitarian emergencies is steadily growing – an outflow of the overall sustainability crisis. Furthermore, Engfeldt gave a brief introduction to TI Sweden’s upcoming work on the consolidation and strengthening of the national chapter that will take place commencing 2011. He then left the floor to Carin Norberg, board member of TI Sweden, who introduced the background to the seminar.

Following the tsunami in Asia in 2004 and the subsequent large flow of aid, Transparency International began in 2005 a research project to identify the risks of corruption in humanitarian aid. The aim was to suggest rules and approaches for reducing these risks. The research collaboration resulted in not only a comprehensive survey of these risks, but also the handbook “Good Practices for Preventing Corruption in Humanitarian Operations”. The handbook was compiled with the contribution of a number of international aid organisations and chaired by Ms. Roslyn Hees. It has since been followed up by a pocket guide, designed primarily as a quick reference for humanitarian aid workers in the field.

Norberg finalised with reflecting over the fact that corruption is, unfortunately, still a strong taboo in humanitarian organisations and is merely dealt with upon occurrence by responsible desk officers. The issue of establishing necessary preventive and pro-active measures must therefore be brought up to the decision-making level and trickled down into the whole organisation. She also emphasized, as the previous speakers, the need of daily training and awareness raising activities in order to build capacity in promoting integrity and fighting corruption. The main element of the seminar was the presentation, made by Roslyn Hees, of the pocket guide of good practices on the prevention of corruption in humanitarian operations that was launched in 2010.

Hees explained that the pocket guide is designed to help anyone working in the humanitarian sector identify and prevent the corruption risks faced by their particular organisation. The guide should be considered as a menu of good practice stand-alone tools, not explicit ready-made technical solutions or set standards, and is primarily focused on how staff in the field can introduce and include the corruption angle in their daily operations.

One of the recommendations that Hees mentioned was the importance of a holistic approach, in which anti-corruption policies and actions are not only confined to the audit departments. Rather, it should be considered as part of good quality management and a strategic issue for the board or steering committees. She also stressed the importance of on-site monitoring and involvement of independent local NGO's as monitoring mechanisms. Further, easily available disaggregated information is needed for monitoring by the beneficiaries as part of empowering the recipient communities. In addition, promoting accountability as well as offering assistance in corruption detection are vital in order to build integrity capacity.

Transparency International wishes that the handbook should be integrated into existing integrity programs and incorporated into humanitarian organisation's own development agendas. Additionally, TI is striving to introduce the guidelines into the general humanitarian agenda and reform and is encouraging all implementing agencies to report corruption in order to raise the issue as a common problem, hence increasing the pressure for an open dialogue and the need for quality mechanisms for promoting integrity. Hees continued by highlighting the importance of a rights-based social trust, i.e. a common understanding among beneficiaries of holding decision-makers and equivalent people accountable.

In the second half of the seminar, the participants were invited to openly present and discuss the challenges and experiences they might have encountered in their respective context. The organisations brought to the floor various approaches to the matter, where some explained that the policies were unfortunately constrained to the financial units but expressed willingness to lift the issue to a higher level as well as incorporate it with all departments within the organisation. Others had already a comprehensive system that included training programs for staff, whistle-blowing functions, support to local cooperating organisations, as well as advanced risk analyses when entering a new collaborating partnership.

Among the general conclusions from the group discussions the following can be mentioned:

- The need for donor accountability: a need for the donors to facilitate an open environment for discussing as well as reporting corruption, including providing mechanisms for intermediaries facing the issue of both acting as a donor as well as implementing agency
- A need for a systemic change is inevitable, as results in development are often measured in terms of quantifiable indicators, leaving little or no room for long-term actions and planning

- The issue of incorporating preventive and pro-active measures should be brought to decision-making level and considered as part of good quality management
- Policies are in place, nevertheless implementation is lacking. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are crucial for a successful implementation
- Incentives are needed for staff and implementing agencies to report corrupt actions or events
- The Swedish law needs to be strengthened in order to protect whistle-blowers. Although Sweden has signed a number of conventions against corruption, there is still a weak legislation

Pia Stavås Meier, International Director of the Swedish Red Cross, summarized that although the humanitarian sector is better off today than a decade ago, the relatively slow progress in this area shows how difficult it is to address this issue and much work still lays ahead. This is a strategic issue that needs to be addressed at management level to build more accountable organizations. She stressed the need of incentives for whistle-blowers to build an enabling environment for transparency, in contrast to reported cases of marginalisation of individuals or economic sanctions on organisations. To support the process we need donors that are realistic and support capacity building in preventing abuse of power. She appreciated the open discussions, despite the sensitive matter, during the seminar and asked for a continuation of the dialogue in as well as among the participating organisations.

Roslyn Hees re-emphasized the importance of both internal and intra-organisational discussions in order to bring the topic to the international development agenda.

Carin Norberg finalised the seminar by presenting the various ways national TI chapters are working with inspiring local activities and contributing to a broad movement; as a facilitating organisation bringing applicable tools and relevant knowledge, as a provider of meeting places and partners as well as a monitoring function