Panel remarks - Dr Dawit Zawde, President, Africa Humanitarian Action

International discussions and consultations about responses to disasters and conflict in Africa have long been distinguished by differences. These differences spin around who is responsible for the slow pace forward - a never-ending dispute over intentions, performances and resources between, in short, the South and the North.

I will make a few, brief remarks as some of these differences apply to humanitarian assistance in Africa. The aim being to reduce stalemate and to be effective and efficient for those whose plight we claim to serve.

Humanitarian assistance has made a difference to many people around the globe, particularly in the emergency phases. However, while some good has been done - much more should and could be achieved. So far we all agree, but when it comes to the causes and remedies we differ, and begin to lay blame on each other.

Today, official humanitarian operations largely remain within a small group of actors who are often far removed from the ground and its realities and from the people whose predicament they claim to look after. They set the rules and practices. The course of action is dictated by institutional and individual interests of governments, a variety of international and civil organisations, mostly in the northern hemisphere.

Political and military alliances and networks are ever more trying to integrate humanitarian aid into their strategic agendas. Equally the United Nations' integrated missions are heading the same way. Humanitarian aid has become politicised and militarised, putting in danger the fundamental humanitarian principle of free and open access and assistance to victims in need everywhere and at all times. Aid, to a high degree is interlinked and serves financial, political, and military interests. These interests play out and interact at global, regional and national levels.

The unprecedented growth of the humanitarian enterprise and the development of standards, procedures and techniques have led to a prompt and large-scale presence of aid organisations on the ground, remaining as long as media helps their fund-raising.

The many set-ups of co-ordination, the numerous workshops, all the initiatives to create standards for good humanitarian behaviour and complementarities of actions all serve the *system* well – but not necessarily the recipients of aid.

This mode of operation has resulted in a business-like approach - amateurish though - it has also reduced creativity and flexibility with regard to ever different events. Short aid cycles and unrealistic time-frames have led to unfinished business being left behind.

Over the last four decades, the aid world has spent billions on humanitarian and development assistance and on co-ordination and partnerships. Northern agencies don't really have to earn the money; it comes free and repeatedly - and with big bonuses. The reasons for this money being put forward vary, but its usefulness is severely hampered by the gap between what funds are being made available for, and authentic needs and priorities. And if a programme does not take place, the chosen target group is unlikely to find out.

A too large share of the funds have become self-serving, spent on the aid mechanisms along the enigmatic roads to the vulnerable communities. And this despite seemingly in-built control mechanisms of internal and independent audits and evaluations - also firms, individual consultants and auditors have got caught up in keeping the business alive.

Today it is the same people who invent and design programmes and projects, and then vouch for them as robust and valid products. They also implement and monitor them, and then verify results and performance; and finally it is still the same people who establish the narratives that are helpful to their causes.

Having indicated the reality of aid what are the grievances in the North-South interdependency? In simplistic shorthand, the South's chief point is that the North must, and is morally compelled to continue to make larger financial resources available. And it should be done more swiftly and with fewer conditions. The South also grumble that the North has an unfair influence and powers of academia, media and communication resources, and hence dominate and dictate policy and the thinking about aid.

On the other hand, the North complains about the insufficient capacity in the South to absorb funds in a constructive and timely manner, without giving though to the need to develop the requisite capacity in the South. The North also points to the lack of good governance, of unethical behaviour, and of financial corruption. Hence, it considers stringent controls necessary, and prefers to act in its own rights whenever possible.

I am deeply convinced that until we stop to repeat ourselves and blame each other, and start to come up with tangible and practical proposals for changes that make sense - not just serving ourselves but those in whose name we gather - we will not make much progress. I will now indicate some of the paradigms which might help to take us forward in the African context.

My *first* suggestion concerns how to improve results, and make more of the funds reach the communities and people in whose name we justify ourselves. We claim to know what they need and what is good for them. Sometimes we even decide in our self-rightness to represent them. But they are rarely included in our discussions, our structures or our decision-making. So one improvement would be to move beyond consulting with our clients and *include their representatives* in all processes and activities.

I am a firm believer in the key role of *developing capacity* in all we set out to undertake. The *second* initiative I would like to share with you therefore concerns a common, homogeneous, and systematic education of the policy and executive leadership in the African aid world. Aid has become a career removed from personal engagement and volunteerism which piloted humanitarian work well in the past. We need to fortify leaders and staff in aid work with integrity, competence and energy and build up humanitarian brigades in the continent.

In 2004, *Africa Humanitarian Action* took an initiative to create an *African centre for Humanitarian Action (ACHA),* as an education and information centre which, at a symposium similar to this one, met with enthusiastic support. Unfortunately this keenness was not followed up with the signal funds. It is in this context, I conclude that we, as Africans, need to create our own resources and stop looking elsewhere to fund our own institutions. Only once this is done, will we be able to talk and act with our Northern partners on a level playing field in the humanitarian arena.

My *third* point is therefore to call on our pan-African institutions - and I think in particular of the African Union, the African Development Bank Group, and the regional groupings in Africa - to provide *institutional funding* to ensure the presence and the quality of home-grown African humanitarian and development organisations in the international *fora.* It is both feasible and realistic that they should and can be funded as organisations from African sources. Pan-African institutions should also use and promote them as flagship agencies in African disaster and conflict situations on a regular basis.

Finally, in a globalised world, where we are all interdependent, it is likely that we all would be helped by an institution which would oversee the humanitarian aid world in a positive, helpful way in both the North and the South. It could set norms, regulate and validate actions, and produce non-partisan views on results and performances. This institution could perhaps also issue a clean sheet every two or three years, and express opinions on who is best-suited to provide the humanitarian services and eligible to receive funds based on results obtained on the ground. It should integrate and use the work of many already existing set-ups.

The closest I can come when trying to give a name or sum up such an institution is "Humanitarian *Ombudsman*". The key to its usefulness is two-fold. One is that everybody buys in to the idea, and secondly that it becomes to the largest extent possible *independent.*

I thank you.