

The Forum is Not a Project

Minimum Standards for Host Agencies



The advice provided within this document stems from interviews with 18 NGO forum secretariats, multiple donor agency representatives, and host agency staff at both field and HQ levels.

It is also informed by InterAction's decade-long history of supporting NGO fora within the global humanitarian ecosystem with annual conferences and over a dozen field visits.

Introduction

What are NGO fora? What are host agencies?

Active in nearly all of today's acute and protracted crises are NGO fora—coordination bodies through which NGOs can collectively and effectively engage with the international humanitarian, refugee response, and development architectures. They provide a mechanism to minimize and mitigate operational risks with respect to delivering a principled and needs-based response; credible and democratic representation of the NGO community; and space for relationship building across local and international NGOs. They provide a critical link between the voices of affected populations and in-country leadership bodies such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). Well-run fora enhance humanitarian operations and lead to improved outcomes for affected populations.

Fora are considered independent entities with respect to their positions, priorities, and work. They are governed by their membership—usually led by a steering committee—in accordance with mutually agreed upon practices. In many acute and protracted crises, the fora have dedicated staffing support (a secretariat) that enables them to accomplish a broader range of functions and high levels of outreach and representation. Legally and administratively, these secretariats are either “Hosted,” i.e. supported by a third-party organization (usually a member NGO); or “Independent,” i.e. registered in their country of operation as a national NGO, international NGO, or association. Whether fora are hosted or independent depends on a variety of factors, including local legal and political contexts with respect to civil society.

Because NGO fora have been a feature of the humanitarian ecosystem for well over a decade, good practices have emerged from across a multitude of humanitarian contexts. Fora take different shapes and sizes, but lessons can be learned via their commonalities.

Successful fora all deliver:

- Mechanics to agree on collective NGO positions and to identify common challenges/needs.
- Credible representation of these positions and challenges/needs to the HCT, U.N., donors, government, and other relevant coordination and leadership mechanisms.
- Effective accomplishment of the other core functions identified and prioritized by members (e.g., information collection and sharing, policy analysis, operational coordination, capacity building, security, etc.).
- Facilitation of dialogue amongst and between international, national, and local NGOs.
- Facilitation of dialogue amongst and between humanitarian and development actors.

To achieve this success, all fora must have:

- Independence from any individual member, donor, or government influence over work priorities, and advocacy positions.
- Member engagement to a level that enables effective information gathering and sharing, and that supports the development of broad-based collective positions.
- Recognized, legitimate leadership and decision-making processes.
- Competent secretariat management with tenure longevity.
- Consistent and adaptive operations.

A forum that is well-run over multiple years develops considerable social and political capital. Fora that successfully distill and credibly represent collective NGO positions, that share information, that communicate legitimate concerns effectively, are sought out as key interlocutors. These fora attract engaged members. They are heard at all levels; their advocacy asks are adopted.

Hosting a forum is prestigious. The host agency is providing a service to the NGO community and the broader humanitarian ecosystem in-country that is both recognized and respected. Host agencies experience more immediate access to information and stakeholders, as well as a competitive edge, as they are seen as leaders in the response.

The relationship between a forum secretariat and its host agency is operational. In general, the host agency is responsible for contracts, benefits, insurance, and visas for secretariat staff; serves as a grant holder and financial manager for the forum's funding; ensures donor and legal compliance; and ensures staff safety and duty of care. In most cases, they also provide housing, office space, and transportation; and they are provided with direct or indirect cost recovery. The host agency is accountable to both forum donors and forum members to properly support the secretariat. Often, they have a dedicated spot on the forum steering committee (however, unable to be chair) in acknowledgment of the legal responsibility and operational support role that they are implementing on behalf of all members.

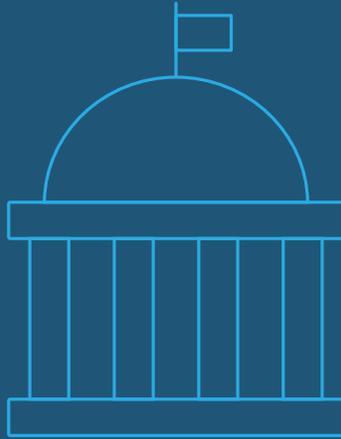
Fundamentally, it is very important that a perspective host agency enters into the relationship with a clear view of the risks and rewards: see annex A for key considerations.

This paper will delve into Best Practice and Minimum Standard recommendations for host agencies in the categories of (a) Governance; (b) Human Resources; (c) Operational Support; and (d) Grant and Financial Management.

Best Practice

Include a module on “How Fora Function” as part of all country director onboarding.

All INGO country directors should be onboarded to understand what forums are, how they function, and how to support them. Engaging with an NGO forum will almost certainly be a part of their job, regardless of whether they are a member organization, a steering committee member, or the host agency. For newly established fora, country directors can also serve as a vector for ensuring that the forum is taking advantage of the considerable institutional knowledge and global resources available from InterAction and ICVA, including: TOR and MOU templates and best practices, fundraising support, structural support, a recruitment roster for Forum staff, and more.



A. Governance

Good governance practices—leadership, decision-making pathways, and delineation of roles and responsibilities across the secretariat, steering committee, members and host agency—serve to bolster forum independence, improve member confidence and engagement, and ensure staff retention and consistency of operations.

Minimum Standard

Understand that the forum is not your project.

The forum is not a project of the host agency, and secretariat staff is not an extension of host agency staff. The secretariat represents all members equally, and the director¹ reports into the steering committee. This set up is in the interest of both the forum and the host agency. From the forum side, perceptions that the host agency has unjustified power undermines the legitimacy of the forum in the eyes of external stakeholders and decreases member confidence. From the host agency side, it lessens any potential negative reactions to forum advocacy in the eyes of donors or the government from reflecting unduly on the host agency.

The practices outlined throughout this paper provide practical guidance as to how the host agency can support independent forum governance and operations.

¹ The title of the head of the secretariat is most commonly director, however, in rare cases it is “coordinator” or “representative”. In this paper, the title of director is used interchangeably.

Best Practice

Before entering into a hosting agreement, ensure that an up-to-date forum governance document is in place; and then follow this document.

This document should clearly outline how leaders are elected, how decisions are taken, and representational roles and responsibilities. It minimizes misunderstandings and perceptions (and occurrences) of undue influence. It is the responsibility of the forum membership—led by the steering committee—to ensure this document is approved and in place. It is essential that the host agency (and the secretariat and steering committee) transparently follow this governance document. If something in the document is not working, the document must be updated, and membership must approve the update. Not following the document will erode member confidence.

Best Practice

Sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the forum.

This MOU should clarify respective roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority of the host agency, the secretariat and the steering committee with respect to forum human resources, financial management, donor relations, safety and security, and operational and administration support. It should be fully consistent with the forum governance document and signed by the host agency CD, the steering committee and the forum director. The MOU will likely not be legally binding; it is not a sub-grant. Nonetheless, it is important to formally and transparently set expectations and provide a basis for mutual accountability. Share it with host agency headquarters.

See annex B for a template MOU.

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Best Practice

Do not change host agencies unless there is a very good reason.

There are legitimate reasons that a host agency may step down: ceasing operations in the country, being unable to provide the required level of operational support, external pressure, etc. However, there are other reasons that are not recommended to force a change: giving another member “a turn” or accessing funding from a particular donor (subgrants facilitate this). Changing host agencies requires immense bureaucratic time and effort, which negatively impacts the forum’s representation, advocacy, and coordination work. It can also result in the loss of experienced expat and national secretariat staff. If you must change host agencies, ensure a very detailed, clear work plan is in place between the former host and the new host.

See annex C for a sample workplan and tracking plan for changing host agencies.



B. Human Resources

Forum secretariat offer, primarily and ultimately, skilled human resources. Failure to attract and retain high quality forum directors and staff undermines the quality and credibility or representation, the effectiveness of collective advocacy, member engagement, and funding. An effective forum director is the most important factor in the strength of the forum and its ability to accomplish its goals.

The compensation, management, and support provided to the secretariat by the host agency highly influences recruitment and retention, enabling staff to remain in place long enough to build trust with members, national civil society, government interlocutors, and humanitarian decision makers.

The position of forum director should be considered a logical progression from the position of NGO country director, rather than a steppingstone towards that role. The position requires a candidate with years of management experience in humanitarian response with exceptional planning and organizational skills, the ability to analyze and strategize around both advocacy and operational challenges, and the interpersonal and communication skills that enable diplomacy, consensus-building, and adept representation. It requires gravitas.

Forum directors represent the NGO community to the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), heads of UN agencies and the World

We have no problem funding our budget. Donors are quite satisfied with [the Forum] because the Coordinators have been quite senior, experienced advocates. Donors have confidence in us. We are a strong stakeholder, quite relevant, and have good collaboration and coordination with OCHA and donors.

-Forum Director who used to be a donor representative

You want an experienced person who doesn't have anything to prove, who has been a Country Director and is looking for a new and different role. Not someone who wants to be the boss of all, and not someone who can be bossed around.

-Forum Director who used to be a Country Director and a Forum Steering Committee member

Bank, donor representatives, heads of national civil society organizations, and, in most cases, government officials. This representation is formal (HCT meetings, for example) and informal (a focal point for questions, information sharing, and coordination). Often, they represent the response at regional and international venues, requiring even higher levels of political savvy. They decide when they can or should speak for the forum. They decide if they need to diplomatically reign in a steering committee member who is failing to represent an agreed collective position. These decisions require both the judgment and the respect that comes with seniority. Success in this role can improve outcomes for crisis-affected people. Mistakes or stumbles can negatively impact the NGO response.

Forum directors must advocate for and represent a wide breadth of issues—from the rights of crisis-affected people, to violations of international humanitarian law, to civil society space and localization, to response planning and coordination, to the humanitarian/development nexus, to accountability to affected people, and more. They may need to track, analyze, and negotiate solutions around humanitarian access, Countering the Financing of Terrorism (CTF) regulations, Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), security and bureaucratic impediments, and more. Working with and through their members, forum directors may be active in every sector and every level of a response, from field to cluster/working group to inter-cluster/sector to HCT to regional to global levels. They lessen (or heighten) tensions across national and international civil society response actors.

Forum directors have exceptionally high lateral management responsibilities. In order to effectively facilitate consensus and collective advocacy, member CDs must not only trust a forum director but view them as a peer. Members often hold highly divergent viewpoints. Members may subgrant to one another creating power imbalances. Forum directors need immense diplomacy to ensure all voices are heard.

This all remains true when first setting up a forum. In multiple cases, forum steering committees have sought to hire a program coordinator or manager when first hiring a secretariat. And yet, setting up a forum can be just as complicated, or even more so, than running an established one. This individual will shape representation, create systems, and be expected to ensure the neutrality and credibility of the forum.

We all manage multiple stakeholders, we all have discussions about how to expand humanitarian space, we all negotiate with governments...How do we deal with rebel groups, best principles, UN architecture. Discussions with the HCT, working group, clusters, etc.

-Forum Director of multiple years

Minimum Standard

Forum directors are considered senior in-country management positions.

Forum directors are interagency positions that are more senior and more complex than a review of their budget responsibilities and number of direct reports may imply, if looked at simplistically. In most cases, these positions should be graded at the equivalent level of a CD in the host agency's salary scale. Decisions about the grading should be taken in consultation with the steering committee and not made by the host agency alone.

As with any position, but especially given the complexity of the post, the forum director must have transparent, clear management lines and must receive constructive feedback on their performance. This is critical for retention, job performance, and taking corrective action if needed.

Best Practice

The forum director reports to the steering committee on all job responsibilities with an administrative line to the host CD on contractual issues, benefits, financial approvals and operational support.

Performance evaluations of the forum directors should be conducted by the steering committee (or a focal point within the steering committee) and incorporate feedback from the host agency CD (on operational issues) and the forum membership (e.g., via the annual member satisfaction survey). It may make sense for this to be done on the host agency performance evaluation format and schedule. The forum director is responsible for the performance evaluations of secretariat staff.

Hiring for a forum may follow a different or abbreviated process. If so, it should be clearly laid out in the host-forum MOU. However, the host agency should not be compelled to forego any standard requirements with respect to background checks, PSEA or other measures that are necessary to ensure the safety of its staff, beneficiaries, and resources.

Retention of quality staff is challenging when staff have to fight for themselves and their families to receive their contractual benefits.

Minimum Standard

The forum director and steering committee have final authority for decision making for hiring, extensions, and termination for all forum secretariat staff.

No employment-related decisions for the forum director should be taken without the approval of the steering committee, and no employment-related decisions for the secretariat staff should be taken without the approval of the forum director.

Best Practice

Secretariat staff should have the same support as any other staff when it comes to human resources support.

Secretariat staff may be independent in their work, but they should be provided with as high a level of support as any other staff when it comes to benefits, travel, accommodation, insurance, visas/work permits, etc.

In countries where obtaining visas/work permits for international staff is challenging or restricted, there should be open and frank communication between the host agency CD, forum director, and steering committee. Given the unique and interagency role of the forum, creative solutions can be identified to help mitigate issues that obtaining visas/work permits for forum staff may create.



C. Operational Support

Support provided by host agencies to fora generally includes information technology, transportation, logistics/procurement, and security, in addition to human resources. Operational support enables representation (e.g., transport enabling meetings and representation), information sharing (e.g., information technology tools and staff), and effective advocacy (e.g., security enabling field visits with member organizations). A forum’s budget should sufficiently cover operational needs and host agency cost recovery.

Best Practice

Provide the forum secretariat with dedicated transportation capacity.

This may come in the form of a dedicated car and driver, a dedicated care and driving privileges for secretariat staff, an arrangement enabling use of taxis (with advance payment), or a combination of these. Funding for transportation should be explicitly included in forum operational budget lines.

Forum secretariat staff will use this transportation to be on time for meetings, to facilitate key networking opportunities, to attend last-minute meetings with hard-to-reach interlocutors, and in short, to represent the NGO community responsibly. Sharing transportation with host agency staff has proved challenging at best in multiple contexts.

Best Practice

Provide office space that reinforces the forum's independence.

It is important that the secretariat has some physical separation from host agency programs and teams, to highlight their independence and maintain confidentiality. Some fora have a fully separate office. Where this is not possible (e.g., too expensive) or desirable (e.g., too burdensome to be removed from administrative support), the minimum standard is an office with a door.

Secretariat staff should follow the policies and procedures of the host agency, except where the MOU outlines exceptions or alternative arrangements. As such, these staff need to be properly oriented to these systems, to know how they work and how to request exceptions if needed. This is especially crucial if the secretariat undertakes their own logistics and procurement to ensure they follow host and donor requirements.

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Likewise, host staff should be trained on the workings of the forum. Host staff should be able to share in the sense of prestige that comes from hosting and supporting a forum, and they should understand how forum programs are different and how the forum benefits the entire humanitarian community.

“When following HA operations and administration and finance procedures, we’re not a priority. HA national staff don’t know what we do. They know we are more than just a program, but they don’t know how we fit in.”

-Forum Director who used to be a Country Director

Best Practice

Clearly communicate with in-country staff about what the forum is and how they are expected to engage with and support the forum secretariat.

Host agency staff should understand that while the forum secretariat may have some different rules, it should not be treated like a “second class citizen” next to other programs.

Grading the Forum Director at a senior level within the salary scale also supports respect and smoother operational support.

Secretariat staff often need to visit field and program locations to gather information, meet key interlocutors, or undertake research for advocacy purposes. Secretariat staff are bound to comply with host agency security rules. However, unique rules and regulations may be required for Secretariat staff in the case that they need to travel on Forum business to locations where the host agency does not operate but other forum members do.

Minimum Standard

Always maintain responsibility for secretariat staff safety and security.

Should secretariat staff need to travel to locations where the host agency does not operate but other forum members do, best practice is for the security focal points of the host agency and the member organization being visited to ensure—formally—that there are appropriate arrangements in place. Special security procedures for secretariat staff should be clearly articulated in the MOU and communicated to the host agency security team.



D. Grant and Financial Management

Hosted forums require financial and grant management support from their host agencies to ensure that financial management of grant funds and member fees is compliant with relevant regulations. This support comes in the form of accounting; budget development; tracking and management; expenditure forecasting; financial reporting; and financial control, compliance, and accountability. Often, it includes support on proposal development (although not objective/activity decisions) and grant reporting more broadly. However, no proposal, budget, or report content about the forum should be submitted to a donor without the approval of the forum director (who is responsible for obtaining approval from the steering committee).

The host agency needs to orient secretariat staff to their financial and grants management processes. The forum secretariat must accept and comply with host agency policies and procedures unless an exception has been agreed upon in the MOU. The forum director needs a senior financial authorization to approve forum expenditures within budget and grant parameters.

Minimum Standard

Ensure a clear and distinct budget for the forum secretariat is in place and being properly managed.

Grant funding for forum secretariats may be in the form of a small distinct project just for the forum, a result or objective within a larger grant to the host agency (at present this is the most common arrangement), or as a simple activity (and sometimes just a single budget line) within a larger grant to the host agency. In some cases, Forum funding comes through a grant to another organization that is then sub-granted to the host agency to fund the Forum (“pass-through funding”). In all cases, it is important that the budget lines (and activities and indicators) for the Forum are as separate and distinct as possible from those of the host agency or pass-through organization. The forum secretariat should have a “master budget” that brings together all of the various funding sources and enables smooth financial planning.

The forum’s budget should be overseen by the forum director with the support for the host agency financial team (as per the support they provided to host agency programs). Obviously, regular forecasting and budget-versus-actuals are important.

Minimum Standard

Ensure that the forum director is directly engaged in donor relations for forum grants.

For many forums, a successful formula has been for the forum director to manage initial funding discussions with donor representatives in-country (with the support of the steering committee), with the host agency CD being fully engaged in any more advanced or final discussions. For most forum secretariats, the grant holder (i.e., the host agency or pass-through organization) manages donor relations at the donor capital/headquarters level. During the grant, if there are project delays, changes or challenges, it is often best for the forum director and the host agency CD to work together and proactively reach out to the donor to agree ways forward.

Best Practice

Communicate funding issues that could affect forum operations.

Funding challenges for the host agency that are unrelated to the forum can lead to instability in forum funding. It is important that the host agency CD communicate such issues to the forum director and steering committee as soon as possible and agree how the forum will proceed to prevent disruption of forum operations.

A quick overview of key tips for host agencies can be found in Annex D.



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