

ACT Alliance National and Regional Forums

Policy and Guidelines

Approved by ACT Governing Board, June 2010

Revised October 2011

This document updates and replaces the document: *ACT National Forums, Consolidated Policy and Guidelines of ACT International and ACT Development, 2008*

Contents

3	INTRODUCTION
3	DEFINITION OF AN ACT FORUM
3	NATIONAL AND REGIONAL FORUMS
4	BASIC OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR ACT FORUMS
5	BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN ACT FORUMS
6	MEMBERSHIP IN AN ACT FORUM
7	ACTIVITIES OF ACT FORUMS
9	ORGANISING AN ACT FORUM
11	STRUCTURE OF ACT FORUMS
13	APPENDIX ONE: MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING FOR ACT FORUMS – STANDARD FORMAT

Introduction

ACT Alliance is a global alliance of over 100 churches and church related organisations. Members of the Alliance are committed to working towards a world community where all God's creation lives with dignity, justice, peace and full respect for human rights and the environment.¹

The ACT Alliance was founded on 1 January 2010 bringing together two existing alliances, ACT International and ACT Development. Both ACT International and ACT Development had placed great importance on national and regional forums which brought together members working in a particular country or region. As of May 2010, ACT Alliance has approximately 40 national forums and 5 regional forums. These forums are at very different stages of development. Some have been working together for a number of years, have well established programmes of cooperation, a Memorandum of Understanding that guides their cooperation and a Strategic Plan. Others are quite new and are just starting to build relationships and discover the benefits of working together as a Forum.

In joining the ACT Alliance, all members committed themselves to 'actively participate in national and regional forums where they exist and work with and strengthen other ACT members' (see Obligations of Members, in *Founding Document*). Participation in forums is therefore compulsory for all members.

This *Policy and Guidelines for ACT National and Regional Forums* replaces the earlier document (2008) titled *ACT National Forums, Consolidated Policy and Guidelines of ACT International and ACT Development*.

This Policy and Guidelines are designed to provide direction and guidance to help strengthen ACT forums around the world. ACT recognises that every national context is different and that forums will differ from country to country in their structure and activities. However forums should all be based on and follow the principles detailed in this document.

Definition and Objective of an ACT Forum

ACT forums are shared platforms or spaces comprising ACT members and observers who are engaged in a particular country or region. The main objective of an ACT forum is to increase the effectiveness and impact of the humanitarian assistance and development work being undertaken by members through improved coordination.

National and Regional Forums

In most cases, forums are most effective when members work together at the national level as they can undertake joint analysis of the country together and explore opportunities for collaboration in their humanitarian, development and advocacy work. However, at times, it is more effective for members to work together in regional forums; for examples, in regions where there are few local ACT members (e.g. the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Middle East) or when the work of members transcends national borders (eg:

¹ From Mission Statement in *ACT Alliance Founding Document Feb 2009*

refugees, food crises, political conflict etc). In some regions, national ACT forums have also met together regionally to share information and develop regional strategies (e.g. Southern Africa and Central America). This Policy and Guidelines is therefore applicable to both national and regional forums.

Basic Operating Principles for ACT Forums

Members of ACT forums will apply the following principles in their ongoing planning and implementation:

Mandate: An ACT forum is part of the ACT alliance and is not a separate entity. ACT does not promote the establishment of formalized structures with statutes, by-laws etc but rather encourages members to develop cooperative ways of working which should be defined by a Memorandum of Understanding.

The ACT Governing Board and Secretariat is aware that, in some countries, ACT members are concerned about the difficulties of working under the common name and logo of ACT without legal registration. When this issue arises, the Forum is requested to discuss the issue with the Secretariat before taking any action to register the Alliance.

Compliance with ACT mission, vision and policies: An ACT forum should respect being part of the ACT alliance, and should incorporate and reflect ACT policies and guidelines in its own operations.

Use of ACT name: All ACT forums shall use the designation “ACT (Country) Forum”, as the visible expression of activities carried out collectively by the forum and will adhere to the ACT co-branding policy.

Participation: An ACT forum should be a participatory gathering of peers. All ACT forum members should equally contribute to, and be included in, major discussions and activities, with due consideration of differences in capacities and resources of each member. Forum members must ensure that all are given equal opportunity to contribute their different perspectives, strengths and resources, and must be sensitive to address imbalances in power dynamics, such as those created by control of funding, or by different forms of discrimination (whether gender, age or ethnicity).

Promotion of gender equality and gender mainstreaming: An ACT forum and its members should prioritise the promotion of gender equality and the mainstreaming of gender in all aspects of their work². Gender balance at Forum meetings should also be taken into consideration.

Local initiative: An ACT forum should be built on local initiative – that of communities themselves, and then of those organisations and churches closest to those communities to enable the most appropriate and effective humanitarian and development work. Particular priority should be placed on local knowledge, as the basis for effective emergency response or development activities.

Developing local capacity: ACT forums must constantly be striving to develop the capacity of forum members whether through local initiatives and practices, shared learning or through the processes and

² Refer to ACT’s Gender Policy Revised 2010.

resources available through the ACT Capacity Development Initiative. Forums should discuss how members are going to work together in such a way that the capacity of local members is enhanced and not undermined.

Countries in which there is no local member: In some countries, there are no local members, only a country office of a northern ACT member. If there are two or more such members in one country, they are encouraged to form an ACT forum to promote cooperation and enhance visibility within the country. Such members should work with the Secretariat to identify any potential local ACT members within the country and ensure that these potential members are informed about ACT and their activities and encouraged to apply for membership.

Language: The working language of the national forums will be agreed by the local members of the forum.

Transparency: Transparency may be defined as ‘about the provision of information; communicating openly and honestly about what an organisation does/ does not do, how they do it and with what resources’. Forum members commit themselves to share information which can enhance the effectiveness of the alliance, including:

- mission and goals
- strategic and other work plans
- how and from whom funds are raised by the member for use in the country
- where and on what all funds are spent by the member in the country³
- those with whom they work
- what is being achieved
- what is being learned — from setbacks as much as success

It is acknowledged that sharing information is not always easy, particularly among members that compete for resources. However, it is anticipated that as members begin to work cooperatively towards a common vision, trust will increasingly develop.

Cooperation with existing ecumenical instruments of collaboration: A number of countries/ regions have existing ecumenical instruments of collaboration such as Roundtables or regional groups, some of which are facilitated by the WCC. ACT members at the national and regional level will negotiate with such instruments to ensure a close working relationship and to avoid duplication.

³ This requires all members to show all their income and expenditure in that country, irrespective of the source and whether or not it is part of an ACT appeal.

Benefits of Participation in ACT Forums

There are many potential benefits of active participation in an ACT forum – benefits being “what we can do better together than we could alone”. A forum can be an effective platform for:

- Sharing a rich diversity of views and experiences, providing a unique multi-member (and multi-agency) national or regional perspective in an emergency or development context.
- Increased transparency and openness amongst peers and the development of good working relationships through mutual support and solidarity.
- Joint and, therefore, increased coverage and reach in humanitarian assistance and development work through joint activities that assist a greater number of people in different locations.
- Increased ability to respond effectively in different sectors or specialised areas of work through sharing complementary areas of expertise.
- Strengthening the appropriateness of activities through working with ACT members with a high level of local knowledge, established presence and relationships with communities.
- Increased profile and visibility through a shared ACT identity that reflects this broader joint coverage and capacity.
- Increased credibility with stakeholders, whether governments, donors, UN agencies or NGOs.
- Increased ability to identify and take part in local advocacy, lobbying and media opportunities with ACT members as well as with other sector actors.
- Increased opportunities for capacity development and sharing of human and knowledge resources and learning in common and complementary areas of interest and expertise.
- Collaborative peer monitoring, review and accountability to promote quality assurance.

Membership in an ACT Forum

Members of ACT national and regional forums are those members and observers of the ACT alliance who are actively engaged in that country/ region. This includes members and observers which:

- have their headquarters or main office in that country/ region.
- have an office in that country (e.g. northern agencies with a country office).
- Members and observers that do not have a presence in the country but which support partners or programmes there.

ACT Observers: In line with the ACT Founding Document 2009, observers will be able to participate in the appropriate ACT Alliance national and regional forums but are not able to vote on forum related issues.

Including those not present in the country: Including those members who support programmes or partners in a country but who do not have a physical presence is important to ensure that all ACT members are aware of what each other is doing and to promote opportunities for collaboration. While ACT members

without a presence will not be able to attend every ACT forum meeting, they should try to attend the annual forum meeting, should give input into meetings as appropriate and receive minutes.

Time-limited Engagement in a Country: Those ACT members who come into a country or region for a temporary or time-limited period related to a specific activity are expected to inform any existing ACT forum of their intentions and to join the forum and play a full part in it.

Guests: At times, ACT members may wish to invite other non-member organisations to attend forum meetings. This may include local churches, the national council of churches, other sister ecumenical organisations, partners of members etc. Such organisations may attend meetings as 'guests' so long as there is agreement between all ACT members of the forum that they be invited. While guests may attend meetings, they are not members of the forum, may not participate in decision making, nor co-brand with the name ACT.

Partners of Members: It is important to note that partners of ACT members cannot be members of the ACT Forum unless they are ACT members in their own right.

Accessing Emergency Funds: Members wishing to access ACT humanitarian funds are required to demonstrate operational commitment, capacity, and competence in all aspects of humanitarian emergency work and the ACT Appeal system. They must also maintain effective administrative and finance systems. Further details on these requirements can be found in the ACT Alliance Membership Application Form.

Defining Membership: Clear indication of membership in the ACT forum should be defined in advance, and be included in the Memorandum of Understanding – so that it is clear to all members. If there is confusion over membership, it is recommended that the ACT forum seeks the guidance of the ACT Secretariat.

Activities of ACT Forums

Forum members in each country and/ or region will decide on joint activities which will vary between countries and regions depending on the context and capacity of members. There are some key activities that are necessary in order to yield the greatest benefit from cooperation and coordination through forums.

National and regional forums play a major role in:

- **Policy development and strategic direction:** giving input into new or revised ACT policies and the overall strategic direction of the ACT Alliance.
- **Participation in global Working Groups and ACT Alliance Governance Structures:** ACT Working Groups and governance bodies reflect regional, gender and operational diversity from among its members. ACT forums have an important role in nominations to Working Groups and governance bodies and are encouraged to collectively endorse the nomination of regional representatives to these groups.

Joint activities of an ACT forum at the national and/ or regional level may include:

- Sharing information and analyses regarding the national and regional context.
- Mapping out where ACT members are located within the country, current humanitarian assistance and development programmes being undertaken and organisational priorities
- Identifying and planning collaborative programmatic work where effectiveness could be enhanced by working together.
- Joint or coordinated needs assessment and planning, implementation, evaluation and overall learning.
- Capacity assessment and development of organisations, including peer monitoring, staff exchanges/ joint training (ideally, a forum will undertake an assessment of their capacity every three years)
- Collaboration on issues of emergency preparedness, prevention and mitigation, including mapping of capacities and vulnerabilities in potential disaster threats.
- Research and/ or advocacy around a particular issue.
- Enhancing the profile and visibility of ACT at country level by representing and promoting ACT at the national level to government, donor organisations, UN and other global bodies and the media.
- Identifying issues or areas of work that need to be considered at the global level.
- Identification of possible sources of funding available locally or internationally, and applying for funding.
- Coordinating joint visits of members to the country.

Activities specific to emergencies:

- Information-sharing and coordination with the other members of the forum on potential and actual emergency situations, through meetings and other mechanisms.
- Issuing joint emergency alerts.
- Conducting joint emergency assessments.
- Joint design and drafting of ACT appeals through sharing experience, information, knowledge and priorities in order to identify how best to respond to a given situation in the country.
- Facilitation of the work of ACT Rapid Support Teams in the country/ region, including providing logistical support to any teams which are deployed.
- Submission of joint appeals and reports, updates and situation reports to the ACT Secretariat, in accordance with ACT policies.
- Joint implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation of emergency programmes.
- Sharing of operational resources such as relief stocks, joint procurement, transport, funds and secondment of personnel.
- Sharing and development of skills, capacity and areas of competence in emergency preparedness and management, such as in proposal and report writing, needs assessments, emergency management training, and use of SPHERE guidelines.
- Monitoring that members are upholding the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, the Code of Conduct on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse of Power and Corruption, the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (SPHERE Standards), and other ACT alliance policies and guidelines
- Local advocacy and lobbying on emergency-related issues.

Organising an ACT Forum

Memorandum of Understanding

An ACT forum must prepare a written Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The document should outline the structure and the agreed objectives and activities of the forum, in a way that best suits the national needs and context, consistent with ACT policies. All MoUs should be sent to the ACT Secretariat which will ensure that they comply with the ACT policy and guidelines and, if so, will endorse them. MoUs should be reviewed (and revised if necessary) on an annual basis by all of the members of the ACT forum. The ACT Secretariat will contribute to this review with any relevant policy changes within the ACT alliance.

Strategic Plan

ACT forums are encouraged to develop their own strategic plans, covering a year or multi-year period, relate them to the future unified ACT strategic plan and have them endorsed by the ACT Secretariat. The plan should address issues of long-term direction, priority areas, internal coordination, external coordination, information-sharing, lessons learned and other issues (fundraising, capacity development, linking relief and development and advocacy). Members should share their own strategies and work plans with others in the forum, and incorporate the ACT forum strategy into their own plans. Where there is neither the capacity nor commitment to develop a strategic plan, the ACT forum should, as a minimum, carry out a priority-setting exercise to identify thematic and technical priorities.

Roles and Responsibilities

As part of the MoU, ACT forums should develop clear roles and responsibilities for their members and for the convenor agency. It is recommended that there is an elected convenor from a member organisation that rotates every 12 months (or as appropriate) among forum members. This is to encourage ownership of and participation in the forum. Essential roles and responsibilities for ACT forums are listed below, recognising that there may be slight variations according to different contexts.

All ACT forum members (including those not located in the country/ region)

Meetings: Attend an annual meeting of the national forum (if the resources of the organisation permit).

Information-sharing: Share information on the work they are undertaking/ supporting (see section on 'transparency' above) including policy documents and/or country strategy papers.

MoU and Strategic Plan: Work together to develop an MoU and strategic plan for the forum.

ACT forum members based in the country/ region

Convenor role: Assume role as forum convenor on a rotational basis, including hosting of the annual meeting. It is not expected that ACT Forum members from outside the country will take on this role.

Meetings: Participate actively in meetings during the year to ensure ongoing cooperation and joint activities. Ensure relevant staff attend ACT forum meetings, and can represent the member organisation.

Information-sharing: Jointly provide accurate and credible information on the situation within the country.

Operational collaboration: Promote cooperation and collaboration between members of the Forum (see section on Activities pg 7-8).

ACT forum convenor agency

Meetings: Host and organise forum meetings, drafting agendas and minutes to be shared and agreed with all forum members. Ensure that all members of the ACT forum, including those not in the country, are invited to an annual meeting of the forum and receive the minutes of all meetings.

Information-sharing: Ensure that all information from the ACT Secretariat and relevant regional forums is circulated to all forum members.

Coordination: Ensure coordination of all activities undertaken by the forum. Coordinate, with forum members, visits of members from outside the country and other external agencies. Coordinate communication, and be the contact point with the ACT Secretariat.

Operational collaboration: Oversee and facilitate implementation of the forum's strategic or work plan.

External representation: Represent and promote ACT in any national forums with external (country/region) audiences, including the UN system, governmental agencies, and inter-agency mechanisms. Represent the forum, or ensure that a forum spokesperson is identified to engage with the media.

ACT Secretariat

- Support and provide encouragement to ACT forums, especially those being created.
- Facilitate an initial meeting of a forum, if requested and appropriate.
- Provide a mailing list of all members of the forum.
- Respect roles and responsibilities of the convener agency, and use it as the primary channel of communication on all issues that pertain to the forum.
- Promote increased programme quality and adherence to common standards in emergency, development and advocacy work.
- Support joint communications of the forums, including presenting forums on the ACT website
- Encourage networking between ACT forums and external actors
- Advocating issues identified by ACT forums.
- Provide information on, and promote effective use of, any new or changing policies, guidelines and procedures coming from the ACT alliance.

- Ensure forums are aware of new ACT initiatives being developed and have the opportunity to engage in or give input into such initiatives.
- Assist forums and members in resolutions of disagreements or disputes
- Ensure communication between different national forums and with the wider ACT alliance.

For emergencies:

- Support the forum to develop high quality appeals in response to emergency situations
- Act in a transparent manner in which general appeal support is allocated.
- Provide forums with timely advice on ACT appeals and reports, including status of their appeals.
- Inform the ACT forum of key emergency-related issues relevant to that country or region.

Structure of ACT Forums

ACT forums should define their own structure for cooperation and coordination and this should be included in the MoU. It should include:

Annual Meeting: One annual meeting must be called each year, to which all members of the forum are invited. The date of this meeting should be set at least three months in advance to enable members to attend. The meeting date should be set by the Convener, in consultation with the Secretariat and as many members as possible.

Regional forums will need to decide whether it is cost effective to meet more than annually (this will also depend on the activities being undertaken by the regional forums).

Regular Meetings: Regular meetings of members who are in country are also suggested. Meeting monthly will promote the building of relationships and ensure that joint programmatic work is carried forward. However, flexibility is also recommended as to the frequency of meetings as there might be periods where frequent meetings are required, particularly in the planning and implementation phase of emergency or development activities.

Agendas: Agendas should be sent to all members of the forum (including those not in the country) and to the ACT Secretariat, in sufficient time to enable everyone to give input into the discussions.

Minutes: Taking minutes provides a good record of valuable conversation and action plans made by the members of the forum. Minutes should be taken at all meetings including those where only in-country members are present and those of a vital nature (e.g. teleconference). Sharing the minutes with the ACT Secretariat and all members of the forum strengthens and deepens the understanding of the forum's work.

Convener: It is recommended that a convener is appointed to the forum and that this position rotates on an annual basis (see section on Roles and Responsibilities of convener).

Funding of Forum Activities: It is expected that activities of national forums will primarily be funded by forum members, depending on what resources are available (especially in terms of personnel and funding). Members of ACT forums may pool resources to either contract, employ or second a local facilitator to undertake this work. However, it is essential that this person is appointed by, accountable to and funded by the national forum, and is not seen as an employee of the ACT Secretariat. While having a funded coordination post, or provision for specific tasks, is likely to strengthen the coordination, it is not a given fact that funds lead to better coordination.

While each forum will need to develop its own procedures for dealing with the question of funding, the following principles apply:

- Forum priorities and possible activities should be decided by the forum as a whole.
- All forum members should then consider the contribution they are able to make towards these activities: for example, funds, staffing or use of resources and also whether funds might be available from other sources within the country.
- Forum activities must be owned by the whole of the forum, and not just those who are able to contribute financially. Forum participants who are unable to contribute financially should still be invited to all discussions.
- The forum will need to decide whose responsibility it is to develop funding proposals for emergency and development activities to external organisations, manage the programme and report to the funder.

Discussing finances can be difficult and cause tension between organisations. It is therefore essential that the activities of the forum are viewed as an important part of each organisation's work and are owned by the entire forum. It is expected that ACT members and observers will recognise the added value of being a member of the forum, and ensure that aspects of the forum are incorporated into their own work plans and strategies.

Use of ACT Name and Logo

As noted above, all ACT forums shall use the designation "ACT (Country) Forum", as the visible expression of activities carried out collectively by the forum.

When meeting with external audiences such as national governments, UN agencies, other NGOs, other funders and the media, ACT members should always highlight that they are a member of the ACT Alliance to increase the visibility and recognition of ACT's work. It is therefore recommended that the MoU should include a section on how the forum will present itself to external audiences, including who is able to act as the spokesperson.

Appendix One: Memorandum of Understanding for ACT Forums – Standard Format

1. Preamble/ introduction
2. Objectives of the forum
3. Membership of the forum
4. Forum activities
5. Roles and responsibilities
 - For all forum members
 - For forum members located in country
 - For forum convenor
 - For ACT secretariat
6. Structure of the forum
7. Networking, coordination and visibility
8. Miscellaneous
9. Specification on validity of this MoU, and date for its review
10. Agreement on MoU contents and signatures of members