

## ATHA Thematic Brief Series: outlining basic tenets of humanitarian action

# Humanitarian Coordination: An Overview January 2008

### - Executive Summary -

A vital component of humanitarian action is the coordination among all actors involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Coordination within this field allows for the most efficient, cost effective, and successful operations possible. Groups seeking access to beneficiary populations often share the same objectives in regards to addressing human need and allaying suffering, but wide variance in such principle elements as organizational structure, technical and/or geographic expertise, mission, mandate, and political interest may hinder or prevent natural coordination on the field. This brief focuses on the dynamics of humanitarian coordination in the context of humanitarian assistance, and the main elements of coordination in the field.

For the purposes of this paper, coordination is defined as a "systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner." A leading scholar in the field identifies three basic types of coordination: coordination by command, coordination through consensus and coordination by default; and the distinction between the three is important in discerning both the benefits and challenges offered by different approaches to coordination. While United Nations agencies played a central role in the systemization and institutionalization of the idea of coordination, effective coordination requires multi-sectoral and multifaceted perspectives, as well as a dual approach in which the importance of both operational and strategic coordination are recognized.

The principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality are central to the provision of humanitarian assistance, and as such, warrant consideration in coordination strategies and policies. Other basic principles and elements of humanitarian coordination include strengthening the capacity of local actors, transparency and accountability, and mutual commitment and cooperation between the different actors. There are a variety of existing mechanisms designed to enhance and facilitate coordination between organizations providing assistance in a given context. These mechanisms range in function from enhancing coordination within and among groups to identifying gaps in responses as well as addressing important concerns relating to funding.

While there are many challenges to implementation of coordination strategies, as well as concerns regarding the potential for increased bureaucracy in an already complex system, the benefits to coordination can be tremendous. Not only are humanitarian operations improved through the development and implementation of coordination strategies and mechanisms, but, more critically, the beneficiary population also gains from better coordinated activities.

#### Introduction

The utility and importance of coordination among international and local humanitarian actors enjoys nearly universal recognition in the field of humanitarian action. Though the shared objective of all operational stakeholders is to alleviate suffering and save lives, there are varying approaches among the main actors regarding humanitarian coordination as a means to enhance and improve this end. The different mandates, activities, objectives, policies, organizational structures and capacities of the humanitarian actors often result in disparate views as to what constitutes the most appropriate level, as well as nature, of coordination. Indeed, the term "coordination" itself may prompt debate, which is seen in the advocating by some actors for adoption of the alternative idiom of "operational cooperation". Taken together, such elements may lead to varying degrees of frustration, ambiguity and confusion on the part of different humanitarian players when the issue of coordination is raised.

This brief aims to provide the reader with a basic overview of the salient elements of humanitarian coordination in the context of humanitarian assistance<sup>1</sup>. While acknowledging the differences and complementarities of humanitarian assistance and development, this brief will focus on the dynamics of coordination in so far as the former is concerned. The definitions adopted in this brief for humanitarian assistance and development are those articulated by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida): humanitarian assistance has as its twins goals - the saving of lives and relieving of suffering - while development assistance aims to provide partner countries with the "opportunity to effect long-range improvements to the living conditions" of their populace.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth noting that the legal basis for the following discussion on humanitarian assistance is that the responsibility to provide for the basic needs of a population lies first with that state;<sup>3</sup> it is when the state is unwilling or unable to provide for such needs does the focus shift to the complementary or auxiliary role which can be adopted by humanitarian organizations. There is no legal framework specifically regulating or governing interactions between humanitarian organizations, though there are a number of related considerations such as the applicability of domestic laws of the country of operation, and consent of the host state, which should be acknowledged. Humanitarian principles and international law should underpin all aspects of humanitarian assistance, and thus by association, also discussions of coordination. Discussions in this brief regarding humanitarian assistance are based on the centrality of the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality in humanitarian action.

Though coordination practices and policies are manifest and important at a number of different levels within the humanitarian system, perhaps the failure or dearth of coordination is felt most strongly at the ground level. It is for this reason, and in consideration of this brief's key target

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> There are three categories of assistance commonly identified: direct assistance, indirect assistance and infrastructure support – with decreasing level of contact with the actual affected population.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sida, "The Purpose of Swedish Support to Humanitarian Actions is to Save Lives." The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, <a href="http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=1357&a=24982&language=en\_US">http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=1357&a=24982&language=en\_US</a>, Updated 20 July 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> General Assembly Resoluion 'Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations' UN Doc A/RES/46/182, 78th plenary meeting, 19 December 1991.

audience of practitioners, that the focal point will be the implications for humanitarian coordination in terms of operational considerations. Thus, detailed discussions regarding donor coordination or issues arising from civil-military relations will not be included in this brief.

In complex emergencies humanitarian needs exceed the capacity of a single humanitarian organization to bear.<sup>4</sup> Efficiency in terms of cost, labor and resources is a significant impetus behind calls for humanitarian coordination, as is the recognition of the importance of coherence, efficacy, quality and responsiveness in terms of humanitarian assistance. The delivery of humanitarian assistance is impacted by such elements, and thus efforts to improve the character and nature of assistance via coordination policies and practices are significant. Though they share the same end goal of relieving suffering and saving lives, donors, host authorities, intergovernmental agencies, governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies (international and local) and the local populations in humanitarian emergencies all have their own interests and play different roles in so far as the coordination of humanitarian assistance is concerned.

While acknowledging that assistance may become politicized in any number of situations, the current examination of the dynamics of coordination will be, to the extent possible, focusing on broad, generally applicable policies and strategies of coordination, rather than delving into the politics behind such coordination.

#### What is Coordination?

The working definition of humanitarian coordination adopted by this brief is the following: Coordination is the systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner. Such instruments include (1) strategic planning; (2) gathering data and managing information; (3) mobilizing resources and assuring accountability; (4) orchestrating a functional division of labor in the field; (5) negotiation and maintaining a serviceable framework with host political authorities; and (6) providing leadership. Sensibly and sensitively employed, such instruments inject an element of disciple without unduly constraining action. <sup>5</sup>

Effective coordination requires an inclusive system, one in which different mechanisms, spanning three basic networks, should be considered. In a Review commissioned by the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, three networks were identified to which most humanitarian organizations belong.<sup>6</sup> There is a network of United Nations agencies, in which essential coordination functions are adopted by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the Humanitarian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Statement by ICRC, "Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance", at UNGA, 62<sup>nd</sup> Session, New York, 19 Nov 2007. http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/united-nations-statement-191107

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Larry Minear et al. "United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis,1990-1992" Occasional Paper #13 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute for International Studies, 1992): 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, (August 2005): 46.

Coordinators (HC, at the country level).<sup>7</sup> A second network is that which encompasses the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and includes coordination mechanisms under the Seville Agreement between the International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.<sup>8</sup> A third network is that which is comprised of non-governmental organizations linked through three main consortia: InterAction, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR). An additional mechanism within this third network is the Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) through which thematic coordination takes place; this group includes a number of large international NGOs who have taken measures to assess and strengthen their response capacity.<sup>9</sup>

Though across these different networks and mechanisms a great deal of overlap exists, there are also resultant key differences. One such difference is the binding nature of decisions taken by lead actors (whether as an individual or lead agency) in a coordination network. In the United Nations and Red Cross/Red Crescent systems such decisions are often binding on all participating agencies; in the NGO network such adherence to decisions is often only invited or often strongly encouraged, failing short of being binding in nature.

Though often considered UN-driven or UN-centric, humanitarian coordination encompasses a variety of networks and mechanisms, across which lessons learned and best practices may be applied with successful results. Due to its broad and often early presence on the ground in many complex emergencies, UN agencies were central in the early development of the theory and implementation of broad coordination strategies and policies; however, the importance of coordination demonstrated by the continued dedication of resources to it has now grown to encompass any number and character of humanitarian organization.

Escalation of needs and the recognition of the complexities of many humanitarian emergencies often requires that a multi-sectoral or multifaceted perspective is adopted in so far as coordination is concerned, with an aim to offer a coherent response to an emergency in order to maximize its benefit and minimize its potential pitfalls.<sup>10</sup> Effective coordination may also require a dual approach which recognizes the importance on the one hand of operational coordination and on the other of strategic coordination. The former deals largely with logistical and sectoral coordination, while the former is concerned with such issues as negotiating access to the affected population, advocating respect for humanitarian law and principles, and liaising with key actors. <sup>11</sup>

Three basic types of coordination have been delineated, and the distinction between the three is important in discerning both the benefits and challenges offered by different approaches to coordination. *Coordination by command* is one form in which strong leadership and authority is a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, (August 2005): 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> With an aim to indicate which <u>organization</u> within the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement would take the lead in specific field operations. See "Seville Agreement", adopted on 26 November 1997, http://www.redcross.int/en/history/fullsevilleagreement.asp

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, (August 2005): 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> OCHA, Glossary of Humanitarian Terms in relation to the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts, New York, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> OCHA, "Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes Region 1997-1997," An Independent Study for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, <a href="www.reliefweb.int/ocha\_ol/pub/greatlak/summary.html">www.reliefweb.int/ocha\_ol/pub/greatlak/summary.html</a> Executive Summary, 2.

means through which to facilitate coordination. <sup>12</sup> Drawbacks to this approach include the fact that often actors don't respond well to a system in which a great deal of power is highly concentrated in one or a few people, and is often exercised through the use of "carrots and sticks." A second type is *coordination by consensus*, which views leadership as important to formulating a coherent response and mobilizing key actors around common objectives; this category ultimately recognizes that coordination should be gained through consensus, rather than via direct authoritative assertion. <sup>13</sup> Case studies have suggested that though this approach may result in coordination, such cooperation risks decreasing as time progresses. At the start of the emergency, and at times of heightened insecurity, coordination may ratchet up, but it is often followed with a detrimental decline once organizations' positions on the ground, and vis-à-vis other actors, become more stable. A third type is *coordination by default*, in which basic coordination activities take place largely on the strength of their context-specific utility. Information sharing and division of labor may take place, but such strategies may be ad-hoc and unique to the circumstances. <sup>14</sup>

Such descriptive approaches to coordination are useful in that they help flesh out not only the strengths and weaknesses implicit in each approach, which can be adapted and applied in part to different contexts, but they may also be helpful in providing a good starting point from which to further develop and expand approaches to coordination. Every context of coordination is unique, thus every response of suitable coordination mechanisms will be unique in this respect.

## **Basic Principles and Elements**

The principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality are fundamental to the provision of humanitarian assistance, and as such warrant consideration in coordination strategies and policies. Implications, especially related to neutrality of an organization (and its perception as such by other actors), should be carefully considered when cooperation between different actors, especially across traditional professional lines, is proposed. As members of a wider group, it is important to recognize that actions taken by one humanitarian organization which may run the risk of compromising a key principle of humanitarian action, may have unintended and potentially dangerous results for other organizations acting in the same area. It is for such reasons that a strict adherence to these principles is important, and should be incorporated into discussions on coordination.

Strengthening the capacity of local actors is also an important consideration in the development of a coordination approach. An inclusive coordination strategy, which recognizes and incorporates local capacity and coping mechanisms, may result in long-term benefits in regards to self-reliance of the population as well as facilitating a transition from humanitarian assistance to development

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Antonio Donini, "The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda," Occasional Paper #22 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute, 1996): 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Antonio Donini, "The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda," Occasional Paper #22 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute, 1996): 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Antonio Donini, "The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda," Occasional Paper #22 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute, 1996): 14.

activities. The realization of such objectives requires effective coordination between local, national and international responses.

Transparency and accountability, especially to the beneficiary population, as well as adherence to codes of conduct (such as the SPHERE Standards) and best practices are important complementary principles on which the success of humanitarian assistance and coordination hinge.<sup>15</sup>

A key element of coordination is close cooperation between a host of actors through which identification of capacities and needs takes place; this is essential to ensuring that humanitarian assistance provided is targeted, effective and useful. Cooperation should be based on a joint assessment of needs which feeds into a shared strategy regarding allocation of resources, division of labor and information sharing. Clear delineation of responsibilities and responsibilities go further in ensuring efficient utilization of resources, as well as in avoiding gaps and overlaps. Mutual commitment by the actors to the agreed upon coordination strategy, as well as appreciation of and capitalization on the complementary roles and capacities of different organizations are also important to operational success.<sup>16</sup>

## Why Coordinate?

Humanitarian coordination is vital to the capacity of the humanitarian community to act effectively and efficiently to mitigate the affects of disaster and conflict. Humanitarian space has grown increasingly populated by different actors, which, coupled with the increasingly multifaceted nature of emergencies has elevated the need for coordination.

A number of case studies suggest that coordination, though exercised in various manners and degrees, has at its base a common framework conducive to identifying priorities and agreeing on a division of labor.<sup>17</sup> The application of such a common framework can significantly improve the overall humanitarian response, ensuring that organizations' strengths, such as geographic presence or thematic or technical expertise, are taken into consideration when developing a response. Coordination can include the strategic and effective use of specialized information or skills; for example, those actors with a developed skill set or with exceptional information gathering, analysis, or comprehensive data sources, are able to disseminate information in a way that maximizes its utility and effect.

Proper coordination can also avoid such results as missed opportunities for early preventive action or having to adopt a reactive posture. It may also negatively impact a shared capacity to develop coherent policies and positions within the humanitarian community.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (The Sphere Project), http://www.sphereproject.org/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Oxfam International, "OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Coordination" (December 2006), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Antonio Donini, "The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda," Occasional Paper #22 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute for International Studies, 1996): 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> OCHA, "Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes Region 1997-1997," An Independent Study for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, <a href="www.reliefweb.int/ocha\_ol/pub/greatlak/summary.html">www.reliefweb.int/ocha\_ol/pub/greatlak/summary.html</a> Executive Summary, 2.

#### **Mechanisms for Coordination**

A number of mechanisms have been developed through which coordination may be facilitated and enhanced. One such mechanism is the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP), which is a forum aiming to bring together the three main networks within the humanitarian community: NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the United Nations. It is premised on the notion that "no single humanitarian agency can cover all humanitarian needs and that collaboration is, therefore, not an option, but a necessity." The forum aims to facilitate enhanced coordination within and among these groups as well as to maximize complementarity of organizations' different mandates and mission statements.

Another mechanism for coordination is the Cluster Approach which was endorsed by the IASC in 2005. It was designed to address identified gaps in response as well as to enhance the quality and efficacy of response through improved predictability and accountability. This approach has at its core efforts to "ensure sufficient global capacity, predictable leadership, strengthened accountability and improved strategic field-level coordination and prioritization." It is based on the premise of partnerships between UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international organizations and NGOs. Adopting a dual approach, the Cluster model looks to the global level at which to address objectives of preparedness, standards, tools and capacity-building. At the country level, the aims is to ensure coherent and effective response through strategic mobilization of key actors, while encouraging improved assessment, planning, delivery and monitoring of assistance. 22

Funding resources play a key role in coordination in so far as they contribute to the streamlining and predictability of funding.<sup>23</sup> One such example is the Common Fund mechanism, which has improved the process by which humanitarian response is planned, prioritized, and coordinated.<sup>24</sup> Additional to funding resources, professional tools which may be of assistance in enhancing coordination have been developed by a number of actors. One such instrument is the Diagnostic Tool, which has as one of its aims to assist the UN Humanitarian Country Teams in determining

http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Introduction/IASCGUIDANCENOTECLU STERAPPROACH.pdf November 24, 2006: 8.

http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/Cluster/Default.asp?mainbodyID=5&publish=0

http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/Financing%20page/OCHA%20Humanitarian%20Financing%20Workshop%20Report.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Global Humanitarian Platform, Home Page, www.icva.ch/ghp.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), "Guidance note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response,"

STERAPPROACH.pdf November 24, 2006: 8.

21 Inter- Agency Standing Committee Cluster Working Groups home page:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), "Guidance note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response,"

http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Introduction/IASCGUIDANCENOTECLU STERAPPROACH.pdf November 24, 2006: 13.

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22 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), "Guidance note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response,"

http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Introduction/IASCGUIDANCENOTECLU STERAPPROACH.pdf November 24, 2006: 13..

See for example The Humanitarian Financing Workshop Report

Humanitarian Reform Website, http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=204

what support will be needed to effectively implement the Cluster Approach, as well as how to determine a baseline against which to measure progress.<sup>25</sup> Such a checklist may also be more broadly useful in detailing important considerations in the development of effective coordination strategies.

## **Challenges to Coordination**

There exists a number of challenges to the efficient and effective implementation of coordination strategies, Such challenges include the criticism often levied that coordination adds another level of bureaucracy to a system already often plagued by politics, conditionality, earmarks and demands. If coordination strategies are to be adopted, it is stressed that they should not be implemented at the expense of unnecessary or unacceptable delays in the delivery of urgently needed assistance. The primary aim of humanitarian assistance should not be overlooked, however, the avoidance of duplication, waste and excess are key operational considerations in terms of its delivery, when maximizing the impact of multiple aid providers. For coordination to be perceived as relevant and a worthwhile goal to which to devote resources there should be assurances that such strategies are not a power-grab, nor a black hole into which money and time are lost.

Within the humanitarian community's response to any given emergency may exist varying levels of competition, financial pressure, territoriality, and internal tension as well as vague or ambiguous organization or agency mandates, and overlapping or competing agendas. These may test any organization's willingness to cooperate, and result in substandard coordination practices. Furthermore, if an inadequate coordination strategy is developed, or an adequate policy only partially implemented, there may develop the risk of harming the credibility and reputation of humanitarian action in general, and especially in the specific locale. This may also potentially delay the arrival of essential aid to the affected population in place.

Mutual agreement based on principles of inclusiveness and representation may also serve to mitigate those challenges which arise when actors feel as if they were not given the opportunity to articulate their mandate, goals, perspective, etc. To the extent that a system is often only as strong as its weakest link, there is an argument for ensuring that humanitarian organizations and agencies, both international and local, are provided an opportunity to represent themselves, and to contribute in a participatory way to coordination discussions.<sup>26</sup>

#### Conclusion

In complex emergency situations, the incursion of humanitarian organizations and material can be overwhelming. The timely, effective and appropriate delivery of humanitarian assistance is

http://ocha.unog.ch/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/diagnostic%20tool%20-%20v4.doc

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Diagnostic Tool:,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), "The Roll-Out of the Cluster Approach in the Democratic Republic of Congo, OCHA-IDD/ICVA Mission to DRC," http://www.icva.ch/doc00001846.html March 7-18, 2006

therefore of great importance. The development of common strategies, policies, mechanisms and tools has improved the delivery of assistance over recent years, while recognizing the importance of collaborative and inclusive processes aimed at building on the different strengths and capacities of actors, especially operations at field level. Not only are the humanitarian operations undertaken improved through the development and implementation of coordination strategies and mechanisms, but, more critically, the beneficiary population also gains from the enhanced operations.

Coordination is a detailed, varying and often complex undertaking, but case studies have demonstrated the need for multifaceted cooperation among humanitarian actors. Though there exists key distinctions between the three main humanitarian networks (UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGOs), there is a sense that through an inclusive system-wide means of coordination, continued progress may be made.<sup>27</sup>

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 27}$  Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, (August 2005): 10.

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