



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS:

A Review Of NGO Coordination in the Field

LESSONS LEARNED v1.0

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Background Note

During the 1990s ICVA supported NGO coordination in the field in various ways and, on the basis of that experience, published two resource books: “Meeting needs: NGO Coordination in Practice”, a series of case studies on examples of NGO coordination, and “NGO Coordination at Field Level: A Handbook”. While much of the content of those books remains relevant, the humanitarian sector has changed greatly in the 15 years since they were published and our understanding of NGO coordination has not developed quickly enough to keep up with those changes.

Commissioned by ICVA in 2010, this review builds on that earlier work, comprising three parts: an Overview Report introducing some key issues in NGO coordination; a series of Case Studies providing insight into how NGOs respond to those issues in the field; and a Lessons Learned bringing together critical points identified in the Case Studies. On the basis of this, the ICVA Executive Committee decided to develop resources for NGO coordination in 2011, working with other NGO coordination bodies and consortia to create a broader knowledge base, clearer guidelines and stronger support frameworks for field-based efforts.

1. Factors in Coordination

1.1 Most international NGOs now recognise that coordination is a responsibility for all humanitarian actors, rather than the sole responsibility of officially-mandated governmental and inter-governmental bodies. While resource constraints (especially lack of staff time) mean that NGOs find it difficult to participate in coordination mechanisms at the expense of their own operations, NGO coordination is the norm and not the exception.

1.2 NGO coordination may not take the form of formally organised coordination but instead rely on informal “coffee shop coordination”. While these bilateral and small group relations usually happen below the radar of formal coordination, they remain critical to effective operations and should be facilitated and encouraged by “official” coordinators such as Cluster leads. Participants should, in any case, make sure that they share information about any agreements reached or activities carried out via such informal meetings with the wider community through appropriate channels.

1.3 Support to coordination does not necessarily mean support to formal mechanisms such as the clusters, and there may be more appropriate and attractive approaches for NGOs. One such approach is the service model offered by initiatives such as the Afghanistan National Security Office, where an accessible structure with dedicated staff provide – either directly, or by acting as a clearing house – a range of services such as information sharing, training provision, provision of guidelines and/or training, and facilitating small working groups on specific issues.

1.4 Coordination mechanisms that exist prior to the onset of crises should be adapted to deal with the emergency where possible and appropriate. This adaptation will enable NGOs to take advantage of the network of relationships that the existing mechanisms are based on, the combined knowledge of local conditions possessed by their members, and the reputation that they may enjoy with other actors. Existing NGO staff – particularly local staff of international NGOs and local NGO staff with relevant capacity – should play a role in setting priorities and establishing principles, while bearing in mind that their background may not include specific experience in dealing with emergencies.

1.5 Coordination processes should be tailored to the operational environment, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. Factors affecting coordination can be divided into several categories, including: political (e.g. relations with the government); geographic (e.g. size and accessibility of the affected area); type of emergency (natural disaster or complex emergency); and scale and scope of emergency. More basic factors also have influence, such as location of NGO offices; where they cluster together, meeting attendance is higher.

1.6 Funding is clearly a critical factor. Aceh is cited as one of the least-coordinated responses primarily because it was felt that the funding surplus for the tsunami removed one of the main incentives for NGOs to coordinate. NGOs that are well-resourced (particularly from private rather than institutional funds) are perceived to suffer less from resource allocation problems, and consequently feel less need to coordinate in order to maximize the impact of their activities. The evidence for this is largely anecdotal and there is almost no research in how overall levels of funding affect coordination. However there is a general indication that funding *patterns* (particularly where they reflect the interests of institutional donors) play a large role in promoting or undermining coordination, and the position of institutional donors in encouraging their NGO partners to coordinate is often critical.

1.7 Setting up coordination mechanisms – particularly if it involves creating a formal coordination body with a membership base – is most difficult during the emergency phase because operational priorities will always take precedence for NGOs. Paradoxically the emergency phase is often when levels of commitment to coordination are highest, as organisations realise that their individual efforts are insufficient and joint approaches will better meet the needs of affected populations and ensure security more effectively. As the emergency phase comes to an end – or as organisations become habituated to an ongoing emergency – the commitment to coordination usually diminishes. This shift is most noticeable when principles and priorities change during the transition from relief to development, as NGO coordination in development contexts is often quite different in nature to that in relief contexts, and especially when relief and development operations are carried out side-by-side by the same organisations.

2. Forming a Coordination Body

2.1 The nature of the NGO community means that successful NGO coordination almost always relies on the commitment of participants to voluntarily devote some of their resources to the coordination process. As a result, NGO coordination is usually demand-driven, and it is vital to clearly establish the level and type of demand before and during the process of setting up a coordination body; not just among members, but through consultation with other stakeholders such as UN, local civil society representatives and affected populations where feasible.

2.2 It is not essential for an NGO coordinating body to have every NGO as a member in order to credibly represent the NGO community. However the body must contain a critical mass of major operational INGOs (preferably including those organisations bringing in a significant majority of institutional funding) in order to have credibility. This same level of control over institutional funding brings responsibilities which are usually recognised by the NGOs themselves, but may need to be encouraged and supported by their peers.

2.3 To create a genuinely collective body, members need to feel ownership, and three means of achieving this ownership have been identified: participation in democratic decision-making processes, establishing task-oriented smaller groups, and requiring a subscription from the membership. However while requiring paid subscriptions provides some indication of the level of members' engagement, they must be carefully managed to avoid making the coordination body exclusive and undermining intra-NGO relations.

2.4 A coordination body should aim to establish a positive feedback loop for its participants, making coordination meetings useful and engaging in order to keep up attendance levels, which in turn will help to make coordination meetings more useful through the network effect. Another positive feedback loop arises as more NGOs join the coordination body, making it more representative of the community; the more representative it is perceived to be, the more likely it is to be invited to high-level meetings and other policy forums, adding value for the members.

2.5 Clear Terms of Reference (TORs) must be set out when a coordination body is formally established, at minimum laying out its governance structures and operating procedures. These TORs should be in place as early as possible since it provides the framework for both internal discussions and external representation. The same is true for any support structure that is established such as a Secretariat; the role, responsibilities and limitations of the structure must be clearly communicated to internal and external stakeholders, which may require translating TORs, publicising activities and establishing feedback mechanisms.

2.6 The legal status of an NGO coordination mechanism in the eyes of the State should be clear in order to facilitate its activities. An unclear legal status can create problems, particularly in terms of government relations and especially if the coordination mechanism plays an important role in the overall response. It also avoids the questionable situation of an officially unrecognised body representing a membership consisting of officially recognised bodies.

3. Leadership and Governance

3.1 The absence of major emergencies always results in a dip in NGO coordination activities, but reviving a coordination mechanism after a lull is possible through strong leadership and rigorous organisation. In these situations it is an advantage for the Chair (or other leader) to be one of the larger NGOs to show that the coordination body represents NGOs with sufficient weight; but it is equally important that the coordination body not be identified too closely with a single NGO. Where a single representative (or even a small group) carries the weight, they need significant capacity within their organisation(s) to support them.

3.2 While strong leadership is essential, it also sets the tone for the coordination body overall. These roles require commitment, selflessness and transparency, combined with an ability to take decisions and bring colleagues along with them while maintaining inclusivity; being able to tap into existing networks and build new ones is also a vital skill in order to influence the wider humanitarian system.

3.3 The governance structures of many NGO coordination bodies tend to be dominated by larger NGOs, frequently American or European. This fact may simply reflect the reality that these NGOs have more capacity to spare for coordination, but it is sometimes the result of the linguistic and cultural advantages enjoyed by those organisations in coordination that plays to those advantages. No matter what the cause, this situation can lead to smaller and local NGOs feeling excluded from the structure, and the question of representation and accountability are paramount. While democratic procedures such as elections can mitigate such questions, it is always possible that individuals are being elected because of their organisation rather than their personal capabilities.

3.4 Strong leadership must therefore be balanced by strong governance bodies, such as advisory boards, steering committees (SC) or executive committees (ExCom), in order to ensure accountability within the coordination mechanism. Strong governance can also sometimes become a weakness, for example if a steering committee loses any of its members due to unforeseen circumstances and replacements cannot be easily found. A network approach will be most resilient, when member NGOs with different mandates and capacities can spread responsibilities reasonably widely and provide institutional memory; however this approach may be difficult to balance with a desire for free elections for SC/ExCom membership.

3.5 Staff serving on governance bodies should have decision-making authority within their own organisations (i.e. they should be country-level directors, or sometimes deputies) and be prepared to commit to a reasonably high level of responsibility for the coordination body. This commitment will require them to create space to reach decisions away from their day-to-day responsibilities, while being realistic about how much time they can commit. The high level of commitment required can be balanced against the benefits that Committee membership usually brings: access to better information at a higher level than most NGOs could achieve on their own, access to senior decision-makers in other organisations as peers, and visibility for their organisations in the wider humanitarian community.

3.6 Within NGOs themselves, there is often a lack of understanding of what field staff, particularly country directors, require to ensure successful operations. In evaluating staff performance, HQs do not attach high value to their staff participating in coordination activities, despite the fact that those activities are often essential for the work of the organisation. If NGOs could agree that a specific percentage of their staff time will be spent on coordination activities, possibly including it in their job description, it would improve field coordination considerably, and hence improve their own operations.

4. Support Functions

4.1 NGO coordination bodies are most successful when there is a dedicated support function (such as a Secretariat or Liaison Office) that can focus on the administrative aspects of coordination. Dedicated support – Secretariat, Liaison Officer or Information Officer – allows members to work more effectively, not just by handling basic administrative requirements (ranging from taking minutes at meetings to implementing election procedures), but also by facilitating communication, providing continuity and in some cases acting as NGO representative.

4.2 Coordination support requires specific skills, qualities and experience, rather than a general background in humanitarian work, including. While appropriate operational experience, preferably in the country itself, and ideally supported by appropriate language skills, is important, other skills are also necessary. These include: strong organisational skills and good interpersonal skills (including facilitation, negotiation and mediation); an understanding of relationships across the entire humanitarian community, including an awareness of one's position within the community, both actual and perceived; experience of working with a range of stakeholders, including local civil society organisations; and, where appropriate, experience in developing policy positions and advocacy approaches.

4.3 Representational skills are only necessary when that specific responsibility is conferred upon coordination staff. However support staff still play a critical role in advocacy on key issues, particularly those that require consistent pressure over a period of time, rely on circulation of information amongst internal and external stakeholders, and need a wide support base for advocacy actions. In such cases, full-time support staff can keep advocacy processes going and ensure that they do not fall through the gaps even if key member organisations change their leadership or lose momentum in other ways.

4.4 In terms of pushing particular issues to the fore, support staff must strike the correct balance between supporting the membership and taking the lead. Broadly speaking, the issues pursued by support staff must always reflect the concerns of the membership; support staff should not be seen to be in a leadership position as this can undermine the credibility of the coordination structure as a representative body. Given that most NGOs are occupied by their own organisational concerns, however, helping the membership to recognise the importance of common issues may be essential.

4.5 The membership should not become over-reliant on Secretariat staff at the expense of their own engagement, and a strong Secretariat should be balanced by an engaged membership. It is essential that support staff receive adequate oversight from the membership of the coordination body, not just from their host agency. When setting up support functions, there must be a balance between the responsibility of the host agency (which has responsibility for providing administrative support to the support staff, such as recruitment, financial management and logistics) and the responsibility of the organisations responsible for directing the day-to-day activities of those staff (such as a Steering Committee or Executive Board). These responsibilities must be clearly articulated and understood by all parties.

5. Key Issues

5.1 Approaches to advocacy must be tailored to the specific country context. Direct approaches may not always be the most productive means of addressing key issues where governments are sensitive to criticism, and indirect and mediated advocacy, working with sympathetic government offices, UN agencies or donors may prove to be more successful.

5.2 Donor support (particularly for funding support staff) is easier to get if a coordination body has a track record to demonstrate that the members are committed to the process and the body is worth investing in. However it is difficult to sustain an increasing level of collective action over a period of years without having some sort of financial support; for some coordination bodies, that support has come from the larger NGO members, who were prepared to give some of their resources to keep the body going. However NGO coordination activities should complement and not compete with its members for funds; for example, if an NGO coordination body becomes directly involved in capacity building of local NGOs, they may be seen to be competing with their own members. It is far better for an NGO coordination body to act as a broker for e.g. local NGO capacity building, rather than carrying out capacity building activities itself.

5.3 NGO coordination bodies should act as vectors for promoting principles and standards that the wider NGO community has agreed upon, such as the Sphere standards. This type of promotion may be through ensuring regular discussion about these issues, through working groups or joint advocacy initiatives by members, facilitating or providing training to NGO staff, or establishing monitoring or compliance mechanisms (bearing in mind that coordination alone will not ensure compliance). Coordination bodies should aim to build links with organisations such as the Humanitarian Accountability Project (especially if members are also HAP members) to create opportunities for experience sharing and technical support.

5.4 Even if there are no formal accountability or disciplinary measures available to the SC/ExCom regarding member behaviour, NGO coordination bodies can provide an informal accountability mechanism, particularly for long-standing members. They offer a venue for informal peer review of member activities, a forum in which to discuss openly member policies, and a mechanism to build consensus. Private discussions create pressure for members to be consistent in their public statements to different actors – the prospect of embarrassment amongst peers was strong enough to restrain behaviour.

6. Managing Coordination

6.1 The larger and more diverse membership a coordination meeting has, the more difficult it becomes to have focused discussions – particularly on policy issues – and thus more difficult to develop coherent advocacy. Even though there is frequently the perception that broad consultation across a wide range of organisations is inefficient, this diversity is essential to ensure proper representation of the NGO community and decision-making should not be (or be seen to be) exclusive. Decision-making should be consultative and transparent, or risk inappropriate or unrepresentative decisions. The perception that organisations are not sharing power will undermine both the credibility of the coordination body and the trust relationships that enable it to operate.

6.2 In general governance structures should be as streamlined as possible, keeping project costs, staff numbers and activities as low as possible while still delivering good service. It is easier to scale up than to scale back, but rapid expansion of the NGO community poses specific challenges for coordination bodies. One advantage is the infusion of new, different approaches drawn from other operations, in which case a coordination body can provide a conduit for sharing lessons, even if only informally. Another is the possibility of the coordination body becoming more inclusive through adding new members that represent a wider range of constituencies. Such an approach also increases the network effect, through which the coordination body has the potential to reach a wider range of actors through creatively exploiting individual members' access to other networks (such as faith-based communities, technical expert communities, etc).

6.3 However this type of growth can easily overwhelm or marginalise a coordination mechanism; changes in operating environment and membership composition will inevitably affect the ability of an NGO coordination body to achieve collective goals. These changes can be managed as long as the structure of the body remains flexible; trying to maintain specific meetings, governance bodies and operating processes past their natural lifespan is generally counter-productive. Like any organisation, NGO coordination bodies need to invest in organisational development to ensure their continued success in changing circumstances.

6.4 The ability of NGO coordination bodies established or dominated by international NGOs to reach out to local NGOs depends on how effectively the membership communicates this priority to the leadership, and how well the leadership manages the outreach process. Basic elements can be put in place to facilitate local NGO participation, two of the most important being appropriate location (to ensure that meetings are accessible to local NGOs, both in terms of getting to and getting into the venue) and language (in which coordination meetings are held, and coordination materials printed or disseminated).

6.5 Care must be taken to balance the needs of local and international NGOs, which are often very different. This lesson is particularly true where resources may have to be allocated, such as support staff time, or where existing processes may have to be adjusted, such as changing meeting formats to accommodate local NGO capacity. It is also worth noting that facilitating local NGO participation in coordination is not necessarily the most effective way to support local response, although providing an open forum for open discussion at the very least enables local NGOs to make their own discussions about participation and representation of their views. The *Principles of Partnership* provide a framework for international NGO commitment to these processes, but a means to evaluate whether or not the principles are being observed must still be established.

6.6 It appears that no existing coordination bodies have ever established criteria and procedures for bringing their operations to a close. A reasonable argument against such a requirement is that there will probably be a need for NGO coordination of some sort for as long as NGOs are operating in the country. However coordination bodies at least plan for those times when members' level of commitment diminishes considerably, when the credibility of the body is jeopardised by its own actions or a changing external environment, or when funding streams dry up to the point where the coordination body is no longer viable. An exit strategy is simply an obvious and necessary extension of such planning.