

# Introduction: Collective action and performance — a personal view

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One of the most important functions of ALNAP is having an overview, to promote and facilitate changes and improvements in the whole humanitarian system. But seeing the big picture is not easy, and the vast majority of people in the humanitarian system do not have a complete overview. Many jobs look inwards rather than outwards, and it is often difficult to be aware of and responsive to the external environment.

I became acutely aware of this in my first job as a UN Field Officer in the 1984–85 famine in Wollo Region in northern Ethiopia. My brief was to monitor deliveries of food aid in the 50 or so relief camps and report back each month to the UN Assistant Secretary-General. Wollo is large – about the size of France – very mountainous and with very poor roads. It was also necessary to obtain a government travel permit to move between checkpoints. Getting a permit was a frustrating business and often took weeks. Because of my status as the only UN staff member stationed in the whole of Wollo, the authorities issued me with travel permits that allowed me to go almost anywhere within the region. I soon discovered that I seemed to be the only person in the relief operation able to do this on a regular basis.

Throughout 1985 I was able to travel the length and breadth of Wollo. I got to know all the NGO and Red Cross field staff across the region and often delivered messages and supplies between camps. There were only about six working telephones in the region (one in my house) and, coupled with a lack of freedom to travel, this meant that almost nobody knew what was happening elsewhere. In this environment, I became an important source of information between different agency personnel isolated by their lack of freedom of movement. Camp workers lived in a sealed environment, unconnected and operating without reference to what was going on in neighbouring camps. Such restrictions had all kinds of negative consequences for personnel on an emotional and psychological level, there were very dark political implications, and it was a very inefficient way to do business.

This lack of connectedness was partially recognised in Addis Ababa and efforts were made to set up ‘coordination meetings’. However, these meetings generally consisted of various people reading out lists of things they had delivered within the confines of their own camp situation. The mindset of the day was to ‘do one’s own thing’. And there were good reasons for this. It was very hard to work in a political environment where a repressive regime creates a restrictive environment, where the truth is covered up and collective gatherings are perceived as potentially undermining the

powers that be. In these circumstances genuine coordination (another DAC criterion) and collective action is a non-starter.

But both Ethiopia and the wider world have changed greatly since 1985. It seems almost mandatory for current commentaries and reports on humanitarian assistance to make reference to living in a globalised environment with instant communications, affordable transportation, information overload and the like. The physical means are now in place for agencies to work together, share information, learn together and work collectively. Indeed, the idea of being more connected and playing a part in collective action for humanitarian goals is one of the main reasons why I joined ALNAP 16 years after I left Ethiopia. Like many people I had been influenced by analysis in the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), which helped to develop a new approach. I gained a sense of the wider system and the political forces that influenced it – the picture was bleak in some ways but inspiring in others. It seemed to me that when the system came together in a spirit of cooperation and with a shared aim, a great deal could be achieved. And I believe this still to be the case.

In Chapter 3 of this *Review of Humanitarian Action* (RHA), Margie Buchanan Smith and Tony Beck note the high quality of the substantive analysis provided in the JEEAR – but the excellence of the report itself should not obscure the importance of the process. This was the first time that so many actors had come together and provided a means by which the humanitarian system could get to know itself, get to grips with serious problems and work out collective ways of dealing with those problems. In that sense, the JEEAR has offered us all a way of way of doing business. It says that the system is greater than the sum of its parts and that all of us in the system are in some way connected with each other. We are also in some way dependent on each other. Paul Clark and Ben Ramalingam explain this lucidly in Chapter 4 on organisational change. Recognising this interdependence and acting upon it is one of the prerequisites for both good practice and good policy.

## 1.1 Collective action in practice and policy

What is the value of collective action? One way to address this question is to reflect on the low points in humanitarian action over the last 15 years or so, and also on the causes for celebration and optimism. It seems that the biggest effect on how well agencies and the system perform results not from things (manuals, kits, standards) but from the quality of the motivations and attitudes of agency personnel. If we start with the negatives, we need look no further than reports from the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) on what can only be described as a selfish attitude prevalent in agencies involved in the international response. Agencies seem to have been dazzled by the amount of money available directly after the tsunami struck and were not able to say no to funds even when they did not have the capacity to spend them wisely. A 'me-first' mindset was adopted, and agencies went about their work in a spirit of competition. Logos were photographed and flags were flown. As someone said at the time, after the first wave, there came a second dangerous wave of humanitarian agencies. Agencies were reported to have fought with each other over turf; they were unwilling to cooperate and coordinate, did not pay due respect to local organisations and culture, did not build local capacity, and poached local staff. Overall, it is not an edifying picture, and unfortunately does resonate with many of the findings from the JEEAR ten years earlier.

This is all the more unfortunate given that, directly after the Goma experience, many agencies were committed to making sure that similar attitudes and behaviours were not repeated. One positive example of this comes from Liberia in 1996 when a number of NGOs came together to create the Joint Policy of Operations (JPO), which was essentially a collective effort to change the way in which emergency operations were being conducted. One of the underlying motives was to learn from the operational shortcoming described in the JEEAR and find a practical way of coordinating joint action. What is evident here is that, compared with the Goma and Ache experiences, the motivation and the attitudes of the agencies demonstrated a desire for collective action that enabled people to put individual differences aside and work together according to a set of rules for the collective good.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, there is also good reason to take heart in the principle underlying the cluster approach to coordination. This is again a principle of collective action, and has the potential to make real improvements. However, even when it looks as

though cooperation is the name of the game, the ‘me-first’ mindset is sometimes not far below the surface. The evaluation synthesis on the response to the Pakistan earthquake by John Cosgrave and Maurice Herson (Chapter 2) reveals conflict between the individual agendas of agencies designated as cluster leads and the priorities of the cluster itself. Lead agencies found it very hard to separate their responsibilities as cluster leads from their agency mandates. This provides a warning demonstration of the strong influences, institutional and external, on how agencies see the world and how they choose to behave.<sup>2</sup>

Policy also benefits from collective action. The Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative shows how a group of donors collectively recognised a lack of harmonisation in their different approaches and took collective action to resolve it. Anyone who has read the TEC report, or indeed Tony Vaux’s RHA chapter last year on ‘distortions’ in the system, will be under no illusions that this is going to be easy, but coming together as a group has at least provided the basis for making funding more equitable, flexible and apportioned on the basis of humanitarian need. This has also prompted one of ALNAPs members (DARA) to take up the task of designing an analytical tool to measure the effectiveness of donors in light of their commitment to the principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship.<sup>3</sup> No doubt this task will be not be easy either, but such initiatives are a vital part of an effective global civil society, and promise real value.

Collective action is evident also in initiatives that combine elements of both policy and practice. This is perhaps best seen in the Sphere project, as probably the most expansive example of collective action. Indeed, it has been difficult *not* to be involved in this process at some level. Although criticisms are still levelled at the underlying rationale of technical standards themselves, there is good reason to rejoice in the collaborative nature of the Sphere process. Although we still do not know whether the Sphere standards are playing a real role in improving performance (of which more below), they are at least widely recognised. It has also been heartening to note the excellent progress made by agencies who have come together in a global community of practice to exchange ideas and experiences on cash-based programming.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 3 on joint evaluations, experience of evaluations carried out by the Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) project has found that the evaluations were good in themselves, but that the process was also very important.

Many people involved spoke of the benefits to staff members from competing agencies working together. A positive work environment seems to have been created, apparently very different from the competitive frenzy noted in the TEC and JEEAR. ECB seems to have enabled the collaborating agencies to put ‘us first’ and ‘me second’. And it has worked.

## 1.2 Collective action on measuring performance

So, where are the gaps in collective action? To begin to answer this, I would like to go back to Ethiopia, just after the famine-relief operation finished in 1986. Many people then asked the inevitable questions: ‘How could such a thing happen?’, ‘What went wrong?’, and ‘How can we ensure this will never happen again?’ The same questions were asked after Rwanda, and after Kosovo, and are still being asked about Darfur today. In 1985 the system had not matured enough to address these issues properly – the concept of humanitarian joint evaluations was not to emerge fully for another ten years, and methods for learning were few. However, in the wake of terrible experiences at Bati relief camp, the Red Cross commissioned an evaluation of its own response, which was led by Robert Chambers. This had a far-reaching affect within the Red Cross movement, but relatively little impact outside. A review of the system’s response to the famine in Wollo was commissioned by the British government; this report was well grounded but its focus on a single region restricted its reach and value.<sup>5</sup> In essence, the system was unable to scrutinise itself, and little or no system-wide learning took place.

Lack of learning is not a theoretical matter. A number of my colleagues from Ethiopia worked in Goma during the initial stages of the crisis there. All of them in one way or another lamented the fact that we had been unable to learn very much, if anything, from the Ethiopia experience. In this case, lack of learning and its application had fatal consequences. Fortunately, the humanitarian system has matured and since the JEEAR it is apparent that humanitarian agencies are committed to ‘continuous improvement’ and have made efforts to improve accountability, learning, human resources, coordination, evaluation and all the other areas highlighted each year in

the *Review of Humanitarian Action*. However, as every year goes by it is increasingly clear that the system is unable to assess its own performance. There are still no baselines, no agreed definitions of performance and an absence of any kind of mechanism able to track performance.

Many other sectors, including service industries, manufacturing, commerce, civil society and the military, have developed mechanisms to track their own performance. These are seen as a clear mark of professionalism and maturity, and help to increase confidence among consumers, employees and employers, partners and other stakeholders. A common technique is to design a performance mechanism that generates a set of scores reflecting the overall 'health' of the sector. This is used as a way of judging and monitoring performance over time, and to provide impetus for improvement. The methodology differs between sectors but the use of scores as a barometer for overall sectoral health is a common feature.

There seems to be a growing realisation in the humanitarian sector that we need to follow suit. The best we can do at the moment is through system-wide joint evaluations. Indeed, it is no surprise to read in Chapter 3 that joint evaluations have 'come of age'; Margie Buchanan Smith and Tony Beck recommend further take-up of the knowledge gathered in the sector to date, placing special emphasis on future system-wide evaluations. There is much cause for encouragement here but the chapter also alludes to some of the limitations of joint evaluations. We know that it takes an enormous effort on the part of the system to organise joint evaluations, and they have been undertaken only in exceptional circumstances. In this way they can provide only a one-off snapshot of the system, and are unable to gauge how the overall performance of the sector is changing and whether or not it is improving.

Apart from the occasional joint evaluation, what can the system rely on? ALNAP helps to provide a regular overview of performance through its annual evaluation synthesis. This has certainly added value and has provided a platform for discussing performance-related issues brought to light by analysis of evaluations submitted by ALNAP members. Our understanding of the response to Kosovo, the Southern Africa Food crisis, Darfur and the Pakistan earthquake has been enriched through this process, and the ALNAP membership can be proud of the contribution it has made. But, again, we acknowledge that the synthesis gives a very partial appraisal of performance. It can raise issues and shine a light into particular corners but it cannot provide a rounded picture.

The system currently produces a range of other useful reviews that touch on some aspects of performance, but they are invariably limited in their scope. These include: Development Initiatives' Global Humanitarian Assistance series, which analyses financial flows in the sector; and the Red Cross World Disasters Report series and different sorts of nutrition and epidemiological data produced by projects such as SMART (the Standardised Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transition programme) and the Humanitarian health and Nutrition Tracking Services (HNTS). There are also other occasional publications, such as the Humanitarian Response Review and reports produced by the various quality and accountability initiatives. The views of affected people and humanitarian professionals are now beginning to be canvassed more regularly,<sup>6</sup> and ongoing research on specific subjects continues to be undertaken by research groups such as the Humanitarian Policy Group and Tufts University.

### 1.2.1 The Humanitarian Performance Project

However, if all of this information could be collated it might then be possible to create a more rounded picture of performance. The separate pieces of available data do not currently add up to even the sum of their parts. Therefore, ALNAP has recently set up the Humanitarian Performance Project, which aims to facilitate and support the development of a mechanism for assessing and reporting on the overall performance of the sector. Work over the past 12 months, including consultation with the ALNAP membership, has enabled the Secretariat to explore the potential for a mechanism to assess system-wide performance. This will involve gathering, collating and analysing different kinds of information and data currently available in the system. It will thus depend on a high level of collaboration between specialists, practitioners, policy-makers and, we hope, beneficiaries. Perhaps more than ever, the system will have to engage with a regular process of collective action.

ALNAP is well placed to drive this process on behalf of the system, given that its membership includes most of the key organisations in the official humanitarian sector and spans many of the principal stakeholder groups. At the heart of the approach will be a process of coalition- building among all principal stakeholders. This will inevitably throw up all kinds of challenges but, as emphasised above, the success of this process will ultimately depend upon our collective attitude. It will be possible to deal with methodological and logistical challenges as long as the system



works collaboratively. The successful establishment of such a mechanism would help all of us to see the whole picture, and may herald another coming of age – as a more mature and more confident humanitarian sector, more in touch with its clients and more open to improvements. This is well worth aiming for.

## Notes

- 1** See: HPG (Humanitarian Policy Group) (2000) *The 'Joint Policy of Operation' and the 'Principles and Protocols of Humanitarian Operation in Liberia'*. HPG Report, 3 March.
- 2** A detailed analysis of the reasons why people do and do not cooperate can be found in Gillinson, Sarah (2004) *Why Cooperate? A Multi-disciplinary Study of Collective Action* Working Paper 234. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- 3** See: Hidalgo, Silvia and Augusto Lopez-Claros (2007) *The Humanitarian Response Index 2007: Measuring Commitment to Best Practice*. Madrid: DARA.
- 4** See: Harvey, Paul (2007) *Cash Based Responses in Emergencies*, HPG Report 24, January.
- 5** Mitchell, John (1986) *Review of the Famine Relief Operation in Wollo Region, Ethiopia 1984–85*. (Report available from ALNAP.)
- 6** See Fritz Institute [www.fritzinstitute.org](http://www.fritzinstitute.org) and HAP-I: The Humanitarian Accountability Report 2006. Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, Geneva