

# Working together in the field for effective humanitarian response

## Discussion starter

### 30th ALNAP Annual Meeting

3 – 4 March 2015, Berlin

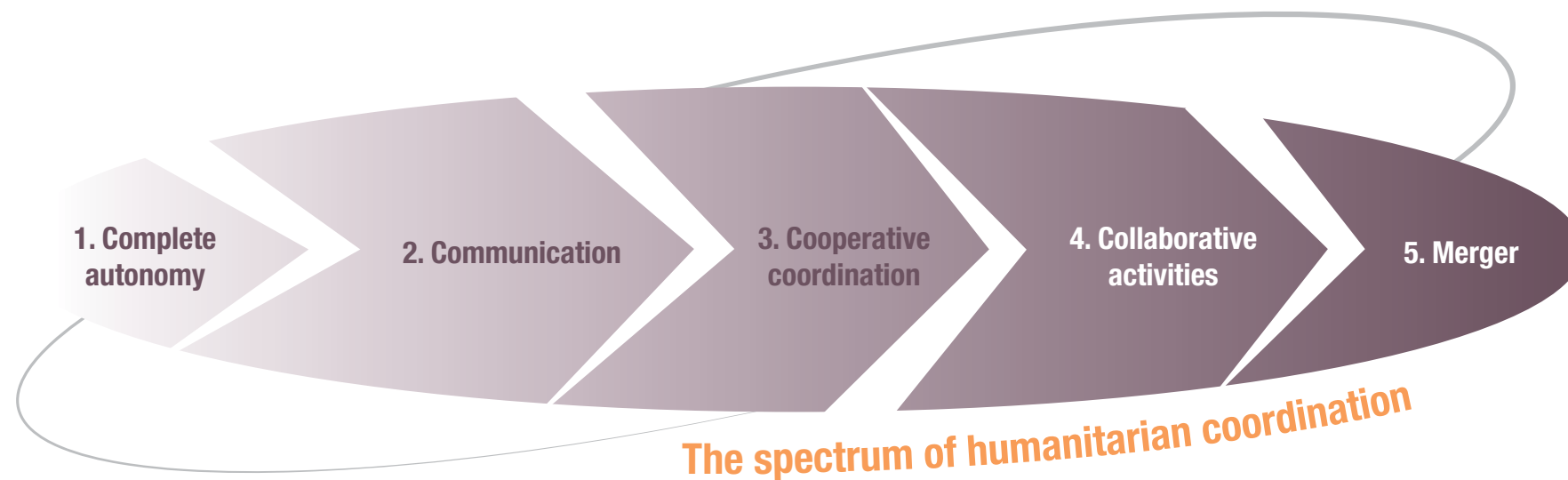


Humanitarian responses often involve large numbers of organisations. If these fail to coordinate effectively, the response can suffer from gaps in coverage, delays, duplications and inefficiencies.

Humanitarians have to deal with increasing and more complex responses to crises and emergencies yet funding continues to be limited. Coordinated approaches offer the possibility of using scarce resources more effectively.

But with a multiplying **constellation** of actors in the international humanitarian system – all with different understandings over how aid should be approached – coordinated action may seem impossible.

Yet it is happening. The background paper to ALNAP's 30th Annual Meeting addresses the variety of ways that different organisations are working together at country level. It considers bilateral relations between organisations (partnerships), as well as relations between multiple organisations (clusters, networks and consortiums). It also looks at non-structural factors used to support cooperation (funding mechanisms and standards).



There is a broad range of terms to describe the ways in which organisations in the humanitarian sector work together.

For the purpose of this meeting, ALNAP suggests a typology which differentiates between levels of coordination in terms of the amount of time and resources required for coordination, the level of formality in the relationship, and the degree to which organisations involved give up autonomy. The spectrum suggested outlines different levels of coordination between **complete autonomy** and **total merger**:

**Communication:** Entails informal information sharing and exchange, with limited commitment of resources.

**Cooperative:** Involves agencies working separately but in parallel, aiming to prevent gaps or duplications. There is a higher level of formality and increased commitment to contribute and adjust plans if needed.

**Collaborative:** At this level activities are formalised, there is sharing of resources to varying degrees and the collaborating organisations' strategies and work plans are aligned.

## The current situation

- **States** have the primary responsibility to lead and coordinate emergency response, as it has been widely recognised both formally and legally. However there is a great diversity among states in terms of capacities (e.g. the rise of National Disaster Management Authorities, NDMAs) and contexts. This generates frustrations and tensions between states and international actors.

- **The IASC** has established **formal coordination mechanisms**. The last decade has seen a series of reforms leading to improvements in terms of structures and functionality of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) and clusters, including the ability and willingness to learn and improve. Yet certain challenges and critiques persist, particularly in terms of flexibility, adaptability and inclusion issues.

- **NGOs coordination** takes many forms: consortiums and networks, bilateral partnerships and families. Evaluations highlight trust, clarity over roles, responsibilities and shared goals as important success factors. While there have been attempts to standardise certain ways of working (e.g. Principles of Partnership (PoP)), reactive and short-term goals have often clashed with strategic and longer-term attempts to improve coordinated work.

- The involvement of **non-traditional actors** such as the **private sector** offers interesting new avenues for coordinated action. Yet these initiatives are no silver bullet and concerns remain over their replicability and generalisability.

- There are other factors that can enhance or constrain coordination and cooperative approaches. **Informal arrangements and tacit knowledge** play an important role, with the advantage of being adaptable and rapid. **Funding** can support joint work (e.g. pooled funds at country level), yet inclusion and exclusion issues can arise in an environment with competition for access and control of resources. **Standards, guides and procedures** can also create commonalities.

## Potential benefits of working together

### COVERAGE

- Geographical and sectoral needs can be better addressed.
- Helps avoid duplication.
- Can decrease gaps in access to affected people.

### EFFECTIVENESS

- Can lead to improved performance in key phases of the project cycle management.
- Higher levels of communication can help agencies to make informed decisions and support dissemination.
- Speed of response by pre-positioned coordination can enable reactivity resulting in rapidly available funds.

### EFFICIENCY

- Can maximise and build on what is available locally.
- Coordinated procurement and service delivery result in economies of scale.

### RELEVANCE & APPROPRIATEDNESS

- Can go beyond just mapping, to actually understanding the needs.
- Coordination with local actors gives better understanding of needs.
- Coordination with local organisations/private sector can give affected people more agency.

## Factors that can make coordination difficult

- differences in mandates of organisations responding
- tensions between time and investment required versus speed required in emergency response
  - institutional resistance to loss of autonomy
    - costs in time and money
    - linguistic and cultural barriers
- sheer numbers of actors involved in responses: working with everybody will, in most cases, be neither feasible nor practical

### CONNECTEDNESS

- Coordination with development actors allows smoother transition to recovery.
- Coordination can improve legitimacy of the government and reinforce and build civil society capacity

### COHERENCE

- Joint advocacy can result in improved access and protection.
- Coordination can help in the dissemination of humanitarian and human rights principles.

## Factors against too much coordination

- power disparities, danger that less powerful organisations may be forced to compromise on their objectives and principles
- subordination of aid to political ends
- compromises to the principles of independence and neutrality (e.g. when a state is part of the conflict or implicated in causing the humanitarian crisis)
- too much coordination leading to 'homogenisation', also decreasing debate, opinion and innovation

## The big questions

Do we have a common understanding of what ‘coordination’ (and related terms) mean? Do we need one?

What are the key elements to be considered when deciding whether to coordinate? How do issues around nature of the crisis, timing, capacities, mandates and principles affect our decisions?

Is coordination always desirable? In general, what level of coordination should the system be aiming for?

Are there obvious priority areas for improved coordination? If so, what are they?

What are the key constraints to effective coordination in humanitarian contexts, and what do we know about how they have been/can be overcome?

How can we work effectively with organisations which do not share our objectives, or cohere to humanitarian principles?

How can we work effectively together with ‘competitors’ to deliver effective humanitarian assistance?

How can we measure and evaluate the effects of working

For more information about ALNAP’s 30th Annual Meeting, please visit:

[www.alnap.org/meeting2015](http://www.alnap.org/meeting2015)

#alnap2015

