NEW ALNAP WEBINAR SERIES ON COORDINATION

How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?

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ALNAP

(72 minutes)

Leah Campbell: Hello everyone, and welcome to this ALNAP webinar on the topic of the role and involvement of national actors in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. My name is Leah Campbell, and I'm a researcher at ALNAP, where we've been looking at the topic of coordination for a few years. We've also looked at the role of national actors for some time as well, so this for us is a real chance to put a few different topics that have been important to ALNAP and our membership together, and to hear the perspectives and experiences of several different speakers who are going to share with us today. In a moment I'm going to introduce all of our speakers to you, but before that I'd like to put you all to work by answering the first poll of this webinar. So I'm going to launch the poll now. Just let us know a bit about your level of experience with the topic of coordination, and the role of national actors.

So while you fill that out I will introduce you to today's speakers. We have with us Angela Huddleston, who is currently the programme manager for World Vision International's Turkey based Syria response. She is currently managing funding and donor relations, communications and partnerships, and is also the advocacy focal point for Syria and Turkey based programming. Angela has been working in Turkey since 2014, originally starting as the deputy coordinator with the NGO Forum for NGOs operating in Northern Syria, where she focussed on increasing coordination with Syrian NGOs. She's previously worked in Kenya and Haiti in programmes and M&E, as well as at NGO headquarters, and has a Master's degree in human rights.

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Xavier Génot is a French architect who for the last ten years has be focussing on disaster preparedness and response in the shelter sector through emergency to reconstruction programming, and coordination, mostly with IFRC. He's been involved in a variety of responses from the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the Bangladesh cyclone in 2007, the Haiti earthquake in 2010, Haiyan in 2013 in the Philippines, and most recently in Vanuatu with Cyclone Pam last year.

Our final speaker, Virginie Lefèvre has been working for the past 10 years with NGOs, particularly for the promotion and protection of human rights. For the past five years she's been working in Lebanon, where she's now involved in the humanitarian and development sector. She is the programme and partnerships coordinator of a Lebanese NGO called Amel Association International, and she is also the focal point for the Lebanese NGO's Forum.

I'm going to close the poll now, we have a range of experiences, about 15% of you without any experience on this topic, 60% with some experience, and 25% with quite a bit of experience with this issue. So that's great to know, and great that we have quite a bit of differing experiences in the room. I'm going to first turn to Angela, and the question is what are your overall experiences with the issue of national actors in coordination mechanisms?

Angela Huddleston: Well hello there. First of all I want to say thank you to everyone for coming, I'm excited to see that there's so many people interested in this topic. As you heard from Leah, I've worked with the NGO Forum for 6 months, from August 2014 until February of 2015, and during that time my main priority was to increase our engagements with Syrian NGOs in the humanitarian coordination infrastructure, as well as specifically to ensure that we were including the perspectives of the Syrian NGOs into the advocacy representation topics that the NGO Forum was focusing on. We had a very interesting experience working with Syrian NGOs in the NGO Forum. When I first arrived there was very limited experience and very limited involvement of Syrian NGOs in the coordination infrastructure. Also at that time we didn't have the clusters activated yet. So actually any of the coordination infrastructure was focusing very heavily on informal working groups that were supported by INGOs, supported by the NGO Forum, as well as beginning to engage with the UN mechanisms that were beginning to be established here at that time. At that time Syrian NGOs were very under represented in all of the coordination infrastructure, particularly at the working group level. There was a massive lack of understanding about who was doing what where, there was a massive lack of understanding as to even the scope of the Syrian NGOs, there were several larger Syrian NGOs that were actively involved, and a Syrian NGO coordination mechanism, which was called the Syrian NGO Alliance which had been established, but in terms of full representation of the myriad of local partners that could be engaging, it was very under represented.

That's part of my purpose, and actually the process that I went through was meeting with as many of the Syrian NGOs and the Syrian NGO networks as I could, and as we learned over time, there was a lot more Syrian NGOs that actively wanted to be

involved and actively wanted to be represented but just didn't know how, and didn't really understand why. Those that are familiar with the Syrian crisis, you'll recognize that Syrian NGOS prior to the conflict didn't really exist, there was not a huge Syrian civil society prior to the existence of the Syrian conflict, and so once the Syrian conflict started, we now had multiple Syrian NGOs starting up who were very unfamiliar with the humanitarian principles, the humanitarian infrastructure, what the role of the UN and OCHA is in coordination, why they should be involved in cluster mechanisms, and even just the basic tenants of humanitarian programming. However they had the heart, the enthusiasm, the interest, the passion to take it on, and to try and learn and do whatever they could for their people.

That was actually one of the really positive things when it came to me trying to increase their engagement in the coordination infrastructure. The appetite for learning was so strong, and the appetite for wanting to be engaged, and for wanting to raise awareness of both their organisations, as well as what they could do for the Syrian humanitarian crisis, it was a very positive opportunity for me to capitalise on. During my time with the NGO Forum, I did meet regularly with many Syrian NGOs. I set a goal for myself to meet with them at least once per month, and for the most part I was able to keep that goal, which did oftentimes mean a lot of travelling on my part. Most of the time when I was meeting with the Syrian NGOs, the best thing that I gave was just an opportunity to answer questions. I was able to build a very trusting relationship with these Syrian NGOs, where they could come to me and ask questions about different things that they may have heard in the humanitarian coordination meeting, or at one of the clusters, and trying to get more clarification as to what is this, why does it exist, etc.

The NGO Forum, it is an NGO Forum, so it does allows for representatives from the local NGO population as well as the INGO population, which is something that I think is that's fairly different. I know that there are some others that do allow for local NGO engagement in their NGO coordination mechanism, but the NGO Forum had that mandate since the very beginning. Having that mandate, so having that ability to be integrated into at least one component of the coordination mechanism has given a really strong stepping stone for integrating local NGOs into the remainder of the coordination mechanisms, whether it's at the OCHA level, whether it's at the HCT level, or whether it's at the cluster level. Since then, as the NGO engagement has become much stronger, we've even had opportunities where Syrian NGOs are the NGO co-coordinator at one or more of the clusters. There's been a lot more engagement, and Syrian NGOs are seeing the benefits and the positive benefits of their engagement in the coordination infrastructure.

Since I left the NGO Forum, I'm now working with World Vision International as their head of programmes here in the Turkey based Syria response, and coordination with local NGOs remains to be one of the priorities of my job here. Because we are working very strategically through local partners, in the majority of Northern Syria, we need to have very strong coordination mechanisms. I wanted to speak actually, about one of the challenges that we are still facing in terms of how NGOs are integrated into the

coordination mechanism. That's actually through the reporting and the representing at the clusters. Obviously everyone's aware of the 3Ws, the 4Ws that we have to fill out on a monthly basis, that identifies who is doing what, where, and when. Because the Syrian NGOs are now so integrated into the cluster system, one of the challenges that we face as an INGO is how do we actually report our activities, which are implemented through a local partner, who is also reporting on what they're doing, that is also being implemented by another INGO.

For instance, an NFI distribution that a local NGO could have, and could be doing NFI distributions, which is funded through several INGOs and through several donors. How do we actually report into the cluster system, into the 3Ws? How do we actually represent ourselves in the clusters by ensuring that the partnership is identified, that all of the activities are identified, and that one INGO is not necessarily taking credit for the activities that a local NGO would be doing, but that it's still actually shared and reported appropriately. One of the remaining challenges we're still trying to actually figure out, and hopefully we'll have some better solutions for that soon, it does show that some of the challenges when local NGOs do become more involved with a coordination mechanism, there are even some very small things that you wouldn't necessarily think about to start with, but that come up as they're becoming much stronger players.

Leah Campbell: Thank you so much Angela, I really picked up on quite a few things there. One of the things that most stuck in my mind was, your mentioning of the having a mandate for involvement of national and international NGOs from the beginning in the Forum of Syrian NGOs, or NGOs working in Syria. This issue of having this purpose and mandate to work this way from the beginning is an interesting contrast to the problem you were facing in terms of reporting, where perhaps the role of national NGOs in the clusters hasn't always been… not necessarily clear, but not as purposeful, because it is a mechanism that's an international mechanism, so it's something that can be carried through different contexts, which has its advantages, but doesn't necessarily then have the easiest time driving with what is already existing in countries. Thank you very much for that introduction. I'm going to hand over now to Xavier to get his thoughts on this issue as well.

Xavier Génot: Good morning, afternoon or evening, depending on your time zone. Thanks to be here. On this first question on experience with coordination, I would distinguish 2 types of coordination I've been deeply involved with. First one was from the Haiti earthquake response in 2010. As you may know it was the biggest Red Cross/Red Crescent response, in one disaster response, and as you may know, the Red Cross/ Red Crescent response relied on the simple fact that all nationalities are there to support the in country affected National Society. It means that I was in charge to support the Red Cross, and all the national societies to implement the shelter response to the disaster. This included a lot of understanding of the issues of each stakeholder, because each has their own agenda and understanding. So it was quite intense coordination, because as coordinator I had to liaise with National Societies,

all the stakeholders within the movement and outside the movement, I had to liaise with national NGOs, local authorities and governments.

My second experience is as shelter cluster coordinator, I was in the Haiyan response as well as Vanuatu. If you want to summarise what is a cluster, it's a table where nobody is obliged to come, but people have an interest in coming, and they think they understand the issues that are discussed, for the goal of bringing stronger response. To do that, international actors, NGOs, UN agencies are more familiar with the cluster coordination, but this is not the case for national actors. They don't know how to contribute to that. In this coordination, the main issues for me in the shelter cluster were to reach out as much as possible, especially with local actors, for local authorities, national NGOs, but also with civil society, like in Vanuatu. Coordination with national actors is to reach out, help them understand the role, and to really make them a place at the table of coordination, as this is the only way to create a strong response. Maybe I could add that in terms of cluster coordination, more and more, at least for disaster response, the national governments are taking ownership of cluster coordination, but it's often difficult for cluster coordination personnel to understand all the issues regarding to clusters. It might be really difficult to endorse things at national level, how can you deal with that? It's hard to understand the mechanisms. It's to the national actors to make them understand the system for international aid, but for international actors to understand the constraints of national actors. Understanding the balance is the key to strengthening national coordination.

So I'm going to continue onto the question, what are the main barriers to participation of humanitarian actors, and how were they overcome? I'll share with you some experiences I've had while involved in the shelter sector. In the shelter sector, what is shelter, what is housing, we have these difficulties, we have different actors who have different understanding about what is shelter. On the strategy we developed for the Haiyan response, we had 120+ actors, and with this many actors involved we did some reaching out. I was cluster coordinator in Tacloban, what I did, I asked all the partners who were already involved in the cluster to indicate to me, on the field, local actors who are not part of the shelter cluster, but it would be great for them to be there. What I did, and it was a great experience for me as coordinator, I tried to reach out to local actors and sit with them face-to-face, explain what is a cluster, and what we do, and what would be interesting for them to come and contribute to our meetings.

I was surprised in t he Philippines, they had a fair understanding about the clusters, but they thought the cluster was an NGO. All of this led to 50 or 40 persons, or partners who came to the cluster table. It has been so helpful, because these national actors brought additional actors, brought really in depth knowledge on what's going on on the ground, on Filipino culture and all this. I think that's been fantastic. If you are a national actor and you want to contribute, you need to feel that you are welcomed. It means, as I told you, that you're with them, you listen to them, you listen to their issues, and you lend them the floor to speak and to address the other partners. Contributing to cluster coordination, what is my interest for national actors to come,

you need to support them in their own issues. One of the key things we did in return of this reach out, as much as possible, supporting them in discussing, in negotiating with local authorities. For this national NGO, who has been a really strong cluster partner, who've never come to the cluster before, it was also for me to go with them to meet some (? 16.19). In this case it was issues on the no build zone, so it has been really fruitful and it's worth the effort to do this reach out programming.

On the same aspect, in Vanuatu, when I arrived it was the same week that the Nepal earthquake happened, meaning that all the key international actors and shelter experts just left for Kathmandu, and that was logical and normal. So the interesting part of the response, it was the first time there was a shelter cluster in Vanuatu, and there was a lot of non-shelter expert actors. There were some who never did shelter, never knew anything about shelter response and cluster coordination. My role here again was to sit with them, to invite them to come. They became one of the most interested partners of the shelter cluster. The interesting thing on this, they said, "We were shy, and you being big players, we didn't feel we had role to play." I said, "When was the time that you feel you've got a role to play?" He said, "When you came to me at the restaurant and said, hello, how are you?" because they feel, "Oh, it's a family spirit, I could come to discuss with you." So that would be my input at this moment.

Leah Campbell: We're going to turn now to Virginie to do a combination of answering the first and the second question, which is to tell us a bit about her experience coordinating as someone involved with a national NGO, and also what the main barriers of participation have been for national NGOs in Lebanon, to participate in the coordination, as well as what any potential opportunities there are to fix this.

Virginie Lefèvre: Thank you very much, first for this invitation, but as well for the opportunity to exchange with you on the role of national actors in coordination. Briefly, I work with Amel Association International, a Lebanese, non-sectarian NGO created in 1979. We are active in emergency development and human rights, notably in the sectors of health, education, protection, and livelihood with vulnerable populations, migrants, and refugees. We work through 24 centres and 6 mobile medical units all over Lebanon and we are particularly active in the response to the Syrian crisis. It is within this framework that I am the focal point of the Lebanese NGO Forum, which is an informal platform, which gathers Lebanese NGOs, mainly the NGOs active in response to the Syrian crisis. This informal mechanism was created almost three years ago under the initiative of UNHRC. You can imagine that initially many local NGOs were not really happy with such a mechanism created by a UN agency, knowing that other coordination mechanisms existed in Lebanon before, even though they were not particularly focused on the Syrian crisis response. Together with other Lebanese NGOs, Amel thought, "Okay, let's give it a try, but let's keep it informal, flexible and different from other existing structures," which means that let's not focus too much on pure advocacy. Let's have our forum as an operational coordination tool.

Since then this is what happened, so every 6 months we designated a focal point to facilitate the coordination process within this network of NGOs, but as well with other stakeholders. For the past couple of months, I have been the focal point on behalf of my organisation, Amel. So what were the achievements of this forum during the past couple of months? I would say that even though we are informal and very flexible, we were able to achieve quite interesting things. Notably, within the framework of the planning process in relation with the Syrian crisis here, which is the Lebanon crisis response plan, so during the past year in 2015/2014, local NGOs hardly got involved in this process because we didn't have the capacity to be engaged in the meetings, sometimes we weren't invited to the Forum. We were really able to provide sectoral input, general inputs, we were able a little bit to structure our feedback, and as well, at the same time, we were able to enhance and increase our participation to national coordination mechanisms and notably the humanitarian country team, where we now have three local NGO seats, we used to have one before.

One very interesting point as well is that we were able to produce joint advocacy messages together with international NGOs. Here in Lebanon we have the Lebanon Humanitarian International NGOs Forum and notably for the London Pledge Conference we were able to produce joint messages to be shared in London around protection, livelihood, importance of resettlement and political solutions. Indeed, as well, during the past months we were also able through the Forum to express common concerns to local NGOs in relation with different operational issues, which are usually common to different national actors including partnerships, principles of partnership, the salary scale, the agreements with the partners, with UN agencies, with donors, this was as well, something very important. I would like to mention that from my experience, it was very important to have from the very beginning a clear understanding of what we wanted from this coordination and for us, I mean for Lebanese NGOs who are engaged in this process, we wanted coordination to be a tool and not a purpose.

This is particularly important for us, because usually national actors don't have so much time to dedicate to coordination because we don't have dedicated resources for coordination, so we wanted this coordination forum to be flexible, and not to be focused only on meetings and so on, but really to be something informal. We limited our meetings to monthly meetings and really to use electronic tools to exchange information, to agree on letters and so on, and not have endless meetings which are usually one of the complaints of local NGOs, that we have to attend so many meetings. Why do you have to produce so many meetings? It's also important to mention about my experience with the Lebanese NGO Forum is that we don't have a full dedicated secretariat. As I mentioned initially we have focal points changing every six months, so this is quite challenging because we don't have permanent staff. However, it's very interesting because it is forcing us to set up some priorities and really to engage all other members. However, even though I said that we need to engage all the members, I think that we need to be very realistic and not to pretend that we are representing all national NGOs. This is often a problem with networks is that you say, "I represent all national NGOs."

No, we represent certain national NGOs and we do as well try to outreach to as many local NGOs as possible to have a diversity of points of view, but always when we're going to meetings, when we're invited to meetings, when we're preparing papers, whatever it is, we are always trying to get other NGOs on board, smaller CSOs, grassroots organisations to make sure that we really represent this diversity, which is quite important in Lebanon because we have 2,000, 3,000 active non-governmental organisations at least. Indeed, one network cannot represent all these NGOs, and as well, I would like to mention that for us as a network, it was very important to say that the network wouldn't be implementing activities. Often this is one of the challenges you face as a national structure and as a network in itself. To get funding, to sustain your network, basically you would say that you will implement training and so on. As national NGOs we are a little bit suffering from this training fatigue, and we really want to focus on implementation of our activities to serve the needs of the affected population. We are more facilitating training which is provided by other organisations, but we're not organising training ourselves. We're really focusing on exchanging information, making sure that our voice is being heard.

Now just for the main barriers, there are many barriers which are affecting the participation of national actors indeed. I would say that for sure we will mention the language, but this in mainly Lebanon a problem with the local, local NGOs. At national level it's usually okay, we're able to have a good representation of staff who can interact in English or in French. I would say that the main problem is more about the fact that we have staff who can coordinate, who can be present and network, but we don't have the same capacity as international NGOs or UN agencies who can be there each week for two or three meetings. It's really difficult and this is really the added value of a network, to always have someone who can represent you but not necessarily all the hundreds of Lebanese NGOs need to be there all the time. I'd also say that one of the barriers, and it has been mentioned a bit previously, is the problem that we are using so many acronyms and terms that the other NGOs are not familiar with. I would say that another barrier is we need to make our language easier. This is not hard, but just to make sure that our meetings and our processes are easy. It's not only a matter of training, for sure you can explain the cluster system, in Lebanon, the working group system, how it is working and so on, but you also need to use simple language so that everybody can understand and everybody can participate.

Leah Campbell: Great, thank you so much Virginie. That was really interesting and I think a lot of the things that you just brought up are things that people submitted in their questions both before the webinar and also the ones that are coming in live. The question that I'm going to go to next is one building on something that Virginie just brought up in terms of technology, and what potential there is in technology to play a role in creating a better kind of environment for the role of national actors to be better included in coordination mechanisms, and another question that's come in that's related is, what are the different experiences that the speakers might have about coordination via face-to-face meetings compared to video or phone meetings? I know

Virginie just mentioned a little bit about that, and so I'll turn to Angela to see what experiences she might be able to share on that front.

Angela Huddleston: Thank you Leah. In terms of the role that technology has to play, I'll be completely honest and say that I don't actually have much experience of successful technology in coordination mechanisms. This was something that we tried to work on in the NGO Forum, particular because in the Turkey coordination structure, half of the NGOs are based in a city that's a three hours drive away from where the other pack of the Syrian INGOs and UN agencies are based. For coordination, if you're wanting to do coordination, if you're wanting to be most effective, face-to-face still is the most effective way to communicate that. You have the opportunity to share experiences, you can actually provide live feedback, take live questions and answers, and the participants tend to stay much more involved in the conversation and contribute more.

For that, for all of us here working in the coordination mechanisms, travel, a three hour drive is a major component of that, which does get very exhausting of course, but because of the impact of the face-to-face meetings, it's necessary. We've attempted to use, most of the time it's using Skype to call in and have a coordination meetings with Skype call ins. It's possibly sometimes used, other type of webinar conferencing, online systems, but unless the people that you're Skyping in are very actively engaged, and are very actively listening, and of course the internet holds out, it's very challenging to ensure that their involvement is integrated real time into the rest of the conversation that's happening live.

OCHA here now has actually initiated the live translation services, and that's one instance where the technology has actually been quite effective. However, these type of live translation services are very costly and also take some time to set up. They are used and especially with the HCN meetings they're used quite frequently, because of course INGOs still tend to function in English here, whereas the Syrian NGOs function much better in Arabic. Taking into consideration the need for Syrians NGOs to be involved in coordination infrastructure, it's essential to have some sort of translation services available, and OCHA has solved that by having the dual translation services. In other coordination meetings we've mostly used live translation through translators and because the Syrians that we're working with here do have such a high capacity of English, most of them are actually quite fluent in English, there's even been instances where live translation happens by members in the cluster, and even it happens ad hoc with certain members shouting out the words individually, because the actual interpreter may not actually know the technical word for what it is that they're meant to be translating from English into Arabic.

Leah Campbell: Thanks very much Angela, you brought up one of the most common questions we've had come in, which is about language. It's a challenge that consistently comes up around the world, and one that it sounds like maybe there are a few solutions for. I know both you and Virginie have mentioned this a little bit, so thanks so much. Another barrier that a few people have been asking about is the

challenge of cultural difference. I was going to turn to Xavier to see if he could share a bit of his experience, I think he's got something to share about working in Vanuatu on this note, so I'll pass over to Xavier.

Xavier Génot: Thanks Leah. Two things on that, just a quick input on the last question. Technology is tricky, we somehow have some fantasies, we see that as the next big thing, but at this moment, in my personal experience, I think we miss the use of social media, like Facebook pages, and things like that, so on this I think we need to improve. In terms of cultural differences, two examples in Vanuatu, it was really interesting. We arrived, we had not a lot of Vanuatu actors at the table, Vanuatu people at the table. We were wondering how to cope with that. The only thing was to change the time of the meeting. The meeting was at four o'clock, we put it at 3:00, and we have an increase of ni-Vanuatu people. I think that little detail counts a lot.

Cultural aspects, I think yes, I think the key element to improve this coordination with local actors, is to define the common ground. It's not only for national actors to understand the constraints and processes, but also to bring their interests and their own culture to the table. The primary response has been fantastic for that. Why? Because, as I said, it was the first time there was a shelter cluster, that we could address shelter issues in Vanuatu, and the key has been to really listen, observing and bring input on the traditional way to build in Vanuatu. Basically when we are more driven normally by Western ways of looking at things, to look at standards and processes, in the shelter cluster, a lot of times we end by up defining a response, by standards, the structural resistance of the structure. In fact no, in Vanuatu it works well, because we really included traditional architecture in the discussion at the cluster level, how we could support, how we could enable that best, the normal way for building in Vanuatu, and this was the key to bring local actors to the table, to help us understand what is the way to build.

As an added dot, for example, when at the capital level there was a discussion on how to design new schools and new houses that would resist a category five cyclone, I had the opportunity to go on the field, to go in communities, to meet communities, to see how they built, to in fact know the resilience of people is to build a bamboo structure, and the community kitchen being the emergency shelter in case of new disasters. I think to bring this from the ground, from the remote community, to the table, show the local partners, yes there's interest to come to the coordination table, because yes, they are listening to us. I think that's key, we agree on processes, on acronyms, and things like that, but I think if you want to make a move to have better national coordination, it's really to listen to the community perspective and the cultural way of dealing with things.

On the same level, the government (? 37.26) who was in charge of the shelter cluster coordination was quite shy. How I could deal with all these (? 37.32) coming from cultural and historical barriers, and in fact it was just to listen to him, to support him to understand how the committee is working, and listening. Step by step, week after week he just took it over. That's quite interesting to see even physically, in the first

meeting he was behind me, and after he was with me, and after he takes the lead, and I think it's really, how to respond to that is really to be receptive to the cultural difference, and really consider cultural differences as a strength, and diversity as a strength. If you show the national actors that this is their show, this is their boat, this is their fruit, it will be better. Vanuatu has been great for me, personally learning about this. In terms of languages for example, in shelter, we have some eight key messages, safe shelter reconstruction and we developed a key messages leaflet, and building back safer key messages, and we say how we could translate this positive experience from the Philippines to Vanuatu? Basically from eight messages we came to four, because we said, "Let's just do four." So we used four key messages, about foundation, connection and so on, and when some agencies designed the safe shelter one, because we listened to the cultural difference, it was fantastic. An international NGO were listening to the culture, explaining to communities how to build back safer houses. The old guys of communities saying to the young guy, "Look, we told you, you have to build like this," so again, it's listening and really listening on the cultural differences, and that adds strength to the coordination.

Leah Campbell: Wonderful, thanks so much Xavier. I think this is a great time to bring together a few questions that have come in, because it builds on what you've just said about seeing the strength and the value in that cultural difference and what that can really bring. One of the questions that someone has asked is what do national actors bring to humanitarian coordination and is this something that the international system really recognises and looks at this as adding value? I'm going to add to this another question that's come in from someone else, which I think goes along with this well, though I do realise it's quite a big question to be posing to you all, so I apologise. The second part of this is, why is this a constant discussion, and why does it sometimes seem so hard? Without the benefit of the experience that all three of our speakers have today, I would say that there are lots of things that national actors can bring to coordination and that we should definitely value, so putting those two together, do we value national actors and the role and experience, and the different things they can bring to coordination, and if we do, why do we keep on discussing this issue and why does it seem to be sometimes so hard? First I'm going to turn to Virginie to get her thoughts on this one, and then afterwards we'll hear from our other speakers as well.

Virginie Lefèvre: Yes, one big question. I want to come back very quickly on the language and the barriers. I was thinking while you were discussing, we mention a lot language at meetings. At least here in Lebanon it's not so much about the language of the meeting but it's also about the language of the documents. If you're getting the documents in advance in your own local language, then it's way easier after to give your input in English, but you need to have something, the core content of the meeting which is being translated to the local language. So sometimes this is more helpful for us. I would say that the language of documents as well can be a barrier. One of the comments as well here from local NGOs is to say that basically, you could also, from international NGO and UN side hire some staff who actually speak Arabic, and this is

a question we can raise as well, right? It could be a requirement for some of the positions here to be Arabic speaking, this is the case for some of them.

Now to go on the question you just raised, what do national actors bring to humanitarian coordination? Well, obviously the field reality, right? Usually, the local actors are the first responders, and they are the ones, as I mentioned, initially who are very connected to the field implementation. Usually even the person who will participate in the coordination meeting is involved in the implementation. You can really see the difference here in Lebanon in coordination meetings between international and national actors. Usually national actors have a very good sense of what's happening. You're not talking from a programmatic perspective, from a strategy perspective, you're saying, "Okay guys, you're talking about the strategy for the health sector, well I tell you that practically speaking this cannot work, from my experience at the field level."

National actors, it's very interesting because they have the experience, they have the knowledge of what already exists in country in terms of policies, practices. Here in Lebanon often national actors can also give their input on what happened during the Lebanese Civil War in terms of dealing with emergency, with protracted crisis as well, so this is very important. Also, the last point, which is really essential for me, they bring to humanitarian coordination the sustainability and they prepare the exit strategy to this humanitarian coordination. If not, what happens is that basically when the internationals leave, there's no more coordination structure, there's nothing remaining. This most probably leads us to why this is a constant discussion. It's a constant discussion because we are basically reactivating those mechanisms every time there's an emergency. Lebanon is a very interesting case study because unfortunately we are regularly facing emergencies and crisis.

Here when I'm discussing with staff who've been involved in crises for the past 20, 30 years they are telling me, "Basically we face those issues with international NGOs, the problem that we're not able to engage with them. The problem that our voice is not being heard in meetings with other international actors." They've been facing it for the past three decades. Why is it still that way? It's because there's no continuation in our mechanisms. We don't have time to reflect on what happened before. So probably, if you have a strong involvement of national actors in these coordination mechanisms, it's also the memory, it's also your memory of coordination, your national actor. I'm not saying it will prevent this from being a constant discussion but at least you have this continuation, and this sustainability.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks so much Virginie. We're going to stick on the same question, and I'm going to pass to Xavier to hear his thoughts as well on this one.

Xavier Génot: Thanks Leah. So, on this I would say it's good to consider coordination, coordination of the software. We agree globally as a software, with the humanitarian coordination platform, the clusters and so on, but the software has to evolve, this software has to adapt to each situation. So why we address it differently at each

moment, that's normal, because we need to install the software in each case. You could not avoid that. So on the question of capacity building, yes, I agree, this would come from installing software and somebody to understand this software and maintain it when there is no disaster and in times of disaster but it's really complex. Why? First because if you think of it from a software perspective, you are looking at a picture of an institution. One of the key elements of disaster response, humanitarian aid, is the turnover of people. How do you address the predictability of a system between different institutions and the turnover of staff? It could be turnover of dedicated staff and also turnover of people who have just other things to coordinate, so we'll never be able to avoid this constant question, how to involve national actors. I think when we will succeed is when the international coordination software adapts to the national software.

When a response is good is when there is capacity of the software to match together, the software of national government, local authorities. One good example, I would say, the most relevant, is assessment. What is coordination? First you assess, and a lot of the time you just come with a new assessment, so we do joint assessment. We deploy a huge mechanism to assess and reassess and in fact, it was the case in Vanuatu, it's good to look at the national software and their disaster response mechanisms, and their assessment mechanisms, so it's good to use this. If you don't want to, we need to acknowledge that we have this predictable humanitarian platform, but we need to adapt to the national software. It's an effort, but it's really, international actors to look again to the software in place, not to reinvent a new wheel. I would say this would be my input at this stage.

Leah Campbell: Great, thanks so much. I think we should switch to another question that's come in, in a couple of different formats, and I think it's an interesting one. The question has to do with how we can manage to coordinate with national actors who don't necessarily have a great history of coordination with one another. So we've talked a lot about national NGOs mostly in the webinar so far, but thinking about, for example a context where one would want to coordinate and involve national NGOs, but also the national government, local government, and perhaps those actors don't necessarily have the greatest relationship. There's a lack of trust, or suspicion present among them. How can we as humanitarians, with these humanitarian coordination mechanisms that we have, whether they're clusters or working groups or what have you, how can we manage to coordinate with national actors who don't necessarily coordinate more effectively with one another? To start us off with this one, I'm going to turn to Angela and then we'll hear from our other speakers as well.

Angela Huddleston: That's an interesting question Leah, and I feel actually very surprised by my instinctive thought that came into my head in response to this question, because from my experience especially, for working with local actors who don't have a history of coordinating with each other, whether that's due to actually political disagreements, or just lack of history of coordination, or lack of history of humanitarianism, which is the instance in the Syrian crisis, actually being a foreigner, being an INGO, being a UN agency is one of the best ways to actually increase that

coordination. You're coming in as an outsider, who doesn't have the understanding of the context, the tribal or political differences that may separate the different actors from wanting to engage with each other. When you're coming in as a foreigner, the approach of the foreigner is actually really important. If you're coming in as a foreigner, as someone who is very willing to learn, but someone who also does have an expertise in certain areas, such as in coordination, such as in understanding humanitarianism, such as in understanding what are the benefits that the local NGOs can get out of the coordination mechanisms, it's a lot easier to build their trust and then be able to get them to negotiate with each other.

I've seen this in my past experience, after I left the NGO Forum, there were concerns that the engagement of the Syrian chairs was now actually being turned over to a Syrian. This has positives as well, because the person that it was turned over to, of course has the language, there's not going to be the language barrier, they were able to communicate with local NGOs much more frequently and with much greater ease than I ever was able to, because I don't speak Arabic, but they automatically, because of either where they're from in Syria, or where they've worked in the past, or who they are, what their family name is, they have these automatic associations which can increase distrust in the organisation. You have to have a careful balance of who the person is that you're identifying to work with the local coordination infrastructure, and how they actually build trust. This is a question we were talking about earlier, how do we build trust with national actors? Xavier has actually touched on it a bit as well, having that very open communication, and actually providing the respect to the perspective of the local NGO is one of the biggest ways to build trust with the local NGOs. Recognising the information that they have available, recognising their importance and influence for actually implementing any humanitarian activities and making sure that's communicated with them, to create an open space of information sharing.

If it's a person who is working with the local NGOs coming in with this aura that they know everything, they're the ones that are imparting their information on the local actors, that's not going to build the trust and build the mutual respect which is what needs to happen in order for positive and beneficial coordination to happen. Having a dedicated staff, Virginie mentioned this as well, having a dedicated staff, whether you're in the coordination infrastructure or mechanisms, the clusters, or even within the INGOs, having a dedicated staff who is there and able to work directly with the local NGOs, to be their focal point, be the one that they can ask the questions to, be the one that's there following up with them, making sure they understand everything, and also being there just to answer questions and making sure that their perspectives are heard. We did that here in the Gaziantep based coordination, quite well, we made sure that Syrian NGOs are represented at every possible level within the coordination infrastructure. We have 3 seats at what we call the HLG, which is the equivalent of the HCT. They are represented within the steering committees of the NGO Forums, they are represented at the clusters, and like I said previously, some of the clusters already have a local NGO as their NGO co-coordination partner. Currently at the moment we're actually working to establish the Turkey focus, so for the Turkey response,

we're trying to initiate our Turkey NGO coordination infrastructure, particularly for establishing a Turkey coordination group just for NGOs. This is for INGOs, Turkish NGOs and Syrian NGOs, really scaling up their activities to respond to the refugee situation here in Turkey.

As we're establishing this, one of the big questions is ensuring how we want to represent the Turkish NGOs, and ensuring that they're involved at all levels. At our first meeting one of the things that was brought up was that the steering committee, which consisted of four INGOs, one Syrian NGO, it was recognised that there was no Turkish NGO that was represented on there, and having Turkish NGOs represented was critical to ensuring that we have an understanding of the context, and especially understanding all of the changes that are happening within Turkey, with everything that's going on now between Turkey and EU agreements. Having the Turkish NGOs present is critical for us to have the understanding of the context, the knowledge of what's happening at the government level, the links with even how the government works, and how the government thinks, and ensuring that we respect the cultural procedures that are in place and that we should put in place that will increase Turkish government representatives and Turkish NGOs, to put the trust in INGOs. That's something we're going to have to continue to focus on, because that's still one of the benefits of having national actors in the coordination mechanism, for the access and the understanding that they provide for INGOs, for foreigners, for expats, whatever you want to call them, who come in, who don't have the long term history or understanding of the context, and they need to learn it very quickly. Having those frank discussions and building that trust with the local NGOs is the key component to increasing the trust, and the ability for NGOs to increase their coordination, and coordination infrastructure.

Leah Campbell: Thanks so much Angela, I think there are some really great examples in there, and that's really useful. We don't have much time left on the webinar, so I'm going to turn directly to Virginie to see if she has any thoughts on this question as well.

Virginie Lefèvre: Very briefly, because I think that inputs have already been given, but just one small note, we often say that national actors, they have a problem with coordination, everybody wants to engage, you have previous bad experiences of coordinating together, but we should also acknowledge that the same issues are present between international actors. We often expect national actors to only have one voice, this is not possible, and it's the same with international actors. From my experience here in Lebanon, what's successful is to have these different levels of coordination. Often you'll have problems between national actors at the national level, particularly with government, but if you go back at the local level, you're able to coordination effectively with the representative at the local level. If you want to gain the trust of local actors as well, it's important to go back to the local level, invest in these grassroots coordination committees, to make sure that even if at the national level there's a problem with a policy, and you're not able to move forward, well at the local level you're able to move forward, and then with all these local initiatives, at

some point you're able to say, "Okay, here in this particular local coordination committees we've been able to achieve this, and this is working. So you disagree at the national level, you say this is not possible, but it is possible." Often here in Lebanon, this is how we've been able to move forward, so this would be my very brief input about this question.

Leah Campbell: Great, thank you so much, that's a really good point, and I think a very valuable addition to the response there. We don't have much time left, but I do want to fit in one more question that specifically relates to government, because it's not something we've covered very much in the webinar so far. One of the questions that's come in is about the potential implications of when governments, perhaps in response to their not being effectively involved in the coordination mechanisms, or international response that has come in, in the past to their countries, but responding to the fact that in a number of countries in recent responses, government has suggested that external input isn't necessarily needed, that the response can be managed, that the big international system isn't required, or isn't as required as the international system is perhaps set up to be, which I think is a broader question. Specifically about coordination, what are the implications for that in terms of humanitarian coordination? So what are the implications for coordination where you have actors in a country, government or other national actors who feel that external help is not required? I'm going to turn first to Xavier to see if he has any thoughts from previous cluster experiences, and then we'll also turn to Angela on this one afterwards.

Xavier Génot: I have no real input on this but I think it's a bit linked with the last question. I think, as you know, the cluster mechanism is something that has been created to fill a gap, you know, a gap government could not respond to. Therefore, it's really difficult in this case, because this case is more for conflict related crises and I always work in disaster response crises, so I don't know if you want me to contribute more. I have more contribution to the last question and I will say maybe it's linked, it's the need to keep the pairing of national and international actors. A lot of things, you look at a name of things, we see why this (inaudible 01.01.57) or whatever, it's a big question for government to say, "I need help." It's a lot about humility and things like that. I don't know what else to say to that.

Angela Huddleston: Yes, I think this is really interesting and a very tough question. Particularly if I look specifically, and it's less familiar. I'm based in Turkey, we're working with cross border programming in opposition controlled areas of Syria. There are also other hubs where humanitarian assistance is provided, both from inside of Syria, based from Damascus mostly into government controlled areas, but not exclusively, as well as humanitarian support provided cross border from Jordan and a very small amount of humanitarian support provided from Damascus. Obviously this creates immense challenges in terms of border controls, engaging with the governments surrounding the country where our humanitarian activities are taking place to ensure we can have access to the sites, working across the front line to try and provide humanitarian assistance where it's needed most as well as the fact

that the government of Syria, my Damascus based colleagues have to engage with, is actually a party to the conflict. So that automatically, there are politics involved.

I'm not going to say I have any amazing feedback or any amazing perspectives on how to improve engagements with a government who doesn't feel like external help is required, because from my perspective all of the work we've done here from the Turkey side has been engaging with the government of Turkey to access Syria cross border, and there has been some small challenges and oftentimes it's actually based off of having an understanding of how the government works, who to talk to correctly, and why you need to talk to them, and how to approach them appropriately. This is where Turkish NGOs, or the local NGOs can be of a huge amount of assistance because they have already, as I mentioned last time I spoke, a contextual knowledge of the best way to approach a certain governor, for humanitarian activities. In terms of the coordination infrastructure in the Syria response, because we're operating from so many different locations, and having to coordinate our responses in one country from so many surrounding countries, the coordination infrastructure here has taken an additional approach, which we call the Whole of Syria coordination infrastructure. This is a completely newly developed, I don't think it's ever been done before in any other humanitarian emergency, where there's now an umbrella level coordination infrastructure which sits outside of the country which is aiming to collate and collaborate and provide strategic guidance to the humanitarian response across the whole of Syria, not just the opposition controlled areas versus the government or the Kurdish controlled areas.

The intention of this is to have a greater understanding of who is doing what where, across the entire country to improve the collaboration and communication between all the different hubs. It hasn't been as successful as the intentions were to start out with, and from our perspective of those that are based here in the Turkey hub, is one of the things that we continue to try and advocate on is having the Syrian presence there. One of the major challenges that we face, because this Whole of Syria infrastructure exists now, they have meetings in happen Lebanon, in Jordan, in Turkey, and the challenges for having Syrians represented at these locations on meetings such as developing a humanitarian response, is immensely challenging based off of location. For instance, in the 2016 humanitarian response plan, as it was developed, the Turkey based Syria response was only able to send one Syrian representative. So when we're talking about planning for the humanitarian response, and putting together the strategy for 2016 for the humanitarian response, there was one Syrian speaking on behalf of his entire country and his entire population to give his contribution as to what our strategy should be.

That's actually completely disrespectful and it was due to the fact that the location of this planning meeting was in a location that was very challenging for Syrians to travel to. That's something that the NGO Forum, we continue to advocate for and because of our strong advocacy, the HLG here has also increased their advocacy to ensure that Syrians are represented and that you have Syrians speakers, and Syrians advocating for their response at the same table as the INGO or UN actors. I think I've probably

derailed from the actual question, and I think coming back to that question, if we're looking at the Turkey refugee response, the government of Turkey is again a government that wasn't too open to communicating with INGOs because of a history of distrust, a history of feeling like INGOs were coming in to point their fingers at the government of Turkey, not to work on humanitarian responses.

There was a general lack of understanding as to what is required in a humanitarian response, and to be honest, we actually had a lot of discussions about the best way to work with the Turkish government, how to integrate them and build up their trust and understanding of what INGOs can bring to the table as well as what local NGOs bring. Actually, this is where our coordination with local NGOs has been critical. Because working and coordinating with, and having representation from Turkish NGOs actually helps us to increase our access to the government. They trust that at least in the case of Turkey, the government of Turkey has much greater trust in Turkish actors than foreign actors. By having the Turkish representatives at the same table, and oftentimes them taking a leadership role in discussion, it can actually provide for increased trust, as we've seen here in the case of the Turkey situation. The other piece of advice is just to take it slow and to not try and force it. If you do try and force it you can create further distrust between the government, which can lead to the potential risks of either getting kicked out of the country or having to have increased challenges with your engagement, or increased challenges with humanitarian access.

Leah Campbell: Great, well thank you so much to all of our presenters. We have reached the end of the webinar time now, so we don't have any time for any further questions at this moment, but I just want to thank everyone again, to all of our speakers for taking the time to share their experiences today, for all of you the audience who've stuck with us, we do sincerely appreciate your participation. This is a part of a broader piece of work that ALNAP is doing, looking at some specific coordination challenges. The first webinar we held was last month looking at coordination across a response. This one focussed on national NGOs, we've got two more coming up looking at information management, and decision making, so those will be happening through April and May, and we'll definitely send out the dates and registration when they're available, if anyone is interested.

We'll also be producing a short paper and video on each of these topics, which we'll definitely be sure to share with you ahead of a meeting we're organising at the end of June, which again will have a follow up output paper which we'll absolutely share with everyone. All of the contributions you've made today through questions and sharing comments have helped us to gain a better understanding of this issue, and hopefully been an interesting way to spend an hour and a half of your time. So thank you again so much to everyone, and we very much look forward to having you join us for the next webinar. Take care, and have a great rest of your day.