



# **STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: A Review Of NGO Coordination in the Field**

## **OVERVIEW REPORT v1.0**

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## Table of Contents

Background Note.....	1
The Definition of Coordination.....	2
The Drive for Coordination.....	4
The Post-Cluster World.....	5
What is NGO Coordination?.....	5
The Added Value.....	6
Introducing the Case Studies.....	7
Appendix 1: Key References and Further Reading.....	8
Appendix 2: Terms of Reference – Mapping and Learning from NGO Coordination Bodies...9	
Appendix 3: Key Questions to ask about NGO coordination.....	10

### 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.

## The Definition of Coordination

The most enduring definition of humanitarian coordination was set out by Minear et al. in their 1992 study of UN coordination during the first Gulf War:

“Coordination is the systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner. Such instruments include: (1) strategic planning; (2) gathering data and managing information; (3) mobilizing resources and assuring accountability; (4) orchestrating a functional division of labour in the field; (5) negotiating and maintaining a serviceable framework with host political authorities; and (6) providing leadership. Sensibly and sensitively employed, such instruments inject an element of discipline without unduly constraining action.”

This definition has been contested, notably in Stockton's review of strategic coordination in Afghanistan in 2002, in which he pointed out that it described coordination of UN activities rather than the full range of humanitarian actors, and also conflated the desired goal with the approaches necessary to achieve that goal. The top-down nature of this model of coordination – and as per Stockton's critique, it appears to be a model rather than a definition – was incorporated by Donini into his 1996 typology of coordination:

- “coordination by command—coordination in which strong leadership is accompanied by some sort of authority, whether carrot or stick;
- coordination by consensus—coordination in which leadership is essentially a function of the capacity to orchestrate a coherent response and to mobilize the key actors around common objectives and priorities. Consensus in this instance is normally achieved without any direct assertion of authority by the coordinator;
- coordination by default—coordination that, in the absence of a formal coordination entity, involves only the most rudimentary exchange of information and division of labor among the actors.”

These categories make sense in the context of UN coordination, but a satisfactory definition of a more inclusive coordination still proved to be elusive. Donini went on to describe instead a “coordination package” of functions and services that the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (later to become OCHA) could provide. This alternative approach of avoiding defining coordination and focusing instead on the tasks of coordination proved more popular: the 1998 review of strategic coordination in the Great Lakes crisis of the 1990s described how:

“the IASC [Inter Agency Standing Committee] has not defined strategic coordination, but rather has instead listed functions that describe what it considers to be the composite elements of two related tasks, strategic and operational coordination. The composite functions of strategic coordination, according to the IASC, include:

- setting the overall direction and goals of the UN humanitarian programme;
- allocating tasks and responsibilities within that programme and ensuring that they are reflected in a strategic plan;
- advocacy for humanitarian principles;
- negotiating access to affected populations;

- ensuring correspondence between resources mobilized and established priorities;
- monitoring and evaluating the overall implementation of the programme; and,
- liaising with military and political actors of the international community, including those of the UN.” (Lautze et al 1998)

Shortly afterwards Von Brabant proposed a “list of the possible functions that a coordinating forum of aid agencies can fulfill”, although without specifying who holds responsibility for those functions (Table 1). This functional approach is useful to inform practice but fails to provide a solid policy framework through which NGOs may understand and engage in coordination.

**Table 1**

Services to members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Registration</li> <li>• import and income tax</li> <li>• labour legislation</li> <li>• legal advice</li> <li>• meeting rooms, resource centre</li> <li>• salary or transport surveys</li> <li>• maps</li> </ul>
Training for members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training course broker/inventory</li> <li>• standardise training curricula</li> <li>• interagency training provider</li> <li>• organisational development specialist advice</li> </ul>
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective agency contact point</li> <li>• agency directory</li> </ul>
Situational updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produce situational updates</li> <li>• monitor and collate needs assessments</li> <li>• monitor and collate financial availability (financial resources and assets)</li> </ul>
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information exchange on security situation</li> <li>• incident pattern analysis</li> <li>• coordinate contingency plans (hibernate/evacuate)</li> <li>• technical support service on security (radios)</li> <li>• incident investigation</li> <li>• interagency security management</li> </ul>
Learning / evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect programme reports / reviews</li> <li>• interagency discussion of reviews / evaluations</li> <li>• carry out reviews / evaluations</li> <li>• develop institutional memory of lessons identified</li> </ul>
Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Database of projects (sector/district)</li> <li>• sectoral policies / guidelines</li> <li>• facilitate interagency programme planning</li> <li>• review programming gaps / duplication</li> <li>• operational role to fill gaps</li> </ul>

Political analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict analysis</li> <li>• actor analysis</li> <li>• agency positions in the political economy of conflict</li> <li>• scenario development</li> </ul>
Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To powerbrokers for framework of consent</li> <li>• to donors / general public for resource mobilisation</li> <li>• to the media for public relations / information</li> </ul>
Strategic decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About division of labour / task allocation</li> <li>• about agency vetting / selection</li> <li>• about agency positioning in the conflict and terms of engagement / disengagement</li> <li>• about incentives or conditionalities</li> </ul>

By 2001, OCHA's *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience* had returned to Minear's original definition, while noting merely that the context had changed. Since the mid-2000s, however, there has been a retreat from reviewing the objectives of coordination even while efforts are being made to improve the mechanisms of coordination; the 2005 *Humanitarian Response Review* did not even provide a working definition of coordination in its comprehensive assessment of the UN's coordination mechanisms.

## The Drive for Coordination

There is a continual drive on the part of governmental and inter-governmental bodies for a unified and hierarchical coordination structure, on the assumption that such a structure will be more effective and efficient than any alternatives, while non-governmental organisations tend to prefer a non-hierarchical system that preserves their independence. The tension between these two drives is one of the main reasons why NGO coordination by external bodies is consistently problematic, and the cluster system can be seen as an ongoing attempt to balance the two, especially as the incorporation of NGO co-leads or co-chairs into the clusters at country level becomes increasingly common.

Given the dynamic described above, the UN, donors and national governments prefer to have a single body representing the NGO community, since such a body makes it easier for them to deal with a heterogeneous group. NGOs themselves also favour having a single point of contact for various functions, such as sharing information from external stakeholders. These preferences are two of the reasons why NGO coordination looks similar around the world, since internal and external stakeholders alike benefit from having a single point of contact for information and representation. However this view may lead some to think that NGO coordination is primarily about the formation of NGO coordination bodies to provide that point of contact, which may not necessarily be the case; there may be other ways of achieving the same coordination goals.

There are valid questions about whether separate coordination mechanisms contribute to the polarization of the humanitarian community, or whether they are essential for ensuring a range of perspectives on humanitarian issues. For example, in places such as Afghanistan and Liberia, the implications of integrated UN missions have contributed to revival of NGO coordination bodies, primarily for advocacy. The heterogeneity of the NGO community means that a single body is unlikely to ever be able to fully represent the entire community, and this is never more obvious than in relations between international and national NGOs. There is a notable absence of models for engaging national NGOs in the context of NGO coordination bodies which requires attention.

The problem in discussing coordination systems and what type of coordination structures are appropriate is that it is clear that the structures and systems must vary from crisis to crisis and country to country. The appropriate form of NGO coordination in a weak state racked by conflict will look very different to the appropriate form in a strong state suffering from a natural disaster. The cluster approach has exposed the weakness of a one-size-fits-all system that, while flexible, is by definition going to struggle to fit into existing systems and, in some cases, tends to disrupt those systems. While NGOs have more flexibility than the UN system, we must remember that NGO-led coordination is only a part of a wider strategic vision of where and how NGOs position themselves in the dynamic context of each country they work in.

## The Post-Cluster World

The publication of the *Humanitarian Response Review* and the introduction of the cluster approach marked a clear break in the history of humanitarian coordination. Initially NGOs were reluctant to accept the new system until the UN began talking in terms of partnership and took steps towards incorporating NGOs into the sectoral coordination provided by the clusters, with NGO cluster co-leads and co-chairs identified in a number of places. Such arrangements are still the exception rather than the rule, but it is likely that they will become more common given the slow progress in expanding UN capacity and despite occasional opposition from within the UN.

Obstacles on the NGO side include lack of mandate, capacity and resources, in particular a lack of time to participate on the part of senior NGO staff, although such problems could be addressed by increasing funding and expanding staff roles within NGOs. As a result it is usual for NGOs to accede to UN or government leads when it comes to sectoral coordination, especially at field level. In situations where a UN agency is unwilling or unable to take on its coordination role, however, NGOs are prepared to take on that role (sometimes by invitation, sometimes independently). This role is not generally welcomed by most NGO staff, and most respondents to our study expressed their support for the cluster system, with two caveats.

First, the system does not function perfectly, and NGOs would like to have greater involvement in the work of improving it at field level. NGOs might even establish their own sectoral coordination where other structures exist, as long as they are effectively linked. Second, the cluster system does not cover all areas of humanitarian activity, and there remain many NGO-related issues that the cluster system does not address at all. There will remain a need for NGO coordination for some time, but there are very limited resources available to meet that need.

## What is NGO Coordination?

NGO coordination can be seen as an overlapping subset within overall humanitarian coordination as described above. It is quite difficult to mark off “NGO coordination” as an entirely separate effort; but at the same time it is also clear that there is a distinct set of activities that have “traditionally” come under the general banner of NGO coordination. NGO coordination is the norm rather than the exception: in almost every emergency some form of NGO coordination takes place, even if only the most informal coffee-house coordination, and in many emergencies more formal NGO coordination bodies form spontaneously.

The history of NGO-led coordination in the humanitarian sector refutes traditional misconceptions of NGO coordination as being “like herding cats”, a label resulting from misunderstanding of what NGOs are trying to achieve when they come together in coordination bodies. NGO coordination is a project built from the bottom up to achieve common goals, where coordination is the effect rather than the cause; in general NGO coordination does not deal with sectoral issues, although it can (and does) when the authorities that are responsible for those sectors prove incapable.

Instead of the detail of service delivery, NGO coordination is more usually concerned with the wider problems that prevent NGOs from delivering those services, such as security, civil-military relations, NGO regulation, humanitarian access, and so on. These are issues that are not within the remit of UN or government to address, but which require NGOs to address those bodies on a collective rather than an individual basis. Consequently NGO coordination bodies are generally set up in response to one of three conditions:

1. An attempt to externally impose coordination by the UN or government,
2. A gap (or perceived gap) in existing coordination mechanisms, or
3. A need to address NGO interests that will not be addressed by other actors.

Coordinating NGOs may appear to be like herding cats simply because the wrong approach is being taken. Externally-led or imposed coordination mechanisms usually fail to take root, but councils, forums and consortia that are generated and supported by the members themselves tend to show great resilience; this trend is true at the international, national and sub-national levels. The one great weakness of NGO coordination mechanisms is that they tend to be reactive, since most NGOs do not see coordination as a core part of their mandate; however this attitude is increasingly unacceptable to host governments, donors and beneficiaries alike.

NGOs respond to incentives rather than threats. If those incentives are right then they are happy to participate in coordination mechanisms, although this participation does not necessarily mean financial incentives – donors do not have to make participation in coordination a prerequisite for receiving funds. The case studies show that lack of participation in coordination mechanisms (such as cluster meetings) does not necessarily indicate an unwillingness to coordinate. Reasons for forming NGO coordination bodies prove to be similar in every country, and they all rest on the simple argument that collective action can achieve common goals more effectively.

The way to ensure participation in coordination mechanisms is to ensure they deliver the benefits that participants require and expect, but in order to do so, there needs to be a clear definition of coordination – both in general terms and in the specific context of particular coordination mechanisms – acknowledging the different expectations of different organisations. We also need to bear in mind that in some cases – where coordination is not implemented sensibly, and hinders rather than helps NGO field operations – the costs of coordination may not be worth the benefits, either to agencies or to the affected populations which they are trying to serve.

## **The Added Value**

While a full cost-benefit analysis of NGO coordination has never been carried out, however, the persistence of NGO-led coordination bodies suggests that they do have value for their members. The factors driving NGOs towards forming their own coordination mechanisms are relatively simple. Their presence on the ground creates a sense of urgency that may not be shared by those without such a presence; it also means that they are more likely to identify gaps and duplications in the field. Most NGOs have a strong sense of the humanitarian principles they have signed up to, even if those principles are not always closely observed. Finally there are always practical issues of common concern such as security, access and relations with State and non-State actors.

The politicisation of humanitarian space, often with the tacit acceptance of the UN, is also cited as one of the biggest drivers towards establishing separate coordination bodies, but the single biggest common factor in NGOs forming their own coordination bodies is when those organisations with a mandate to coordinate – whether UN or national government – fail to fulfil that mandate satisfactorily. This combination of factors is most keenly felt during or immediately after a conflict or natural disaster, which is often when NGO coordination bodies form. As the situation stabilises the external pressures to coordinate recede and it is in this phase that NGO coordination bodies lose momentum.

Van Brabant identified some of the barriers to effective coordination – different mandates, different sectoral interests, different target groups, different operating principles and so forth – but the most basic obstacle is much more obvious. The biggest problem in NGO coordination is not a lack of the will to coordinate, but a lack of resources to coordinate. Coordination has a cost – whether in time, money or other resources – and NGOs are willing to pay that cost only if they see the benefits. The question of what those benefits might be is explored in the case studies – although it is notable that none of the coordination bodies covered have established clear measures for their success, and this gap is an area which requires much more attention.

## **Introducing the Case Studies**

To a large extent, successful NGO coordination – or coordination of any kind – is a question of minimizing the costs and maximizing the benefits of coordination. The case studies included in this report provide a selection of examples showing how such coordination can be done, and what sort of outcomes can be expected from collective action. The focus is on the development of formal coordination bodies by NGOs themselves, although each case study attempts to place that development in context and to show how each body responded flexibly to external events.

Obviously not every NGO coordination body could be included, but the selection includes examples from most of the major humanitarian responses in the past decade. We were unable to include the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, where NGO coordination varied widely: experiences in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other affected countries were very different. The selection attempts to include responses to both natural disasters and complex political emergencies, from a range of countries around the world.

The case studies are specifically concerned with formal coordination bodies convened by international NGOs, although some of them include or support national NGOs. The case studies were selected on the basis of how much literature relating to coordination was available from each country, and how many key stakeholders could be identified for interviews. Combining these two sources with background information on each response enabled the consultants to reconstruct the experience of each coordination body. While every effort has been made to present an accurate picture of each response, gaps in the record and errors in recollection are inevitable. However any errors contained in the case studies are the responsibility of the consultants and ICVA, and corrections and updates are welcome.

These case studies represent the best attempt to document these experiments in NGO coordination for future reference, something that is essential given the poor coverage of NGO coordination. We have tried to identify instances where NGO coordination has made a difference in key issues such as protection or security, and to describe how they made that difference. Hopefully these examples will encourage others to document their own experiences and, more importantly, provide a starting point for learning lessons and developing guidelines for future NGO coordination, a process that is long overdue.



*Appendix 1: Key References and Further Reading*

Bennett, J. et al. (2006). *Coordination of international humanitarian assistance in tsunami-affected countries*. Tsunami Evaluation Coalition.

Bennett, J. (1995). *Meeting needs: NGO Coordination in Practice*. ICVA: Geneva

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Donini, A. (1996). *The Policies of Mercy – UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda*. Institute for International Studies.

Lautze, S. et al. (1998). *Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes, 1996-1997: An Independent Assessment*, OCHA

Miner, L., U. Chellia, J. Crisp, J. Macinlay and T. Weiss (1992). *UN Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis 1990-1992*, Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies

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Reindorp, N. and Wiles, P. (1992). *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience. A Study commissioned by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*. OCHA

Sommers, S. (2000). *The Dynamics of Coordination*. Thomas Watson Institute, Brown University

Stockton, N. (2002). *Strategic Coordination in Afghanistan*. ACBAR: Kabul.

Van Brabant, K. (1999). *Opening the Black Box - An outline of a framework to understand, promote and evaluate humanitarian coordination*. ODI HPN: London.

*Appendix 2: Terms of Reference – Mapping and Learning from NGO Coordination Bodies***Background:**

As a global NGO network working on humanitarian advocacy, ICVA is committed to strengthening the effectiveness of NGOs in humanitarian response. One of the strategic priorities for ICVA is to ensure support to field-based NGO coordination mechanisms. NGO coordination mechanisms take various forms in different countries and contexts.

Over the last 20 years or so, ICVA has been engaged in different NGO coordination or liaison bodies in different countries, with varied success. In each case where ICVA has provided support, as well as in other NGO coordination/liaison mechanisms, a number of lessons are identified, but they are not necessarily systematically passed on to others. There is currently no adequate way to share information between existing NGO coordination mechanisms. ICVA would like to bring together as much experience as possible from various coordination mechanisms in one place so as to provide not only a catalogue of experience, but also to identify what works well and what does not work well when it comes to NGO coordination mechanisms. The ICVA Secretariat, ideally, will eventually provide a repository of information on NGO coordination mechanisms so that the wheel does not need to be continually reinvented when setting up such bodies.

**The Project:**

Two consultants will carry out a desk study of existing, and previously existing, NGO coordination/liaison functions in humanitarian response situations since the 1999 Kosovo refugee crisis and response. This study should provide brief summaries of the various NGO coordination/liaison mechanisms in humanitarian response situations since 1999 (including their main characteristics, origins, composition, focus, terms of reference, impact, etc.). It should also provide an analysis of what was successful or less successful in each case. The documents and interviews undertaken for the first phase of this research would be made fully available to ICVA to publish (if agreed by the sources) on a web page on the ICVA website devoted to NGO coordination mechanisms that the ICVA Secretariat would develop. This first phase of the study should form no more than 60 pages and should entail no more than 20 days of work of the consultant(s).

The first part of the study will be discussed by the ICVA Executive Committee at its October 2010 session. The ICVA ExCom will also decide what exact form the second part of the work should take but it is expected to include the development of an easy-to-use checklist or similar product of the basics of NGO coordination mechanisms. The consultant(s) suggestions would play a critical role in suggesting the way forward on the second part to the ICVA Executive Committee.

*Appendix 3: Key Questions to ask about NGO coordination***BACKGROUND**

- **Background:** what situation led to the formation of the mechanism? Were there any existing mechanisms, and why were they insufficient? What were the specific reasons for forming it?
- **Alternatives:** what other mechanisms existed or now exist that provide alternative avenues for coordination? How does this mechanism relate to those alternatives?
- **Actors:** who were the primary actors that brought the group together? What roles did they take, e.g. funding, hosting, facilitating? Who were the initial members of the group?
- **Objectives:** what were the objectives of the mechanism, and who decided them? Have those objectives changed over time, and why?

**GOVERNANCE**

- **Governance:** what governance mechanisms exist? How are they decided (e.g. ExCom, elections)? Have these changed over time, and if so, how? How is their success judged?
- **Meetings:** what regular meetings are there, and how are they managed? How effective and useful are they, and who judges that? How are new meetings (e.g. working groups) formed?
- **Structure:** what is the structure of the group? How has that structure changed over time? How does the structure reflect (or not) the activities of the group?

**ADMINISTRATION**

- **Support:** what support structures exist (e.g. secretariat, security officer, etc), if any? What are the historical and current budgets for the mechanism?
- **Cost:** how much has the mechanism cost to support over time, and how has cost-effectiveness been assessed (if at all)?
- **Funding:** who funds the mechanism (if funding is necessary)? How is that funding managed? Has the funding been consistent and, if not, how has that affected work?
- **Hosting:** who has hosted the mechanism (either meetings or support functions) and how has that hosting arrangement been managed?

**MEMBERSHIP**

- **Participation:** what constitutes “membership” and how is that managed? What is the quantity and quality of participation in the mechanism by the members?
- **Membership:** what is the members' composition in term of international / local, big / small, faith-based / secular NGOs? Was this composition arrived at through accident or design?
- **Discipline:** what compliance measures exist for membership criteria or codes of conduct? How are these measures enforced? Is there a member complaints mechanism in place?

## EXTERNAL ROLE

- **Relationships:** who are the key actors the group deals with, and how does it interface with them? What are the gaps in the collective relationship?
- **Role:** how does the mechanism fit into the wider humanitarian community, both in theory (i.e. strategically) and in practice (i.e. operationally)? (includes policy development)
- **Impact:** what does impact mean to the group? What has the impact of the mechanism been, and how has that impact been judged (informal) or measured (formal)?
- **Value-added:** what is the added value of the coordination mechanism to a) the group members, b) the humanitarian community and c) affected communities?
- **Status:** what is the current status of the group, and what are its future plans? How is it regarded by the humanitarian community? What documentation exists or is planned?

## ACTIVITIES

- **Issues:** what are the key issues the group has dealt with or is dealing with? What are the approaches that have been taken to address these issues (e.g. working groups)?
- **Functions:** what functions does the mechanism fulfill and/or what services does it provide to members? How are those functions and services delivered?
- **Communication:** how is information passed between governing members and general members, between members generally, and between the mechanism and other actors?
- **Levels:** at what level has the mechanism operated – regionally, nationally, locally, site-specific? How have the relations between different levels been managed by the mechanism?

## LESSONS

- **History:** what has been the broad path that the mechanism has taken? What were the critical success or failure points (e.g. funding, credibility, etc), and how did the group manage them?
- **Learning:** are there any learning opportunities for the mechanism – retreats, evaluations, reviews? Are there any accountability measures in place, or have any been considered?
- **Success factors:** what are the factors that have led to the success (or failure) of a) the overall coordination mechanism and b) specific initiatives the mechanism has undertaken?
- **Lessons learned:** aside from the success factors, what are the lessons that have been learned either individually (by interviewees) or collectively (by the group)?
- **Exit strategy:** is there a situation in which the mechanism would no longer serve a purpose, and has that situation been articulated explicitly by the group?