

1. SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

The judgment by one EMG ‘insider’ that the EMG was ‘fascinating, but flawed’ may appear somewhat harsh. None-the-less, applying cold reason and standard criteria, it seems fair.

1.1 An impressive example of host government and international joint-coordination

The Emergency Management Group was a Tirana based, government led, joint national-international coordination mechanism. It comprised a permanent secretariat of ‘sectoral desks’ that supported a regular general meeting of all main actors. The main conclusion of this report is that despite significant weaknesses (see below), the EMG was a necessary and *given the major constraints it faced*, an impressive initiative.

Host governments have a right and responsibility to be integrally involved in the coordination of refugee crises on their own territory. *This should occur in close cooperation with the international community, especially the UN (which was not entirely the case in this crisis, however – see below).* Such coordination mechanisms have long been recommended, though rarely attempted in major humanitarian crises. The EMG was well conceived given the spontaneous nature of its creation. It was timely in its establishment. It was appropriately based in the PM’s office, despite difficulties of communication and access. It was well led and organised, including the ‘Desks’ concept.

It often responded rapidly and decisively. It was relatively efficient in that it concentrated key actors in one room as a secretariat for coordination meetings and the coordination team. The EMG evolved over time. It adapted to need, evidenced by its transformation from crisis coordination to rehabilitation facilitation following the mass return. The number and function of the Desks adapted, albeit imperfectly¹, to need. The linking with the NGO coordination Humanitarian Information Centre (which was ostensibly part of the EMG) was one such case. NGOs had difficulty in gaining access and the HIC served as a channel between the EMG and NGOs. The substantial adaptation to the rehabilitation phase was another example. With time it managed to involve key agencies such as UNHCR in a substantive manner. Compared to other examples of national/international coordination, it has been very impressive indeed.

1.2 Far from perfect, however

While impressive, the EMG fell short, however, of being an ideal coordination mechanism. It did not, nor indeed could it have ‘managed’ the crisis.

1.2.1 UNHCR sorely missed

The internationally mandated lead UN agency, UNHCR, was less than fully engaged at the height of the crisis. UNHCR argues that it was marginalised. OSCE sources² indicate that a policy existed to favour a national led coordination model. Critics, both national and international, respond that UNHCR had been ambivalent to the EMG at best, during that critical initial period. Both versions are probably true. Whatever the reason, UNHCR, rather than the inexperienced OSCE, ought to have been in the vanguard of coordination of this major refugee crisis hand-in-hand with the authorities. Their absence weakened the EMG.

1.2.2 Bi-laterals – powerful and difficult to coordinate

Major bi-lateral donors, and the NGOs they funded directly and generously, were not always willing to be coordinated unconditionally by the EMG. It was a resource to be availed of and ignored according to need and convenience. This was probably unavoidable among such independent and well resourced actors. In general, bi-lateral and other international actors, like UNHCR, planned and coordinated with their partners (e.g. INGOs) without always informing or passing through the EMG.

¹ The inclusion of a ‘social’ or ‘community services’ desk, that could have dealt with, for instance, such initiatives as UNICEF’s ‘Child Friendly Spaces’ approaches was required but never materialised

² See the OSCE comment that *‘The EMG was first of all created to give ownership to the Albanians’* quoted later in this report.

A result was that EMG coordination was limited principally to information management. Rarely, if at all, did it include disciplined, joint strategic planning and implementation. It did not include standard setting and monitoring until the refugees had effectively returned to Kosovo. Nor did it provide significant technical support to weaker agencies and public bodies. Throughout, access and communications were inadequate, a severely limiting factor.

1.2.3 More attuned to international requirements than national

The EMG was a tool of the bi-lateral international aid effort more than of the national authorities and communities³. In addition, it focused on the central level of the response, rather than the regions and municipalities. Its operational relevance to provincial and local operations was limited mainly to logistical coordination. Even its influence with central government was hampered by initial ambiguity over its legal authority vis-à-vis line ministries, including the Office for Refugees. Line-ministries, prefects and mayors continued to coordinate with international counter-parts parallel to the EMG. There was never sufficient clarity between Albanian and international actors about the EMG's role, responsibility and capacity.

1.2.4 Camp focussed, as opposed to host families

In line with the international relief operation in general, the EMG was almost uniquely preoccupied with the needs of refugee in camps and collective centres. It was not significantly relevant to the well-being of the majority of the refugee population who were in private accommodation, both host families and rented housing.

1.3 Conclusion - an exceptional initiative, not easy to replicate

All-in-all, therefore, the EMG was a rare and progressive initiative. Due to an unusual coincidence of conditions and availability of resources, it was relatively successful, compared to many emergency coordination mechanisms world-wide.

The EMG was exceptional: to be replicable in other emergencies, specific particular conditions and resources would need to exist. The EMG was the creation of powerful, strategically motivated international actors in support of a willing host government in need. The immense strategic importance of the crisis to bi-lateral actors assured it exceptional resources – material, financial, human and political. It owes its relative success above all to the combination of the need, that support and the capacities of an exceptionally gifted chief.

It fell far short, however, of the requirements of a complete and effective coordination and management unit for humanitarian emergencies. Fascinating but flawed, therefore. Considerable improvement would be required for similar exercises to be effective in other major emergencies. If the positive aspects of the experience are to be built upon in future emergencies, be it in Albania or elsewhere, major preparations and investment are required at both national government and international (i.e. UN) levels (see recommendations).

³ See comment from an OSCE source The EMG 'was about informing and addressing donors...' quoted later in this report. Also, the adoption of English as the only EMG working language was one small indication of this international emphasis.