



Executive summary

Introduction

Evaluating the coordination of humanitarian actors within the response to the tsunami of December 2004 provides an opportunity to reflect on the behaviour and performance of the international response system when, unusually, financial resources were not a constraint. The recently launched global Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (GHDI) provide an important backdrop and focus for the analysis.

This evaluation covers three countries: Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with some additional observations from Thailand. A core team of four people, plus one national consultant (Sri Lanka) visited each country during September–November 2005. With additional stake-holder workshops and headquarters interviews, the number of people consulted exceeded 350. The associated TEC Capacities evaluation team included coordination questions in its survey of affected populations, and the findings are reflected here.

The evaluation focuses on the efficiency, effectiveness, coherence and

appropriateness of coordination arrangements within the international humanitarian system and how this related to national government and non-governmental agents. The analysis, drawn from a working definition of coordination and its systems and tools, embodies eight themes:

- 1 leadership and management of representative bodies
- 2 negotiation and maintenance of a serviceable framework with host political authorities
- 3 promotion of a functional division of labour (including civil–military)
- 4 strategic planning
- 5 mobilisation of resources for integrated programming
- 6 gathering data and managing information
- 7 accountability (including accountability to recipient populations)
- 8 joint advocacy.

Although the response became a huge international undertaking, its characteristics were determined more by the particularities of each affected country.

Few dispute that the tsunami accelerated the peace process in Indonesia. Unfortunately, the same opportunity did not arise in Sri Lanka where, despite early promises of cooperation between warring factions – and the proposed equity of distributions under the P-TOMS initiative¹ – the conflict there continues.

Coordination in the Maldives benefited from the relatively small numbers of agencies and close proximity of their offices; by contrast, Indonesia and Sri Lanka suffered from the fragmentation of response caused by geographical spread and hundreds of agencies setting up operations in the first month after the disaster.

Leadership and representation

In such a high-profile event, the UN Special Coordinator and (shortly afterwards) the UN Special Envoy were essential as catalysts, advocates and focal points in bringing affected governments and the wider aid community under one roof. However, this evaluation found a need for greater coherence on the responsibilities of reporting and decision making within the various levels of coordination, to avoid time-consuming micro-management and huge demands for information to be sent to New York and Geneva – a point frequently alluded to particularly by UN field respondents in the evaluation.

In the light of discussions currently underway in the HRR, the tsunami response again highlighted the need for a more predictable and centralised coordination structure at field level under the direction of the Inter Agency Standing

Committee (IASC). The evaluation found that the IASC, despite being usefully mirrored at field level, did not sufficiently reflect, nor speak for, the huge diversity of NGOs, including national NGOs. The umbrella groups of the IASC at international level are without operational offices in the field – their representation, if at all, is through the ad hoc election of a member agency. A recurring complaint from senior coordinators was that INGOs did not bring consistent consensus on important issues being discussed, mainly because members of the NGO community were not in agreement about who had the right to speak on their behalf.

In the early stage of the emergency there was no common service for common assessment. In all countries, the relative importance given to the assessment and coordination roles of UNDAC, for instance, should have been made much clearer. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the setting up of an information clearing house (Humanitarian Information Centre [HIC]) and a common platform for inter-sectoral coordination were perhaps more important than assessments as such.

The evaluation found that insufficient efforts were made to disseminate information and explain the purpose of the available UN common services, how they can link with existing capacities, and how they might more readily respond to agency requirements. Operational partners might, for instance, have benefited from common agreements on procurement, staff hire and rental charges, in addition to those services already available.

The evaluation found widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of coordination meetings, particularly during the first six months of the response. The

¹ Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure, a joint agreement to share tsunami aid, signed on 24 June 2005 by the LTTE, but not implemented due to political opposition.

roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority of participants were often not spelled out, leading to a sometimes unproductive mix of information sharing and decision making. Rarely were meetings monitored or evaluated. The significant opportunity costs of attendance, especially for smaller agencies, outweighed the benefit, particularly when meeting themes and decisions were repeated several times.

A constant stream of visitors imposed a burden on local authorities, military forces and agency staff. The advent of high-profile visitors preoccupied management and logistics staff for up to two weeks in some cases, and logistics schedules had to be reprioritised to accommodate the visitors. This evaluation suggests that adherence to common reporting and joint missions would go some way toward addressing this urgent issue. The main challenge, however, centres on the quality of personnel, their high turnover and, particularly at district levels, inadequate resourcing and inappropriate levels of seniority, which undermined trust and confidence.

Host political authorities

The relief effort benefited from strong national governments with well-developed national institutions and functioning legal frameworks. However, a strong central government could not compensate for poorly developed local-government coordination mechanisms. The evaluation found that, in all countries, the government's ability to coordinate effectively was constrained by its own limited capacity and access to information. The early closure of ad hoc coordination structures (the Centre for National Operations [CNO] in Sri Lanka, for instance) in the emergency phase and the resumption of regular line-ministry

responsibilities lessened coordination effectiveness, though in Indonesia the BRR (the Aceh and Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency) has proven most effective.

The optimal operational capacity of the UN and INGOs was reached just at a time when skills transfer and capacity building for coordination of the recovery effort were most needed by government entities, yet there was no correlation between numbers on the ground and efforts in this respect.

OCHA's pivotal role in ensuring consistency and cohesion between all international partners and governments at district and sub-district levels was hampered by short-term, ad hoc funding of posts. In Sri Lanka, this essential role was compromised by lack of support from the UN country team in the capital (although this subsequently changed). It was also impaired by junior (and late) deployment in the field, and poor local resources.

A functional division of labour

This evaluation found that the frequent turnover of senior UN coordinators undermined the essential continuity and trust that lies behind effective leadership and coordination. Moreover, the quality of appointed individuals varied considerably, indicating the need for better training, with greater emphasis given to outreach skills that discourage the prevailing UN-centric approach to coordination.

Few respondents questioned the necessity for strategic leadership by senior UN appointees, nor the representational role thus entailed. Yet, under increasing government ownership of the national and provincial recovery process, the comparative advantage of the UN should have been in strategic planning, policy and

coordination, rather than in direct project implementation.

Some key INGOs expressed disappointment over the manner in which the assumed UN sectoral leadership translated into inflexibility over methods and practice. Given the comparative advantage demonstrated by some NGOs, there is no inherent reason why UN agencies should take a lead in sectoral coordination.

The post-disaster flood of INGOs created a congestion of humanitarian space. With more than enough money to spend, some INGOs preferred to hold on to information as an exclusive entry point to a client population, and to use coordination meetings as a means of broadcasting this exclusivity. Moreover, many extended their mandates beyond areas of traditional competency and made promises that in subsequent months had to be retracted.

The sudden transformation from a small to large international presence of the Red Cross Movement in each country presented unforeseen coordination problems. Donated goods and services from visiting national societies were often determined by their own domestic assumptions of need with little regard to seeking advice from the host country's long-established society. This is not to detract, however, from the essential role played by members of the Movement in relief and recovery in all countries. Coordination problems have to some extent been addressed through the Movement Coordination Framework, developed from January–February and implemented in March 2005.

There was much 'vertical' reporting to donors or headquarters at the expense of 'lateral' coordination around the effective use of resources and common strategic planning within and between sectors. There was quite a lot of repetition and duplication in the situation reports. Many

agencies reported pressure for quick and visible delivery from the media and their own donor constituency, though the evaluation found this to be more perceptual than empirical.

Inter-NGO coordination was varied. In Aceh, regular INGO interagency meetings may have been attended by only six or seven of the largest agencies, but in terms of coverage these represented perhaps as much as 65 per cent of the resources and project implementation on the ground. The charge of poor inter-NGO coordination – most particularly poor representation, information sharing and adherence to common standards – lies more with the remaining 35 per cent.

In some cases direct implementation was preferred over the more time-consuming approach that would have involved building partnerships and training with local NGOs and CBOs. Although the challenge of capacity building is beyond the scope of this study (and is covered extensively in the TEC Capacities Report, 2006) this evaluation found that a consequence of the 'swamping' of local capacity by the large international presence in Aceh and Sri Lanka was poor representation of, and consultation with, local NGOs and CBOs in coordination meetings. This may have led to the erosion of local emergency capacities.

The evaluation found some evidence of staff 'poaching' from local NGOs by international agencies, particularly during the relief phase. Also, where coordination meetings are dominated by international agencies, English becomes the medium of communication at the expense of already relatively marginalised local participants, whether independent NGOs, government officials or even INGO local staff.

Accountability to the affected population is a cornerstone of good coordination practice. Effective joint-agency communication with the client population,

including a complaints procedure and regular updates on the recovery process, was not an early priority. Frustration and misinformation have resulted.

Communication and consultation between the international community and affected people was sporadic and uncoordinated.

The evaluation examines civil–military relationships in some detail. Military logistics were invaluable in the acute phase of the emergency, but not all deployed military forces and tasks undertaken by them were essential to the relief effort. No organisation representing the humanitarian community undertook to provide a coherent picture of needs across all countries affected in order to advise the military forces involved in the response about the most beneficial disposition and use of their assets. The IASC ‘Oslo Guidelines’ for the use of military and civil-defence assets in disaster relief were found not to be widely known or used by the national ministries responsible for disaster assistance, nor by the humanitarian community or military forces.

Strategic planning for recovery

Coordination efforts in the first year of the tsunami response have been mostly limited to gaining some measure of direction over activities, rather than a strategic prioritisation of outcomes, or gaining a consensus on goals. The evaluation found a heavy emphasis on asset replacement, with relatively less attention paid to sustainable livelihoods. The dearth of disaggregated data, notably on gender, impaired effective targeting of vulnerable groups and reinforced discriminatory practice.

Particularly in Indonesia, the evaluation found a general lack of foresight and strategic thinking on the part of the international community with respect to

shelter provision. This resulted in extraordinarily long delays before an interim solution was in place. Moreover, with disproportionate attention being given to permanent housing, the outstanding requirement for assistance to those in temporary dwellings was neglected until it became a ‘crisis’.

There was little evidence in the first months of either direction or management with respect to cross-sectoral integrated resource allocation. A geographic, as well as sectoral, division of labour – with one assigned lead agency responsible for a multi-sectoral approach within one area, combined with sector-specific lead agencies – might have been the preferred model. This was indeed promulgated by the RC/HC in Jakarta, for instance, but not taken up. One consequence was disproportionality in geographical allocations and coverage.

The tsunami response lacked a consistent, quantified and coordinated gender analysis, an omission that has resulted in some serious protection anomalies and the persistence of male-dominated decision-making structures that have largely gone unchallenged. In particular, gender-disaggregated data upon which to base targeted programmes were largely missing in both the relief and recovery phases.

As governments pressed for greater attention and resources to be given to coordinating the international community, and as the plethora of short-term, single project NGOs departed, coordination improved in the latter half of 2005. Staffing in international agencies became regularised, with longer term contracts. New fund tracking mechanisms (DAD) and the consolidation of existing mechanisms (FTS) meant that gaps in assistance could begin to be seen more clearly, though neither of these tools presented an exhaustive picture. In Indonesia and the Maldives, this coincided with the realisation of greater government

budgetary commitments. Early damage and loss assessments undertaken by international financial institutions (IFIs), and the subsequent introduction of trust funds, led to greater donor coordination in the recovery period, though project funding through the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) in Indonesia was relatively small.

Mobilising resources for integrated programming

The projected six-month expenditure period of the original Flash Appeal was unrealistic;² here, as in some previous emergencies, the calculated reconstruction and recovery period should have been much longer. For many agencies, there was a retroactive allocation of funds toward longer term recovery programmes, but this was not subject to coordinated interagency policy discussion, advocated and argued on a common policy platform. There were exceptions: the IFRC, for instance, presented a preliminary five-year recovery programme in the first month; and in both Sri Lanka and Aceh an early UN transitional strategy became a provisional recovery platform for coordination of those agencies included in the Flash Appeal. The latter, however, was not taken up in any consistent fashion.

In promoting trust funds, the IFIs have enhanced donor coordination through pooled resources, while aligning reconstruction grants with national 'on-budget' planning priorities. Most importantly, trust funds encourage a strategic policy dialogue between key donors and governments. The consortium of donors contributing to the MDTF in

Indonesia, for example, benefited from the World Bank's established relationship with the government and the leverage this had in pushing forward the dialogue on governance and transparency that became a central pillar of the Aceh and Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR). Slow disbursement, however, has impaired effectiveness.

There remains a persistent preference among donors for highlighting their own individual contributions, and many operational agencies spend disproportional amounts of time writing separate reports for donors on individually funded assistance rendered. Notwithstanding current difficulties in applying the principle, un-earmarked contributions, matched by consolidated reporting and allocations assigned on the basis of agency merit as well as coherence within the appeal as a whole, is an ideal that the evaluators would uphold. However, greater effort is required (particularly in UN reports) to move beyond general statements of programme performance and provide sufficient detail to satisfy the monitoring requirements of donors.

Information management

Cellphones and satellite imagery emerged as important instruments of communication and coordination in the immediate stages of the emergency. Since much of this technology was in the hands of the private sector, greater efforts are required to develop partnerships between local and international groups to improve the quality of the information and the speed of its delivery. For example, an integrated early warning system – using

² The Flash Appeal, initially for six months, was subsequently extended to December 2005, and then to June 2006.

new technology and including community-based systems – has yet to have an impact in the field.

The issue of data analysis – how to add value to an abundance of often contradictory data – confounded the Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs) from the outset. The HIC created its own exponential demand, yet its trained human-resource base and toolkit/templates for rapid deployment were limited. Many key agencies simply did not use the service at all in the first two months; their own information sources, formal and informal, were perceived as better.

The evaluation found that the HIC was not a tool fully accessible to the governments. For eventual transfer to government, the exit strategy in each country should include linkages to the Development Assistance Database (DAD) and other information-management programmes under a single umbrella combined with, for example, the UNDP Capacity Building Programmes.

While capacity mapping exercises and agency matrices have some value, there are diminishing returns and in-built redundancy in attempting to capture the activities of the entire humanitarian community. The top 10–15 agencies usually represent about 80 per cent of activities and funds, and it is these that need to be fully reflected in any mapping exercise.

Ensuring accountability

Reporting on corruption was not within the terms of reference of this evaluation. However, the team noted an increased level of awareness and heightened capacity within international and national (including non-governmental) bodies regarding the monitoring of tsunami transactions. In Indonesia, it was encouraging that the BRR

has given high priority to transparency in this respect.

Corruption risks were increased by shortcomings in the existing financial and administrative systems of affected countries. Newly introduced tracking systems – notably the Development Assistance Database (DAD) – make it easy for government and donor countries to check whether funds are being used as expected. The evaluation found that although DAD data were still coming in, a certain ‘momentum’ was already established in terms of both governments’ insistence on cooperation from contributing agencies, and the self-interest of agencies in being seen to be publicly accountable.

Joint advocacy

The evaluation found that in the first six months in particular, most agencies paid insufficient attention to developing a dialogue with governments (and communities) about war/non-war populations and associated protection issues (Indonesia), population consolidation (Maldives) and pre-/post-tsunami displaced populations (Sri Lanka). Some respondents suggested that the limited dialogue was in part due to self-imposed restrictions by agencies with committed project money.

The evaluators accept that, in Aceh for example, priority was rightly given to building a relationship of trust with the government – and the government itself broached the possibility of international assistance beyond tsunami-affected populations. It is also accepted that caution must be exercised in seeking partnerships with some human-rights organisations seeking funding for relief operations beyond their competency. However, the vested interest of committed project money for relief/recovery may have provided a disincentive to engage in advocacy work.

A coordinated common policy framework for human rights was missing, as was a common platform for the protection of minority groups and of relatively voiceless groups such as women. In this respect, several respondents pointed out that the division of responsibilities between UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators was not always clear, having implications for (a) representing the aid community as a whole, and (b) being at the forefront of advocacy around difficult and often political issues.

Composite recommendations and actions

- 1 An international review and consultation should be undertaken with INGOs and local NGOs to develop new approaches to achieving: (a) adequate representation within coordination structures at all levels; (b) consensus that can be translated into common positions and a level of predictability on key issues; and (c) the extent to which a certification process can be introduced to assist governments and donors in choosing responsible NGO partners with whom to work. (Action: IASC, NGO consortia and donors.)
- 2 In natural disasters as well as complex emergencies, the RC/HC in conjunction with a common NGO/Red Cross viewpoint, should take a lead in promoting joint advocacy on 'difficult' issues such as land tenure/ownership, affected/non-affected populations, access to war-affected populations and improving governance. (Action: IASC, all agencies, RC/HC.)
- 3 The international community should ensure that sufficient priority is given to enhancing the coordination capacities of local as well as national government bodies. This would include, for instance, deploying senior staff beyond capitals and helping to build the capacity of local authorities to utilise information systems such as HIC. Where large numbers of INGOs are anticipated, the deployment of a senior NGO liaison officer should be considered. (Action: OCHA and all agencies.)
- 4 Effective, consistent and coordinated communication with recipient populations at all stages of the response – and with a concerted effort to include women in the dialogue – should be prioritised. This should entail dedicated staff resources and tools, with efforts made toward reaching a communications protocol with the host government. A common strategy should be developed, including the use of public meetings, broadcast media, newsletters and posters. (Action: all agencies and OCHA.)
- 5 The creation and use of a common beneficiary database, provided and endorsed by a central government body, should be an early priority in the emergency phase. (Action: all agencies, with host governments.)
- 6 With respect to the constant stream of visits by agency staff and donors, the IASC should urgently introduce monitored guidelines requiring all agencies and donors to report on the numbers and cost of visiting delegations. Common reporting under the guidance of the GHDI, for instance, should be used. (Action: all agencies and IASC.)
- 7 Leadership and coordination skills should include the basics of how to maximise the output of meetings. These skills should be promoted by all agencies, forming part of the induction training for operational staff, along with standard operating procedures. (Action: all agencies and OCHA.)

- 8 Benchmark (gender-sensitive) indicators for coordination should be developed, along with a simple monitoring and report-back system for the quality of coordination meetings. (Action: OCHA and all agencies.)
- 9 In emergencies of this magnitude, the RC/HC office should be supported by the early deployment of a full-time gender officer who remains in post for at least a year to serve as a resource person for the humanitarian community at large and to support the mainstreaming of gender issues through all programme sectors. (Action: RC/HC and all agencies.)
- 10 In line with UN guidelines issued in May 2006 on accepting pro bono offers, OCHA should take a lead on behalf of the wider humanitarian community in further developing guidance on private sector donations. Initially, an internal policy should be shared with all OCHA staff and should include template stand-by MOUs for pro bono offers. OCHA should also ensure that all major emergencies have a dedicated focal point for liaising with key private sector companies (ideally both in country and at OCHA HQ). (Action: OCHA and IASC.)
- 11 To avoid high turnover of staff, HR departments should endeavour to deploy long-term (at least one-year) personnel in the field as soon as possible. Urgent attention should be given to the speed with which staff members are recruited, and to expanding the registry of suitable standby staff. (Action: all agencies.)
- 12 Civil–military coordination should be improved through more extensive promotion of guidelines, principles and procedures. Enhanced in-house and external training and advocacy, as well as joint exercises between humanitarian agencies and the military, would improve civil–military and military–military relations. Senior humanitarian actors – in particular the RC/HC office – should be made more aware of the civil–military resources available to them and the potential contribution they can make in addressing urgent needs, including the rapid deployment of civil–military experts. (Action: ERC, IASC and all agencies.)
- 13 The RC/HC should strongly advocate and disseminate information on the common services available to all actors: what they provide, how non-UN agencies can supplement capacities, and the purpose of the Humanitarian Common Services ‘matrix’. (Action: RC/HC.)
- 14 Adequate resources for coordination should be ensured through the relief, transition and recovery phases of disasters. This should include support to common services from NGOs and the Red Cross Movement. Emphasis should be given to support to the RC/HC through the transition, irrespective of institutional affiliations and restrictive interpretations of mandates concerning relief, recovery or development. (Action: all agencies, ERC and IASC.)