Section 2: Why Coordinate?

“Why coordinate?” is an often asked question, especially if coordination is seen as taking up valuable time that could be used for running your organisation’s programmes and operations. While many coordination forums do take up time without much return, at least some coordination forums provide an added-value: otherwise, people would not keep coming back to them.

Coordination must have clear goals and be a means to an end, not an end in itself. As per the Principles of Partnership, effective humanitarian action “requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.”

The following questions are addressed to provide some reasons as to why there is value in engaging in coordination:

1. What is humanitarian coordination?
2. Whose responsibility is humanitarian coordination?
3. Why should my NGO coordinate?
4. What are the benefits for my NGO?
5. What’s the role of the United Nations (UN)?
6. How does the UN coordinate?
7. If the UN is so active, why do NGOs need to be involved?
8. What is the role of NGOs in the cluster system?
9. How can NGOs engage in the cluster system?
10. What is the mandate for NGOs to participate in coordination?
11. What issues does NGO coordination involve?
12. What does NGO coordination entail?
13. How does NGO coordination fit into these categories?
14. Why do NGOs set up their own coordination bodies?
15. What makes NGO coordination bodies different?
16. How can an NGO coordination body by sustainable?
17. Why don’t we see more NGO coordination?
18. How can my NGO support coordination?
19. How can my senior staff support coordination?
20. What are the benefits for my staff?

1. What is humanitarian coordination?

There is no single agreed definition of humanitarian coordination, but the most durable has been “the systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner.” (Minear et al 1992). At its simplest, coordination is simply minimising gaps and duplications in emergency relief while promoting humanitarian principles and good practice.

2. Whose responsibility is humanitarian coordination?
The primary responsibility for humanitarian coordination always rests with the national government of the area affected by a humanitarian crisis. However, this coordination may be complicated if the government is engaged in an ongoing conflict, antagonistic towards the area affected, or simply too weak to provide leadership. NGOs, in particular, must stay politically informed in such circumstances.

3. Why should my NGO coordinate?

The Sphere Project notes that coordination is necessary “to make our responses more effective, appropriate and accountable.” OCHA states that “humanitarian coordination seeks to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater predictability, accountability and partnership.” Coordination can increase complementarity in responses, reduce duplication, and bring about better aid for those with whom, and for whom, we work. There is broad consensus that these outcomes are clearly in the best interests of the affected populations.

Each NGO will take decisions about the coordination mechanisms in which it will participate, often based on operational priorities. Coordination mechanisms can help NGOs to be more effective in their operations. Partnerships are often created through coordination, which can lead to better humanitarian response. Sometimes donors require NGOs to participate in coordination mechanisms, such as clusters, before they will provide funding to an NGO.

Participation in NGO coordination mechanisms will be based on concerns and priorities for your NGO. They allow for issues not covered by other coordination mechanisms to be addressed. NGO coordination mechanisms tend to allow for greater influence as a collective group of NGOs when raising concerns with other actors. NGO coordination mechanisms can also provide easier access to some external actors – such as government representatives, donors, or UN agencies.

4. What are the benefits for my NGO?

Participation in coordination mechanisms helps to ensure that your NGO’s views are represented in policy discussions, enabling you to raise critical issues (such as vulnerable populations and gaps in the response). Such participation is usually viewed favourably by NGO colleagues, government, and UN representatives, as well as the donor community, potentially creating opportunities for partnerships and funding.

5. What’s the role of the United Nations (UN)?

Within the UN, the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs has a global mandate for humanitarian coordination and is supported by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in carrying out this mandate. In refugee situations, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has a mandate to coordinate the response. In situations of internal displacement, the cluster approach has been adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to ensure coordination. Other UN bodies may have roles in some activities, such as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), facilitating access to populations in need of humanitarian assistance.
6. **How does the UN coordinate?**

The 2005 *Humanitarian Response Review (HRR)* led to the humanitarian reform, which created new coordination mechanisms in situations of internal displacement. Roles and responsibilities of UN *Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs)* were more clearly defined, UN agencies (and some non-UN bodies) were assigned as Cluster Leads with formal responsibilities agreed at a global level, and a Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was established to improve rapid access to funding.

7. **If the UN is so active, why do NGOs need to be involved?**

NGOs often carry out a large percentage of a humanitarian response in a country. It is important for NGOs to have their concerns about the response heard in formal coordination mechanisms. At times, the activities of the Humanitarian Coordinator or cluster leads do not always align fully with the interests or concerns of NGOs. Sometimes coordination mechanisms, such as the *Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)* or clusters do not address broader issues of concern to NGOs, such as humanitarian space. NGO coordination has a role in addressing these issues, providing accountability, and also addressing issues that may be of concern specifically to NGOs.

8. **What is the role of NGOs in the cluster system?**

Clusters are open to humanitarian actors willing to coordinate their actions and participate in complementary activities. NGOs engage with clusters based on their perception of the relevance of cluster activities to meeting their humanitarian response objectives, their own operational presence and capacity, past performance record and accompanying technical expertise.

9. **How can NGOs engage with the clusters?**

Involvement in cluster coordination can include: participation in cluster meetings; sharing information on programmatic activities; contributing to the three W’s (Who does What, Where) database; and engagement in cluster functions such as needs assessments, planning, resource mobilisation, response delivery, monitoring implementation, and strategic priority setting.

10. **What is the mandate for NGOs to participate in coordination?**

Many NGOs now recognise that coordination is a responsibility for all humanitarian actors if they are to serve affected communities effectively. Key standards adopted by the humanitarian community (such as the *Sphere Humanitarian Charter* and *Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*) also include coordination as a core standard. While there is no official “mandate” for NGOs to coordinate, NGOs generally understand that coordination can lead to better humanitarian responses.

11. **What issues does NGO coordination involve?**

While “NGO coordination” is not separate from humanitarian coordination, NGO coordination is usually concerned with issues that impact humanitarian aid, but have not come to the attention of (or may not be a priority for) UN agencies, national
governments, or other actors. It also involves addressing NGO interests that will not be taken up by other actors. NGO coordination also provides a means for NGOs to come together and have a stronger voice on issues of concern. Such issues may include, *inter alia*, civil-military relations, NGO regulations, humanitarian access, quality of the humanitarian response, and accountability to affected populations.

12. **What does coordination entail?**

There are three types of coordination approaches: top-down **command**, with strong leadership backed by some sort of authority, either carrot or stick; **consensus** leadership to mobilise key actors around common objectives, normally without direct assertion of authority; and basic exchange of information and division of labour by **default**, usually in the absence of a formal coordination entity. In recent years, there have been many attempts to improve coordination, particularly in situations of internal displacement – first with the humanitarian reform process (started in 2005), which introduced the cluster approach, and, more recently, with the IASC’s on-going “transformative agenda” (started in December 2010) to ensure better humanitarian response. Coordination also takes place at the global level through forums such as NGO consortia (**ICVA, InterAction, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, and VOICE**) and through the **Inter-Agency Standing Committee** (IASC).

13. **How does NGO coordination fit into these categories?**

These different approaches may co-exist at different levels in a response, and in some cases may work against each other. NGO coordination bodies usually begin through coordination by default – where NGO staff meet their counterparts in relatively informal situations – and develop into coordination by consensus, with a membership meeting regularly to address common concerns. Coordination between NGOs does not always result in a formalised mechanism. Coordination can continue very efficiently between NGOs informally.

14. **Why do NGOs set up their own coordination bodies?**

Most NGO coordination bodies are generally set up in response to one of three conditions:

a) An attempt to externally impose coordination by the UN or government;

b) A gap (or perceived gap) in existing coordination mechanisms; or

c) A need to address NGO interests that will not be addressed by other actors.

15. **What makes NGO coordination bodies different?**

Government and UN coordination bodies, in which many NGOs participate, are often formed on the basis of pre-determined needs. For example, the clusters cover specific areas and sectors and so they are often set up if there is no pre-existing coordination mechanism in-country covering their sector/area. NGO coordination bodies usually operate based on needs identified within the community, being formed when there is a collective will to address those needs. Although common NGO aims can be addressed more effectively on a collective rather than individual basis, an element of leadership from within the NGO community is usually essential for the success of an NGO coordination body. Like other coordination mechanisms, NGO coordination bodies
need to avoid similar pitfalls, such as becoming redundant, no longer adding value, or becoming ineffective.

16. How can an NGO coordination body be sustainable?

While it is the role of governments (and UN offices and agencies, particularly where government lacks capacity) to ensure that NGOs are included in coordination mechanisms, externally-led or imposed coordination mechanisms usually fail to take root. However councils, forums and consortia that are generated and supported by NGOs themselves tend to show great resilience.

17. Why don't we see more NGO coordination?

One weakness of NGO coordination is that it tends to be reactive. Resource constraints mean that NGOs can find it difficult to participate in coordination at the expense of their own operations, especially if coordination does not form part of their core mission. NGOs have become more engaged in coordination due to recent developments in the humanitarian sector, such as humanitarian reform, but there still will be cases where NGO coordination will be necessary.

18. How can my NGO support coordination?

Where appropriate, ensure that your staff have an understanding of what coordination involves, and a clear mandate to coordinate as part of their job descriptions. In some cases, NGO senior management have agreed that a specific percentage of their staff time will be spent on coordination activities, and have included coordination activities within performance evaluations.

19. How can my senior staff support coordination?

Where your staff are elected or selected to serve on governance bodies (such as Executive Committees of NGO coordination bodies), they should be given the authority to make commitments on behalf of the organisation. They should also be prepared for a reasonably high level of commitment, which may require them to create space to reach decisions away from their day-to-day responsibilities.

20. What are the benefits of NGO coordination for my staff?

While they should be realistic about how much time they can commit, this level of commitment can be balanced against the benefits that Committee membership brings: access to better information and greater influence at a higher level than they could achieve on their own; access to senior decision-makers in other organisations as peers; and visibility for their organisation in the wider humanitarian community.