NGO Coordination Guide: Background

This Guide comes as part of a much longer effort that the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) has been undertaking to facilitate NGO coordination in humanitarian response. It is the product of several years of research and practical experience that the ICVA Secretariat and ICVA members have had with NGO coordination. There is a great deal of coordination taking place among NGOs, whether informally or through more formal NGO coordination mechanisms, within the broader context of coordination. However, much of what is learned from these coordination experiences has not been systematically documented. Lessons have been lost and efforts have been duplicated in different contexts because there has not been easy access to existing resources.

In 1992, ICVA undertook an NGO Coordination Project, which mapped 150 field-based NGO coordination bodies around the world, examined some in detail, and developed a handbook that took experiences and converted them into a "blueprint" for setting up a field-based coordination mechanism." (Bennett 1994). The landscape of humanitarian response, and of NGOs and NGO coordination in particular, has changed dramatically since the mid-1990s and ICVA’s earlier work.

Over the years, ICVA has also engaged in practical support to in-country coordination. From supporting NGO coordination in Guatemala in the early 1990s, ICVA Bosnia and ICVA Belgrade were created in the mid-1990s to support NGO coordination. In the late 1990s, ICVA moved to providing support to NGO coordination in various forms. An NGO Information Officer, Paul Currien, was put in place in Kosovo in 1999. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake, a consultant, Bill Canny, looked at how NGO coordination could be supported, producing a study that suggested a number of ways forward. An NGO Liaison Officer, Kerren Hedlund, was put in place in Myanmar in 2008, to support coordination following Cyclone Nargis. In 2009, interim support was given to the NGO Steering Committee in Khartoum, Sudan by ICVA’s Policy Officer, Manisha Thomas. In 2010, following the earthquake in Haiti, ICVA worked with InterAction to set up an NGO Coordination Support Office, by sending its Senior Policy Officer, Manisha Thomas, to Haiti to work with InterAction staff, as well as staff from the Sphere Project, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP), and People In Aid. Future support will be provided by ICVA to NGO coordination when requested and necessary. In addition, ICVA will be developing regional hubs in 2013 to ensure better NGO coordination at the country level. The first regional hub will be opened in Bangkok, Thailand in mid-2013, followed by regional hubs being established in East Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East.

Phase I - The Research Phase

In 2010, ICVA commissioned research to look at what works well and what does not work well when it comes to NGO coordination. Nine case studies of NGO coordination bodies, along with an Overview Report, and a Lessons Learned document were published by ICVA in 2011 under the title Strength in Numbers: An Overview of NGO Coordination in the Field. Given that the case studies focused on more formalised NGO coordination attempts, the research could not fully address the range of less formal NGO coordination mechanisms.

Phase II - This Guide

The research from the first phase found that while NGO coordination takes place in many humanitarian contexts, there is very little practical guidance available for humanitarian coordination in general, and almost none for NGO coordination specifically. This Guide is intended as a starting point for developing this area of humanitarian endeavour. The idea of the NGO coordination work that ICVA has undertaken is to gather experiences, lessons learned, and to make as many NGO coordination resources readily accessible for NGOs – whether local, national, or international – so that they can ideally find whatever they need on NGO coordination in one place.

The Guide's Focus
This Guide centres on how to set up and manage an NGO coordination body, which includes local, national, and/or international NGOs. This focus was chosen because one of the trends identified in the research phase was that NGO coordination bodies are more common than generally recognised. These bodies are usually formed when informal coordination – based solely on personal relationships and casual meetings – are unable to address issues that affect the entire NGO community in a country.

The Lessons Learned document from the research acts as a companion piece to this Guide, while the Case Studies and Overview Report are supplementary reading that provides more detail on specific experiences in the field. The Guide also incorporates some of the critical material dealing with wider issues of coordination, such as security, sustainability and accountability, drawing on documents produced by the UN system, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, NGOs, and other research bodies. The Guide does not include a comprehensive discussion of these issues, but should hopefully help you to think more critically about them.

Who Is This Guide for?
This guide is for operational NGOs that wish to coordinate their activities with each other and with external actors, such as national and local governments; the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement; the United Nations; donors; and other actors during a humanitarian response. It is intended to help NGOs to establish their own coordination processes to complement, not duplicate or replace other coordination mechanisms – such as those set up by government or UN bodies or the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. It is focused on NGO coordination bodies and, as such, is limited in its scope for now. Future versions may expand the focus and content of the Guide.

It is intended as a resource for NGOs – whether they are local, national, or international. It is primarily focused on humanitarian response situations, but there are elements that are applicable in other contexts.

How To Use This Guide
The Guide can be read in its entirety or you can look at the individual sections relevant to your work. Most sections have been drafted to stand alone, so that you can quickly access the information or resources that you need.

As the name implies, it is meant to guide your work – not provide definitive recipes for success in NGO coordination. Each context will be different and will require adaptation. The resources can help you to shape what you need for your NGO coordination mechanism. The Guide may also help you adapt an existing mechanism, as any coordination mechanism needs to change as the context changes.

Users of the Guide are encouraged to engage with the issues it raises and use the resources listed in the Further Reading section to develop their own perspectives.

The Term "NGO"
Whenever a reference is made to “NGO” in the Guide, it refers to local, national, or international NGOs. Local NGOs (LNGOs) and national NGOs (NNGOs) are, in places in the Guide, grouped together as NNGOs, simply to save space; not to diminish the importance of LNGOs. When references are to international NGOs (INGOs), they are named specifically.

What This Guide Is Not
The Guide does not provide all the answers to the challenges of NGO coordination. As noted above, it is also not a guaranteed recipe for a successful NGO coordination body. It tries to provide options, issues to consider, and possible solutions (or where such solutions may be found.) Each context will have its own challenges and the NGOs involved in coordination will often have to face
tough choices. Hopefully, this Guide will be a resource to help in finding ways to meet some of those challenges.

It does not reflect the official position of ICVA or any of its members. It does not claim to provide the definitive perspective on other coordination mechanisms, such as the cluster approach.

The Guide is also not a final product: it is an initial attempt to provide a useful resource. It was felt that putting something out that is a “living document” for people to comment on would likely get more feedback than striving towards a definitive Guide. NGO coordination is constantly changing as humanitarian response changes and new lessons and practice need to be constantly gathered. ICVA is hoping that the Guide will be a tool and resource that will be added to by the NGOs that engage in coordination – whether local, national, or international NGOs – as they are best placed to point out what works well, what does not, and to provide useful resources for others to use in the future.

**How to Provide Your Inputs and Suggestions to the Guide**

This Guide is Version 1.0 – it is meant to be an initial offering to NGOs in the hopes that its contents will be useful. It is not exhaustive and definite improvements can be made to the Guide. Your experiences with NGO coordination and in reading and using the Guide will help to make those improvements, additions, and changes.

The Guide is being made available here on ICVA’s website and is highlighted through various social media (such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook) in the hopes of sparking a discussion and encouraging comments and feedback.

We encourage you to comment directly under specific sections on the website, or alternatively, contact the [ICVA Secretariat](#).

Once we have collected input and comments on the Guide, we will look at potentially producing a Version 1.1 later in 2013.

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