THE CONTEXT OF COORDINATION
5 main factors define the requirements for humanitarian coordination.

The distinction between Natural Disasters or Complex Emergencies is a standard one, but it is difficult to find a purely "natural" disaster since in many cases manmade elements are involved. Coordination structures will need to be more complicated to take account of political implications, with greater focus needed on advocacy to address the political implications for humanitarian activities.

National governments have the mandate but not always the capacity to coordinate effectively. Sometimes they rely on other actors (such as UN agencies) to take the lead or provide support, but sometimes there may simply be a coordination gap. NGO coordination must strike a balance between providing essential services and supporting government capacity, and this will often determine how closely NGOs work with government.

The size of an emergency is sometimes judged on the basis of the size of the affected population. While in some cases size of response is not proportionate to size of affected population, generally the larger the number of actors on the ground, the more difficult coordination becomes. Coordination approaches that work for small groups may not scale up to larger numbers of NGOs.

National government stance – towards affected populations and response organisations – may range from antagonistic to co-operative. This plays a critical role in defining what formal structures are established and how they are managed, but also affects the nature of coordination that happens outside of those structures. It is worth noting that different parts of the same government may have different stances: NGO coordination bodies may have to invest more effort in managing government relationships, but this is an essential part of coordination.

Generally an emergency is either sudden-onset or chronic, although a sudden-onset emergency may be overlaid on an existing chronic emergency. In a chronic emergency, coordination needs to be long-term and process-oriented; in a sudden-onset emergency, the situation will change more rapidly and coordination will need to be more flexible and responsive. This will influence the design and workings of any coordination body.

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