Section 6: Members of an NGO Coordination Body

At the start of an NGO coordination body there may be a relatively limited number of NGOs involved, which later grows in terms of numbers. In other cases, a deliberate decision is taken to limit the membership of the coordination body to local/national NGOs or to just international NGOs. As noted above (Common Pitfalls of NGO Coordination), there may be very good reasons for taking a decision to be inclusive or exclusive when it comes to the membership of an NGO coordination body. Unless there is transparency about what those reasons are, the NGO coordination body risks coming under criticism for being elitist or exclusive. Of course, if an NGO coordination body chooses to be exclusive without good justification, then the potential criticisms will be well placed.

No one debates the necessity of working in support of local capacity – government and non-government – for emergency response when doing so does not compromise humanitarian principles. However, evaluations of humanitarian response, including the State of the Humanitarian System (ALNAP, 2010) and reflections from former Emergency Response Coordinator, John Holmes, on coordination in the Haiti 2010 Earthquake Response (Humanitarian Exchange 48: 2011), indicate that the humanitarian system is far from achieving this goal:

*The international humanitarian community meanwhile did not show itself to be sufficiently sensitive to the concerns and capacities of local civil society, and did not listen closely enough to what the people whose lives had been destroyed by the earthquake were saying. This mistake has been made before, for example in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami five years ago. It leads to misjudgements about what is needed and errors in strategy which then have to be corrected. In this case it was compounded by too much use of English in the coordination mechanisms and difficult access for local NGOs to the UN base where most meetings were being conducted. This is an area where we really must do better. The humanitarian community simply cannot afford not to work with national and local structures, to the fullest extent possible, however daunting and complex an operation may be.*

International NGOs are not systematically considering how they might better coordinate with their local NGO counterparts. INGOs may instead focus on operations and in some cases operational partnerships, but they may not have as their objective to increase the role of local NGOs in strategic decision making for the humanitarian response as a whole. This lack of coordination with local NGOs is increasingly criticised by governments and donors alike. Where the voices of LNGOs have been documented, they have also similarly criticised many international NGOs (Haiti Case Study, 2010). A very first step toward rectifying this imbalance is communication and coordination between local, national, and international NGOs.

At the same time, it must be remembered that not all local or national NGOs will want to work with international NGOs in a humanitarian response, for a variety of reasons. They may not see the INGOs as being independent from their governments; feel that they come with hidden agendas; or find them to be disrespectful of local customs and culture.
Decisions around coordination with other NGOs – whether local, national, or international – have to be taken by all parties. One of the added values of inclusive coordination is that relationships and trust between different NGOs can be built over time, which can lead to a better response. Ideally, this trust and the relationships will be in place before a crisis, but often times, partnerships have to be forged in the midst of crisis.