Section 7: Five Elements of NGO Coordination Bodies

Poor coordination structures established in the early days of an emergency can become fixed in place, leading to a higher chance of failure in the longer term. It is, therefore, critical to make sure that the organisational structures you set up are appropriate to both the members and the external environment. Despite the context-specific nature of NGO coordination bodies, ICVA’s research into NGO coordination bodies identified five organisational elements frequently found in successful membership-based NGO coordination bodies (see case studies in *Strength in Numbers: An Overview of NGO Coordination in the Field*):

These structures do not constitute a blueprint, but they can be seen as a useful starting point for setting up a coordination body. It is worth noting that the labels given here are used for reference only (i.e. “General Meeting” refers simply to the membership of the body, and the specific term does not have to be used).

1. **General Meeting:**
The starting point for most NGO coordination is a General Meeting. While small groups may have been meeting informally, this meeting brings together a critical mass from a clearly defined NGO constituency in a clearly defined structure for clearly defined purposes.

2. **Executive or Steering Committee:**
The General Meeting may elect an Executive or Steering Committee to take specific actions. Such committees are often dominated by staff from larger and richer NGOs, but it is important that the Committee be open to all in order to fully represent the membership.

   *Steering Committees need to be composed of Country Directors who are prepared to make decisions, often on behalf of the entire membership. They must be prepared to commit to a higher level of responsibility and carve out space to reach decisions away from their day-to-day responsibilities, while being realistic about how much time they can commit. This is a difficult balancing act which may be achieved best by spreading responsibilities among members, particularly to help smaller NGOs to have a voice.*

   *South Sudan Case Study, Strength in Numbers: An Overview of NGO Coordination in the Field*

3. **Chair:**
The Committee may need a Chair (and Deputy or Vice Chairs, where necessary) to play a representative role with external actors. However, in some cases no Chair is required and responsibilities are shared amongst the Steering Committee or wider membership.

   *The Chair set the tone for the entire Pakistan Humanitarian Forum internally*
and externally, as well as providing administrative support. Given the heavy workload dealt with by the Chair, this required commitment, selflessness and transparency, combined with an ability to take decisions and bring colleagues along. Diplomatic skills were essential not just for external representation, but also to be able to address individual NGOs in terms that they would respond to, particularly in cases when agency opinions differ within the membership. Pakistan Case Study, Strength in Numbers: An Overview of NGO Coordination in the Field

(4) Sub-Groups:
Depending on the situation, the General Meeting may wish to form Sub-groups that meet for limited periods to address specific issues of concern to members of the coordination body and take forward advocacy activities in the wider humanitarian community.

(5) Secretariat:
As the number of members and range of activities increase, administrative requirements for the coordination body will also increase. A Secretariat function may be required to fulfil basic administrative functions and free members to take forward coordination activities. (See further below for essential skills for Secretariat staff)

Terms of Reference
Regardless of how many of the above elements are utilised by the NGO community, a clear Terms of Reference for the NGO coordination body is essential to provide:

- the framework in which these elements can work together;
- the processes that enable them to achieve their objectives;
- the focus and continuity of the coordination body; and
- its accountability to the wider NGO community and its stakeholders.

Resources and Further Reading

Terms of References/Charters/Mandates from NGO coordination bodies:

- AIDA, oPT
- CCO, Chad
- NCCI, Iraq
- Somalia NGO Consortium
- South Sudan NGO Forum