

On [9 November](#), ICVA's and PHAP's sixth and final online session of the learning stream on humanitarian coordination addressed government-led coordination mechanisms in general, and looked in more detail at the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), a mechanism led by host governments and UNHCR in several countries.



The event featured presentations from Paul Harvey (Humanitarian Outcomes), Vikrant Mahajan (Sphere India), Arafat Jamal (UNHCR), and Patricia Roy Akullo (ACT Alliance, Uganda Forum).

Many of the questions from participants were answered live during the event (which you can listen to in the event recording). As there was not time to answer all questions, Vikrant Mahajan and Patricia Roy Akullo have also answered follow-up questions in writing, which you can now read on this page.

FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

“How do you think we can prevent political incentives for governments to play down the level of humanitarian needs for reasons of national pride or political expediency?”
- Senior Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Geneva

Vikrant Mahajan

In my view, governments may have political reasons (e.g. national pride, or regional and global goals) for downplaying humanitarian needs, but there can be a check and balance within the system that could address this. For instance, a strong civil society presence, a free media, an independent judiciary, and democratic institutions can provide that. Civil society organizations (CSOs) carry out their own independent needs assessments. Sphere India has institutionalized a practice of Joint Rapid Need Assessment for major disasters as a collective exercise by Sphere India members and Inter Agency Groups (IAGs), which at times is also done in collaboration or in coordination with the Government. The reports are shared as open sources and used as a tool for advocacy with the Government.

This issue can also come from a lack of awareness, attitudinal and trust among senior bureaucrats and politicians. More trust building and collaborative work with the Government needs to be carried out in order to build good practice, demonstrating that fair and impartial need assessments can help the Government better deliver to the affected and at-risk populations, which are their political constituencies and the key performance denominator. So, it can also be an opportunity for political dividend. We should document and recognize such good examples when they take place, and develop advocacy and capacity building materials on this.

“In your opinion, during a humanitarian response in government-led systems, how should NGOs deal with corruption and human-rights violations coming from the government in order not to harm their integrity and reputation?”

- Senior Policy Advisor, Iran

Vikrant Mahajan

In my opinion, the Government has the prime responsibility to provide the affected and at-risk populations with humanitarian and development services. If they are not able to deliver accordingly with their obligations, an assessment should be done in order to identify any issues related to a lack of intent, attitude, or system capacity.

At most places, where the coordination is led by governments, there are well defined or evolving systems and structures within the Government. As a trend, governments in most contexts have started exercising more controls and support NGO systems and good practices among all actors. In such contexts, NGOs need to invest their time in building relationship with the authorities during preparedness and also non-disaster times. They can develop guidelines, protocols, and systems for NGO-NGO coordination and Government-NGO coordination, and thus foresee and limit the grey areas of corruption during disaster times. Whenever possible, such mechanisms should be institutionalized with multiple focal points at various levels, coordinating response through nodal points within the Government and NGO systems. Technology and other systems that may bring in more transparency may be introduced. This process takes a lot of time and effort. So, it is imperative to build this on existing national, subnational, or local capacities, led by local people with established credentials. This will help building trust, complying with local legal requirements, and avoiding difficult situations without compromising the integrity and reputation of organizations.

I would also like to emphasize the importance of NGOs to demonstrate their adherence to accountability standards, principles of partnership, and codes of conduct. In my opinion, a lot of difficult situations could be avoided by asking for such requirement. This has also been our experience of working in India through Sphere India, a national coalition together with Inter Agency Groups at sub national levels.

In the case of human rights violations, in my experience there is not a single strategy that can work alone. One of the main concerns during a crisis is humanitarian access, in order to be able to deliver humanitarian services to affected and at-risk populations. It requires us to be more principle-based, focusing on neutrality, impartiality, and the humanitarian imperative. The second concern is also prevention, to voice against rights violations, to seek and deliver remedies. Protection principles can be an important tool in such situations. We need to see what is a priority in the context and what are the instruments available to balance our concerns and approaches for assistance and advocacy. In any stable or even evolving government system, there are mechanisms within the Government like national human rights commissions, judicial reviews, courts, local civil society, and media. NGOs may work through and strengthen such mechanisms. Again, it is more effective through collaborative bodies, and national and local humanitarian networks.

There is always the option to work connecting with the Government system, building relationships, making concerned people within the Government aware of field deficits, and offering support to the Government in addressing those. From our experience in India, this works in most situations, and Sphere India has developed a standard practice called “Rights in Crisis,” which collates beneficiary data from our implementing members and partners for: i) minimum standards of services in relief camps; ii) people’s access to their rights – Government entitlements and social protection schemes and; iii) people living in extremely

risky situations, below the standards of human dignity. We use this collated information to document evidence and share with concerned Government officials as part of our advocacy strategy. We also offer support through our partners to help them reach out to affected populations. It is an evolving experience and has worked well in most contexts we work in.

“Patriciah, in the context of Uganda and the RCM, are basic services to host communities not safeguarded? Could public generosity towards refugees increase a resentment between host communities and refugees? How do the government, UNHCR, and NGOs avoid this?”
- Audit and Emergencies Finance Coordinator, Switzerland

Patriciah Roy Akullo

Basic services are also safeguarded for host communities. As explained during the webinar, the Uganda’s Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) secures land by directly negotiating with the landlords for settling the refugees in their land, and the concerned local community is thus aware that refugees will be coming to settle there, and hence will exert pressure on the local basic services that already existing. The good news is that, since the government policy calls for a 70/30 ratio, NGOs’ and other partners’ assistance has to be shared between the refugee community and locals following that ratio respectively. So the host community is also aware of these extended benefits that will come to them as a result for hosting the refugees. For instance, if there are schools nearby, refugees can attend and partners will provide to all additional resources such as teachers, learning materials, repair of classroom blocks, etc. Or in the clinics, locals will also benefit by getting additional medicines.

Resentment between communities can grow if there is lack of dialogue, but given the additional benefits that locals receive from refugee programs, this feeling is minimized. Also, many of these people speak a common language and end up intermarrying. They often share common cultures, which also binds communities together. Humanitarian organizations also try to avoid resentment by being transparent about the implementation of their activities. They fully respect the 70/30 policy without favoring one over another, not even with cash distribution, as segregation would cause resentment. They also try to work and engage local district authorities as much as possible, so that they can include the 30% share of activities addressed to host communities into district planning having a meaningful impact on their own development. They encourage co-existence, for instance, they support community dialogue on joint planning and promote joint activities, such as officially commemorating common holidays together.