

Content for this topic: [The humanitarian coordination architecture at country level](#) was informed through a combination of contributions from individuals and desk research.



Complementing the webinar for this topic on the global humanitarian coordination architecture, the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) took the opportunity to talk with **Paul Knox Clarke, Head of Research ALNAP**.

Read below for Paul's response to various questions. With thanks to PHAP for undertaking this interview.

EXPERT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In your work with ALNAP, you have examined the topic of humanitarian effectiveness from various angles. Looking at the current humanitarian coordination architecture at the country level, what can we say about it in terms of effectiveness?

“The first thing I would mention is that coordination of emergency response – in particular, multi-agency emergency response – is an extremely difficult thing to do, and it is probably impossible to do it perfectly. We have to be a bit careful about what our expectations around humanitarian coordination are and what can be achieved. If we continually try to design for perfection, we are probably going to miss the objective, which is that we want it to be as good as it can be.

Having said that, what we can say on the basis of interviews and the large amount of evaluations and research that has been done on this topic, is that the current system – I am talking here about the OCHA-led cluster coordination system, not the UNHCR system or other coordination systems – is fairly effective. And we can say that because the vast majority of evaluations and interviews suggest that it has reduced gaps; it has reduced overlaps in humanitarian assistance; and it has been quite fundamental in improving standards around humanitarian assistance in some operations.

You can probably also say that the current system is quite good for coverage – for ensuring that everybody receives assistance, it is quite good for efficiency, and it is quite good for effectiveness in terms of quality. But it does have serious shortcomings – and I am sure we are going to talk about this in next week's event – particularly around the strategic development; humanitarian coordination is more effective at the operational level, and it seems to be much

less effective at the strategic level in terms of identifying where the response should go, overall prioritization of resources in response, and so forth.

I think this does raise the question of whether we should be aiming to have a coordination system that does strategic coordination, or whether we should just try to improve operational coordination, which seems to be what the system does well. But also increasingly, strategic coordination is something that the system has little time for, because looking at this level requires a large amount of time.”

Does the current coordination structure sufficiently engage national and local NGOs? What would you consider to be the main challenges in this regard?

“For the first part of the question – does it sufficiently engage national and local NGOs – the answer is obviously no, it does not. In fact, not only it does not engage national and local NGOs, but it also fails to effectively take into account the role of the affected State as well. So all-round, in terms of the architecture and engagement with national actors, it performs very poorly. But that is not true in all cases – obviously there are countries where great work has been done in attempting to engage national NGOs and even more in working with the State. But generally, it does it very poorly.

There are a variety of reasons for that, I think, so this takes us to the second part of the question: what seems to be the main challenges in this regard. Firstly, at the time the clusters were developed, the problem they were meant to solve, it was really a problem that the international agencies (particularly the UN agencies) had, which was how they could most effectively work together. The system was not really designed to build on what already exists in place – and it does still not really take into account what exists in place. Of course, there are mentions of taking this into account in the reference manual of the cluster and so on; but there is no real guidance as how you would do that. So the first big challenge is that the system is not really designed to do this, it is not designed to fit into the operating contexts, rather it is very much a sort of one-size-fits-all architecture, which is just put down on the ground. And while some countries have tried to go beyond that, there is a design problem.

Secondly, there are of course problems of access, all sorts of problems of access. The main fora of the architecture operate generally in English or French, so there can be linguistic barriers. They are also extremely time consuming. Therefore, small agencies may just not have the personnel to devote to these meetings. Often, they are taking place at a considerable distance from operations, and so – particularly for the local civil society and local NGOs who are actually doing work on the ground – they may not be able to move back and forth to where the meetings are. Sometimes they are in places that are physically hard to enter without a security clearance

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and that can hinder a bit. The humanitarian architecture might be relying on the web, or other IT technologies, which the smaller organizations cannot afford, and so they are not able to fully participate in the information management functions of clusters. So there is a whole load of barriers to access like that, and that is – I think – the second group of challenges.

The third group of challenges is around the function of the architecture: is it there to build capacity – which is actually part as you know of the cluster’s function – or is it there to coordinate operations? Because often the latter requires a smaller number of participants who are very engaged, which may preclude many smaller civil society organizations from participating. Whereas if it is capacity building, you want to have a larger number of less well-capacitated organizations. So there is often a tension – I think – between those two functions in terms of the size and of making sure that organizations participate.

One exciting possibility is using national NGO networks as a way of allowing participation by national and local civil society, but without having very large numbers of people participating in meetings, as their network participates on their behalf. I think there is lots of potential there. Another possibility, particularly at the local and operational level, is the potential for area-led coordination to be led by local NGOs or local civil society organizations. So there is a variety of ways that people are attempting to address these challenges, but a lot more work is required.”

Do you think that the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain outcomes will have an effect on how NGOs will engage with country-level coordination mechanisms?

“Well, you know, it is a bit difficult to look into the future. I suppose, if one would assume that everything that is in it or has been discussed seriously comes to pass; then, yes, there should be an effect, partially just because of the recognition of the work that national NGOs do, and because of increased capacity of and funding to national NGOs. This would make them both more recognized as central actors in humanitarian response, and in some cases would increase their ability to be engaged in humanitarian response. And one has to hope that they may become more recognized and more able to respond in some cases. Then, national and local NGOs would wish to engage with country-level coordination, and with the coordination architecture more generally.

If they do not engage, they will move forward in one way, in terms of national ownership and of the relevance of the kind of assistance that has been provided, but sadly it would probably be at the cost of some of the good things that coordination mechanisms have done, like improving coverage. Therefore, we hope that as local and national NGOs become larger and more recognized, they will become involved. Whether they will be becoming involved with exactly the same coordination mechanisms is also a good question.

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One result of the World Humanitarian Summit, and certainly of the work around cash, is that potentially there might be changes to the coordination architecture itself and therefore, the nature of coordination mechanisms that local and national NGOs are engaging with will be different. I think this is particularly true at the sector level, probably less true if you look at the country level. But certainly for cash and the nexus – the move to look at the development-humanitarian relationship in a different way – will probably have some sort of impact on the humanitarian coordination architecture; and I think there are several options out there at the moment that people are looking at. Whether that architecture will be easier or more difficult for national NGOs to participate in, I think remains to be seen.”

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