



STRENGTHS IN NUMBERS: A Review of NGO Coordination in the Field

Case Study: Iraq 2003-2010

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Background Note

During the 1990s ICVA supported NGO coordination in the field in various ways and published two resource books: “Meeting needs: NGO Coordination in Practice” and “NGO Coordination at Field Level: A Handbook”. Commissioned by ICVA in 2010, this review builds on that earlier work, comprising three parts: an Overview Report introducing some key issues in NGO coordination; a series of Case Studies providing insight into how NGOs respond to those issues in the field; and a Lessons Learned bringing together critical points identified in the Case Studies.

These Case Studies include responses to both natural disasters and complex political emergencies from a range of countries around the world. The studies are specifically concerned with formal coordination bodies convened by international NGOs, although some of them include or support national NGOs. While every effort has been made to present an accurate picture of each response, gaps in the record and errors in recollection are inevitable. However any errors in the studies are the responsibility of the consultants and ICVA, and corrections and updates are welcome.

BACKGROUND

In January 2003, while expressing support for a new UN resolution on Iraq, the Bush administration called it "desirable but not mandatory before launching military action". This no so subtle difference made it clear to humanitarians that a large-scale military intervention was inevitable. For the following months, OCHA led contingency planning efforts in Amman, Kuwait, Syria and Iran anticipating a USD 2.2 billion operation that was to last 6 months (OCHA 2004). Simultaneously the US Pentagon, as part of its military headquarters in Kuwait, established the Humanitarian Operations Centre (HOC) to "facilitate the work of humanitarian organisations that will be called upon to assist the Iraqi people in the event of a conflict in the region"; a sure conflation of civil and military operations (Mack 2004). NGOs working in Iraq at the time observed "there was the military in Kuwait and 300 NGOs behind them" (INGO interview).

In Amman, USAID funded 5 large US NGOs¹ to implement the Joint NGO Preparedness Initiative (JNEPI) with the objective of preparing for a major relief operation in Iraq once combat operations started (Hansen 2007b). However many non-US (and a few US) were concerned that humanitarianism was being used to justify the invasion and similarly humanitarian operations to mitigate the impact of war. As such JNEPI "did not gain a sufficient audience and acceptance amongst the wider NGO community due to its sources of funding and its real or perceived association with the Coalition Forces" (Rodriguez 2004). Simultaneously, the IASC NGO Networks² seconded an NGO Liaison Officer to OCHA to facilitate NGO preparedness, planning, information sharing and security advice. However it took the NGO Liaison more than 3 months to be deployed to Amman and then to Baghdad, ultimately compromising her ability to maintain linkages, build consensus and legitimately represent the NGO community (OCHA 2004).

After the 'war was over' in May, the NGO Liaison Officer became operational in Baghdad. The Coalition Provisional Authorities (CPA) started civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) briefing sessions across the country and attended by the humanitarian community; however the value of these briefings was relative in terms of information provision and did not encourage actual exchange (Rodriguez 2004).

ESTABLISHING NGO COORDINATION³

Inside Iraq 2003 to 2004

The NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) was established in April 2003 in Baghdad by (largely) European NGOs with a pre-war presence: "A few of us staying in the same hotel..."⁴ By creating a forum independent of the US, UN and military where operational and policy discussions could take place, the participating NGOs felt that, in contrast to the CIMIC briefings, "NGO meetings were more transparent. There was a genuine interest to work together"(INGO interview).

¹ World Vision, Save the Children US, International Relief Committee, Mercy Corps, and International Medical Corps

² InterAction, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR)

³ This section draws heavily on Rodriguez 2004 (Thank you).

⁴ Premier Urgence, Oxfam GB, Un Ponte per Bagdad, Médecins du Monde, and Intersos were the first board and founding members.

NCCI started with ad hoc coordination meetings, mainly general and health-related, quickly followed by different sectoral working groups. These meetings served not only as a forum for in-country NGOs before and during the war but also a point of reference for new NGOs. This first phase was fuelled "by the passion and commitment of heads of INGOs working in Iraq, dedicating up to 40% of their time [to the coordination]" (INGO interview).

With no other resources than membership fees, INGOs in a particular geographic area and sector volunteered to chair a working group. Shortly after the invasion, ECHO was approached to fund a small NCCI office, an Executive Coordinator selected among candidates already in-country and put forward by existing INGOs, an assistant and a database manager.

With the arrival of the UN in Baghdad including OCHA at the 'end of the war' in May, NCCI reviewed its value-added role in coordination. However UN coordination meetings in Baghdad were perceived by NGOs as the "UN Show...seen as patronizing given that NGOs were spending more time in field than the UN." Baghdad-based national coordination failed to monitor sector working groups closely and respond to coordination needs accordingly. In the North, coordination was limited to UN Heads of Agencies. In Hillah, as a result of delayed UN deployment, the military took charge of aid coordination (OCHA 2004). Unsurprisingly, NGOs felt a continued need for the role played by the NCCI.

Therefore, in sectors with wide NGO presence such as health, NCCI maintained its leadership while handing over water and sanitation and child protection to UNICEF.⁵ NCCI members felt it important to maintain an independent general meeting and, on an ad hoc basis, facilitate an "Emergency Working Group" focusing on acute crises, e.g. Falujah and Najaf in August 2004. When JNEPI and the OCHA-based NGO LO phased out, JNEPI transferred their equipment to NCCI and both encouraged OCHA to support NCCI (Rodriguez 2004). By June, NCCI members, with a Charter and Code of Conduct, increased from an original 14 to nearly 60 members representing over 50% of the INGOs in Iraq.⁶

Following the tragic bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003 and the evacuation of UN foreign staff from Iraq, many NGOs scaled back programming and resorted to remote management. Some NGOs ended their programs completely, while others stayed, adopting a low profile to avoid danger. NCCI also stayed, and took on many of the UN coordination activities - including OCHA's, who was to remain absent from Iraq until March 2007. At this point, NCCI had offices in Baghdad, Erbil, Basrah, Kuwait and Amman.

ECHO was approached again to fund an expansion of the NCCI office and creation of an NCCI security office (NCCISO). However there were mixed opinions of NCCI's efficacy. While the Humanitarian Coordinator was supportive of NCCI, lending to NCCI legitimacy, OCHA reported that "seven months post-establishment, the NCCI remained unrepresentative of the broader NGO community in Iraq and lacked the requisite skills to coordinate" (OCHA 2004).

Contrarily, a 2004 external evaluation found "the effectiveness of NCCI has been high", the UN was unlikely to provide coordination and information services and NCCI was the only independent

⁵ Note the formal cluster approach was not yet being implemented by the UN.

⁶ The Charter and Code of Conduct can be found at www.ncciraq.org

nationwide coordination body. The evaluation recommended that NCCI continue but also to improve the quality of information by working more closely with Iraqis and relying less on expatriate staff, to increase emphasis on protecting and enforcing humanitarian principles through an expanded, empowered and more representative executive board, and greater accessibility and relevance to Iraqi INGO staff and civil society through document translation in Arabic and Kurdish (Hansen 2004).

In exile 2005-2008

With the continued deterioration in security and ability for INGOs to directly implement in Iraq, donor support for humanitarian and coordination operations in Iraq also declined. By January 2005, NCCI with 5 offices in 3 countries and 80 staff was "too big and too inefficient...we could have operated for 2-3 more years on the remaining budget instead of the 5 months we had left [of funding at present costs]" (NCCI interview). By the end of 2005, NCCI relocated from Baghdad to Amman, closed offices in Kuwait, and significantly reduced staff. As a result of decreased funding, being forced into remote management, and ending up far removed from the humanitarian action on the ground, NGOs sank into apathy and discontent which also affected the NCCI board and membership. While a protection and humanitarian crisis still raged in Iraq, even NCCI advocacy was negatively affected. The unanimity required to make common statements grew increasingly more difficult with "little remaining of the sense of NGO community and solidarity that prevailed in 2003 and 2004."

In June 2005, the General Assembly reiterated its reliance on NCCI to lobby on their behalf for a neutral operating space in Iraq. Nonetheless between 2005 and 2006, coordination became considerably more difficult as the quantity, quality, and timeliness of information were compromised. Low profile programming limited movement and therefore participation in coordination meetings. As a funding strategy, NCCI began capacity building activities for local NGOs. However this was considered competition by INGOs doing similar work and was not well-received by member agencies (Hansen 2007a).

Between 2006-2008, an Iraqi government was elected and for a short time led coordination activities. At first, this leadership was welcome and perceived to be effective. However for a period NCCI's added-value was challenged. Nonetheless a second NCCI evaluation (2007) reported "effectiveness had been high in spite of the fast pace of change in external events and persistent shortfalls in donor funding...not least by the diffusion of focus among the membership since 2004." The report also indicated continued need for coordination, advocacy and information sharing as the "humanitarian situation in and around Iraq became markedly worse" (Hansen 2007). While UNAMI and the UN agencies were planning to increase their presence within Iraq, their presence would remain delimited by the Green Zone (GZ). A second time the Evaluation recommended that NCCI reorganise its coordination structure, create and maintain a flexible network of Iraqi field coordination officers, strengthen context analysis, and increase accessibility and transparency of information by making all routine NCCI documents, produced and distributed at that time (still) only in English for stakeholders, professionally translated into Arabic (Hansen 2007).

Unfortunately high staff turnover at the NCCI Secretariat following the departure of its Executive Coordinator in 2008 "sharply weakened the organization" (Knowledge Centre 2009). The information network that NCCI relied upon was a personal network "so when they went, so did the information" (NCCI staff interview). The 2007 evaluation recommendations were not implemented and strategic

workshops in 2007 and 2008 were little more than "annual plans" (NGO staff interview). Even NCCI staff observed, "We have to keep it [NCCI] but we are not sure why". Between 2007-2009, few if any joint advocacy statements were issued.⁷

In early 2009, an OCHA review of coordination reported coordination within the INGO community had limited effectiveness: "The Government of Iraq is asserting its authority, in aid coordination and other areas. Donors and Iraqi counterparts expect INGOs to establish field operations inside Iraq. A viable Iraqi NGO community is emerging, and organisations are consolidating. Intermediary roles for INGOs will decline" (Beer 2009). A decision on whether to dissolve the NCCI coordination structure appeared imminent.

At this point, a local NGO stakeholder and long time member of the board spoke up. He made a passionate claim that "while (INGOs) were tired of sitting in meetings" and "were unconnected" they didn't realise the importance of maintaining a forum free of political and sectarian influence for local NGOs and a means of communication between L/INGOs. He reminded the Board "the mission is not yet achieved. No problem is bigger than our thinking what NCCI can be. Imagine an NCCI that is consulted by government, the UN and donors on issues related to Iraqi civil-society..." (NCCI Board member).

Returning to Iraq 2009-2010

Since August 2009, NCCI has experienced a 'renaissance'. A new Executive Coordinator⁸ has led the consolidation of the NCCI structure and staff and revived the NCCI field presence, in part by increasing local participation and representation. This has involved re-electing the Executive Board and revising the Statutes, registering NCCI as a Swiss NGO and in Jordan and Iraq as an INGO, "to reassure NCCI members that we exist" and mitigate risk of Iraqi authorities interfering in NCCI activities. He also undertook an informal review of other NGO coordination mechanisms in Chad, Somalia, Afghanistan and ICVA.⁹ There have been investments in team building to increase communication, democratic decision-making, job sharing thereby increasing knowledge management and addressing high-staff turnover. NCCI has greatly increased its field presence by developing a field network of 24 non-member LNGOs to collect, analyse and dispatch real-time information, and reinstating Baghdad, Basra and Erbil in-situ coordination meetings (outside the GZ). Emphasis was placed on relationship-building with local NGO members and non-members, the latter including the LNGO field network, local authorities and local academic institutions, and an increased orientation to local NGO needs resulting in increased local NGO membership (up from less than 30% end of 2003 to nearly 50% in 2010). Relations with OCHA are good with NCCI facilitating contact between local NGOs and OCHA outside the GZ, however coordination has taken a back seat to information and advocacy. Perceptions that the NCCI is relevant are increasing with local partners including government, "We are still connected to the internationals and away from political pressure, at the same time we are developing an Iraqi vision of humanitarianism" (Iraqi NCCI Member).

⁷ Analysis of NCCI documents on Reliefweb.

⁸ A former MDM staff in Iraq and Arabic-speaking.

⁹ NCCI is also considering an annual meeting of national NGO humanitarian coordination bodies for shared learning.

GOVERNANCE/ADMINISTRATION/MEMBERSHIP¹⁰

The core document defining the role of NCCI and the basis for its membership is the NCCI Charter established in 2003 and revised in 2005 and 2009. The Charter was developed by the original Executive Board (5 members) and includes reference to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief and a humanitarian imperative free of religious and political agenda and economic gain (to distinguish itself from "humanitarian contractors"). It further states members will not carry arms, provide accommodation or transportation to belligerents nor accept armed escorts.

Initially NCCI management was characterised by close supervision of the Executive Board (EB) and direct participation by NGO members in the coordination management structure as geographical or sectoral focal points; "the ownership of the process was kept in the hands of the NGOs". With more staff, eventually coordination functions were taken over by an NCCI Secretariat and the EB was restructured: to lighten the EB's and Executive Coordinator's (EC) workload, to give the NCCI office greater latitude to conduct day-to-day business, to promote a more representative board, and to ensure continued participation in policy decisions by the membership while protecting NCCI from the pitfalls of consensus decision-making. "The balance between the extent to which NCCI staff would take over increased responsibilities or remain as a support to NGO initiative was always a difficult one. Having to reconcile the passiveness of NGOs, at times, and yet their reluctance of NCCI becoming too proactive at other times was subject to extensive discussions" (Rodriquez 2004).

The EB was composed of 5 member NGOs elected by the General Assembly (GA). They were voted for terms of 12 weeks, renewable only once. Initially the EB's purpose was to formally represent the NCCI in external forums, formalize issues of concern expressed by the GA and working groups and issue documents to address relevant counterparts and stakeholders. In 2005, this was changed to 7 members for a term of 6 months renewable two times to address the need for continuity. In late 2009 the EB term was revised to 1 year renewable once. While local representation is not mandated, there are two LNCO members on the EB.

The General Assembly (GA) is comprised of all NCCI members. It votes on decisions, elects the EB, approves the creation of working groups and endorses the candidature of the EC. The GA maintains the power of withdrawing NCCI membership according to criteria reflected in the Charter and Code of Conduct. In 2003, it met on a weekly basis, in 2005 monthly and in 2010 semi-annually. A quorum of members (25%) is required to vote and a 2/3 majority constitutes a decision. NCCI public releases must be endorsed by all members or otherwise be signed by individual members only.

NCCI began with an office staffed with an expatriate Executive Coordinator (EC), national assistant, database manager and secretary. Over the months, and particularly following the withdrawal of the UN in August 2003, NCCI established a central office in Baghdad with an EC responsible for managing the office and 3 staff. By 2005 NCCI had more than 80 staff with field offices in Basrah, Erbil and a liaison

¹⁰ The NCCI Charter, membership requirements, structure, decision-making process, etc is all on its website www.ncciraq.org and in the library attached to this study.

office in Amman. This was later reduced to a field office in Baghdad and a larger office in Amman with the EC and support staff. Today, with the expansion of the field network, once again there is a permanent presence in Amman, Baghdad, Basrah and Erbil and approximately 20 staff.

Membership to NCCI is open to international and national NGOs working in Iraq that can provide a certificate of registration as an NGO or association. Becoming a member requires that the interested party accepts and complies with the NCCI charter and the RC-RC-NGO code of conduct, is sponsored by two members, and approved by the 2/3 of the EB. The fee was first determined according to the NGO's annual budget, but was later changed into a flat rate of 50USD/month paid quarterly (except national NGOs who paid a symbolic fee). In 2010, the fees are determined by the EB and approved by the GA in function of available funding and number of members.

NCCI activities were not exclusive to members. Observers, either an NGO or a legally registered international organization, could participate in coordination but could not vote. However "several big partners [US NGOs] are not part of NCCI, making it less valuable than it could have been" (Beer 2009). Most of the time, these NGOs were operating with armed escorts.

The founding INGOs were particularly concerned about the conflation of military and humanitarian efforts thus the clear reference to not carrying arms and using military escorts in the Charter. However monitoring compliance proved to be a contested point. There was and remains an ad hoc Conduct Review Body. The 2007 evaluation noted that not monitoring compliance "represents a missed opportunity to model adherence to the global ethical norms and standards of the humanitarian profession...It represents an abrogation of professional responsibility and a threat to NCCI's legitimacy as a moral voice" (Hansen 2007a). Since the 2010 revised TOR, the EC is responsible for an annual review of members' compliance. In Iraq, there is ongoing debate as to the necessity of an NGO ombudsperson office to which NCCI would consider contributing as a participant.

Originally, the main funding for NCCI came from ECHO, OCHA and the Mennonite Central Committee, as well as from membership fees and in-kind contributions. At the end of 2008 UNOPS offered NCCI a large grant. The departing EC recommended to the EB not to accept the funds "or lose its soul" (NCCI interview). Instead French and Swiss funding continues to support NCCI today. At its peak in 2003-5, NCCI received 1.5 million USD/year. In 2010 it operates with 600,000USD/year.

ROLE/ACTIVITIES

Coordination and Information Sharing. In addition to the coordination functions already mentioned, in NCCI's early years it developed and maintained who-what-where (WWW) databases, sectoral matrices, weekly summaries, contacts lists, and a library/CD of sectoral policy and technical standards, guidelines and a website. In the absence of OCHA, NCCI was doing OCHA's job.

In 2005, NCCI closed its field offices and information functions were reduced in quantity and quality until 2009. Since 2009, the information function has been revitalised - from depending on reports from INGOs to being based on Iraqi knowledge, i.e. relying on a contracted and trained network of local non-member NGOs who have good relations with local authorities. The adoption of user-friendly technologies (Ushahidi) has allowed NCCI and the field network to provide real-time updates on the humanitarian situation, security, politics and incidents against aid workers. With the tacit agreement of

OCHA who remains limited to the GZ, NCCI has re-established field coordination in Baghdad, Basra and Erbil.

Advocacy. NCCI advocacy evolves to reflect the changing operational environment. Between 2003 and 2005 NCCI focused on protection humanitarian space, protesting ongoing violence both toward Iraqi civilians and humanitarian aid workers, and issues related to remote programming. In 2006, advocacy targeted donors for funding. In 2009 and 2010, OpEds highlight the evolution and activities of Iraqi civil society and a chronic humanitarian crisis with development impacts, e.g. illiteracy, water shortages - an analysis made more sophisticated by collaborative efforts with Iraqi academics.

Support to local and national NGOs. After the war, the CPA encouraged association and called for the official registration of LNGOs. There was a period of "rapid expansion later followed by signs of consolidation and maturation". In 2009, the estimated number of LNGOs was between 6300 and 12,000. When the NCCI Charter was established in 2003, one of the requirements for membership was registration, limiting LNGOs membership. NCCI assisted LNGOs to register with the CPA. One by-product of this was to collect considerable information on LNGOs working in the country through the creation of a WWW LNGO database and capacity assessment.

According to NCCI staff, from the beginning NCCI had a "real commitment to assisting national NGOs" (Rodriguez 2004). A national staff member was hired, Oxfam seconded an expatriate, part of the Baghdad NCCI library and website was designed for local and national NGOs (here combined as LNGOs). However "while the willingness to engage was there, the means to do so were not". Both evaluations of NCCI noted that core documents were not systematically translated in Arabic and Kurdish. Information was not easily accessible to LNGOs "unless they asked" (Rodriguez 2004).

While many stakeholders hoped that NCCI could represent LNGOs, their ability to do so was questioned. NCCI could not be a representative LNGO voice in part due to lack of transparency in membership lists which were not shared for security reasons: "NCCI was created by western NGOs and should not be imposed on Iraqi NGOs. If they (LNGOs) want an umbrella they will create one on their own" (NCCI Observer, Knowledge Centre 2009).

In 2009-10, NCCI updated its LNGOs mapping, is conducting more research on the evolution of Iraqi civil society, working more closely with LNGOs as partners for data collection and analysis, as well as providing very specific training in areas relevant to NCCI's function, e.g. data collection, analysis, reporting, local advocacy.

Increase awareness of NGO activities in Iraq. Less related to coordination and more associated with advocacy and representation, NCCI liaised with third parties such as the UN, CPA and Iraqi Authorities and other NGO coordination bodies. However, the issue of NCCI acting as a representative of NGOs was always "contentious" (Rodriguez 2004). To represent the GA for a particular issue (such as access, or registration, or humanitarian space), NCCI required a mandate. The process was slow and impractical, but "it was the best solution found to respecting NGO individuality and yet able to act on their behalf" (Rodriguez 2004).

Security. The NCCISO was established to increase the capacities of NGOs to provide for their own security through NGO security liaison officers (both Baghdad and field offices), trainings, meetings,

warden system, and incident database. With less reliable data, this function was reduced 2005-2008. In 2010, with Ushahidi and the local field network resulting in improved timeliness and reliability, NCCI mapping, incident and trend analysis has regained its relevance.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Operational presence prior to the emergency gives a distinct value to NGO coordination both from the perspective of understanding operating requirements and conditions but also in increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders, particularly other INGOs newly entering the country.**
- **NCCI thrived in the new emergency when commitment ran high. The NGO community was more cohesive¹¹ and there was more direct contact with communities. All of this was challenged when these three conditions were threatened.**
- **NCCI (just) survived due to the ability of NCCI to evolve and respond to the needs of its membership;** this changed from filling gaps in essential information sharing and coordination, creating economies of scale helping smaller NGOs with representation, security, and liaison functions, helping to preserve and expand humanitarian space to eventually involving more local stakeholders, adding value to available information such as trend analysis and links with local experts (academics and the field network).
- **Governance structures have to manage the 'we have to keep it but we are not sure why' stage.** Reduce staff, functions, and cost. Keep it relevant but realistic.
- Similarly there may come a time when the **information function of NGO coordination might not actually add-value, particularly in a situation of remote-management.** Possibly the UN can do equally or better given its relationship with local authorities. Then an NGO coordination cell has to re-evaluate if and where it can add value.
- **Existing in-country NGO staff play an essential role in the beginning,** setting priorities and principles, engaging directly in the coordination function, increasing their ownership and ensuring the agenda meets their needs. But this has to change quickly to avoid **overly-depending on expatriate staff, which is a risk** in volatile security situations and inappropriate when NGO coordination structures need to meet the needs of local NGOs.
- As coordination needs increase and external staff are employed, **governance structures play an essential role in managing any hired staff to ensure that the staff are held accountable.** That said Executive Boards are elected by the membership. Governance structures need commitment, strategic vision, and the ability to make quick decisions and delegate, avoiding micro-management. Keep the structure efficient and responsive. Defining roles and responsibilities, increasing transparency in decision-making, is essential.
- **Flexible funding has to synchronise with coordination functions that will demand more or less time depending on the circumstances.** Adequate funding at the right time can make NGO coordination easier when NGOs are seriously stressed with direct operations. While 1.5 million USD inappropriate when there was NCCI had no field presence, the funds might have contributed to the effective functioning of NCCI for 2-

¹¹ There were always a few US INGOs that chose to align and affiliate themselves with the CPA and their coordination system.

3 more years. With only one-third this amount in 2009, NCCI was able to re-establish its relevance to the humanitarian community.

- **The NGO coordination activities have to complement and not compete for funds with its members.** When NCCI added capacity building of LNGOs to its repertoire they were seen to compete with members for funding. Instead NCCI is appreciated for its adding value to existing services through its clearing house function.
- Like any good business, an **NGO coordination structure, particularly if it is long lived, needs to invest in its organisational development**, democratic decision-making, staff development, avoiding risks associated with high staff turnover including being overly-dependent on a single good leader.
- **Remaining an unaddressed issue, NGO coordination (or similar mechanism) needs to develop the means through which it will be actually able to reflect whether principles and standards are complied with or not.**

SOURCES

8 interviews with NCCI staff and board members between 2003-2010, UN, INGO and LNGO staff.

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