



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: A Review Of NGO Coordination in the Field

Case Study: Kosovo 1999-2002

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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.

Introduction: In and Out of Kosovo

In January 1999, 11 NGOs working in Kosovo decided to form the International NGO Council of Kosovo (INGO Council), primarily for advocacy purposes. During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia from March-June 1999, nearly all of the few NGOs working in Kosovo moved their operations to the Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia (FYROM), joined by new organisations arriving in FYROM and Albania to deal with mass refugee movements out of Kosovo.

In FYROM the original Council members continued to meet but struggled to deal with the rapidly-changing situation. Although the Council itself failed to produce any joint statements, its members were key in organising a letter signed by 35 NGOs sent to donors and the FYROM government supporting UNHCR in its coordinating role. Despite this support many NGOs grew frustrated by UNHCR's lack of presence on the ground, seeming inability to coordinate, and unwillingness to speak out on key problems such as the controversial role of NATO militaries in setting up refugee camps. At the same time, some NGOs worked directly with the military in contravention of basic humanitarian principles, showing that not every NGO was concerned with coordinating positions.

In Albania, while the government established its Emergency Management Group early on, coordination structures were difficult to navigate for NGOs. The Brussels-based NGO network VOICE held a meeting in Tirana in April 1999 to identify how they could facilitate the work of INGOs responding to the refugee crisis, and in May an NGO Focal Point set up to collect and disseminate information about humanitarian activities. From the start of June, the Focal Point distributed approximately two reports per week in hard copy and electronic format in-country, and at the international level via VOICE and InterAction head offices.

With the end of the NATO campaign and the mass return of the Kosovar Albanian refugees, the situation in Kosovo had changed radically. INGOs previously working in Kosovo returned to a completely new environment for which they were not necessarily prepared, and the contingency planning INGOs had undertaken while in Skopje proved insufficient. There were three major developments: a de facto "regime change" with the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia replaced by the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Yugoslav People's Army replaced by the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR), a reversal of the fortunes of the two major ethnic groups in Kosovo, and a massive increase in the number of humanitarian actors on the ground.

As a result of this last development there were nearly 400 NGOs on the ground by the end of 1999, and the Council, which had previously represented nearly all INGOs working in Kosovo, now represented a fraction of the total. Mainly due to the efforts of the Mercy Corps Country Director, the Council continued to meet to exchange information between members, but was not able to consider joint action, even on critical issues. The primary question was legitimacy: originally formed to represent the INGO community working in Kosovo before the war, in what sense could the Council claim to speak on behalf of the transformed INGO community after the war?

At this point the Council had a membership of around 55-60 INGOs, an increase on the pre-war number due to some NGOs recently-arrived to deal with the refugee crisis in FYROM and Albania. The General Meeting was normally attended by around 20 of those members, particularly the larger NGOs, including MSF (which maintained its traditional critique of coordination but nevertheless sent a delegate on behalf of the various national MSFs working in Kosovo). There was also an Executive Committee (ExCom) of six elected by the General Meeting on a six-monthly basis, although no elections had been held due to the crisis.

Requesting and Receiving Support

In August 1999, the Council requested the support of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) Consortium on the Former Yugoslavia to assess the need for and develop the scope of ICVA support to the Council. Three possible needs were identified: to improve links between local and international NGOs, to carry out advocacy work on behalf of the NGO community, and to act as a secretariat for the Council. The first activity was discarded due to high levels of competition around local NGO capacity building, but a TORs was drafted for an Information Officer (IO) to carry out the latter two activities.

While the scaling up of NGO programmes meant that Country Directors were not able to devote as much time to Council business, providing the appropriate type of support required care. ICVA credibility was limited amongst the NGO community (for various reasons unrelated to Kosovo), and INGO Council members were clear that they did not want an external body coordinating them. Taking these concerns into account, ICVA maintained a hands-off approach, taking the lead in recruitment through the Danish Refugee Council (DRC, a member of both the Council and ICVA) but not taking an active management role. The IO arrived in position in October 1999.

The creation of a paid position meant that the Council required funding for the first time; it then had no overhead costs, since Council meetings were held in the offices of ExCom members on a rotation basis (and sometimes in public meeting rooms). To keep costs down the Council made an agreement with OCHA to provide office space and logistics support for the IO in the Humanitarian Community Information Centre (HCIC). The HCIC was hosted in the UNHCR building, since UNHCR was Pillar 1 of the four-pillar UNMIK structure, dealing with humanitarian affairs.

Within the HCIC, the IO was formally viewed as NGO Liaison Officer, but did not receive direction from the HCIC Manager. Despite sitting within a UN office, the IO was tasked with maintaining independence and reported directly to the ExCom, although it was considered that the position had five stakeholders: the Council, ICVA, DRC, the HCIC and **the donors**. Although there was considerable potential for confusion in this arrangement, in practice this did not cause problems since only the Council and the HCIC were active stakeholders.

The ExCom provided guidance for the IO, although direct management proved difficult since the ExCom members had their own organisational responsibilities. However the ExCom were responsive to requests for information and meetings from the IO, and actively participated in joint activities under the Council banner. The IO reported to the ExCom on a weekly basis and maintained bilateral relationships with ExCom members.

The IO took over basic secretariat functions for the Council – convening meetings, setting agendas and keeping minutes – as well as drafting TORs for the Council itself and facilitating elections for the ExCom. At the request of Council members, the IO also convened working groups on issues such as local staff employment and NGO registration, and organised workshops on minority protection and Sphere standards. The IO also facilitated advocacy activities, although he was not mandated to represent the Council and members of the ExCom were engaged as needed to play this representational role.

The IO also took a regular slot in the coordination meetings run by OCHA at 5pm each day (the frequency of these meetings dropped as the emergency phase closed out towards mid-winter). This was held in a large auditorium in UNHCR which enabled all the major humanitarian actors to come together. These were essentially information-sharing meetings, but they did generate a shared understanding of the developing situation, which in turn facilitated coordination activities in other venues such as the Council, where a more NGO-specific perspective could be developed.

Council meetings themselves were held on a weekly basis at the end of the working day, which enabled Country Directors to move directly to a bar or cafe after the formal meeting was over. This meant Council members could become personal friends as well as professional colleagues, although there was always danger that this could be seen as an exclusive club populated by the larger (and primarily American) NGOs who usually made up the ExCom.

When the IO left the position in April 2000 (to become HCIC Manager), the position remained vacant due to a lack of any single agency taking the lead to fill it. ExCom members realised that the easiest way to manage these basic activities was to share the burden of leadership, leading to the Council effectively having a tripartite Chair. The structure of the Council remained the same and, while basic secretariat activities dropped off, the Council became more active in some areas, as described in the section on the Alliance for Rights and Tolerance below.

External Factors shaping NGO Coordination

NGO coordination was also shaped by the particular form of UNMIK, which was divided into four pillars, each with a different mandate and lead agency. The responsibility for INGO coordination was generally agreed to fall under Pillar 1, which had UNHCR as the lead agency and the Humanitarian Coordinator at its head. However when this humanitarian Pillar was phased out in June 2000, responsibility for different aspects of INGO activities were spread across different UNMIK Pillar 2 departments dealing with civil administration (including health and education) and run by the UN, and Pillar 4 dealing with reconstruction and run by the EU. Local NGOs were also dealt with by Pillar 3, dealing with democratisation and civil society, for which Operation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was the lead.

For the ExCom this confusion was mitigated slightly by the fact that the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of UNMIK had an NGO background. He met with ExCom members on a semi-regular informal basis, which created space for constructive dialogue (and not just complaints). It was difficult to measure how much impact NGO perspectives had on decisions at that level, but through this relationship the ExCom Committee was able to develop relations with his front office and other key UNMIK staff.

Since UNMIK was the de facto government of Kosovo and since the lead agencies in charge of each pillar were international organisations, most UNMIK staff in decision-making positions were internationals. This meant dealing with the “government” was significantly easier for INGOs, since it was internationals talking to internationals, and the government was unlikely to feel resentment about outsider involvement since they themselves were outsiders.

At the same time it created difficulties since UNMIK staff tended to see the Council as representing all NGOs, assuming incorrectly that communication with the Council meant communication with the entire INGO community. There were also unrealistic expectations in the UN regarding the level of consensus possible within the NGO community – expectations generated in part by UNMIK's own hierarchical structure. For their part INGOs found that, due to political constraints, UNMIK lacked a long-term strategy in key social welfare areas; partly because, while UNMIK was formally in charge of administering Kosovo, initially at least it did not possess the capacity for this function.

Recognising this, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator during the war and his successor actively sought to engage INGOs through their leadership of UNMIK Pillar 1. Other UN agencies had signed MoUs with UNHCR to bring them into a more formal coordination relationship, but this did not address the NGO community. Outreach was essential for UNMIK because the larger NGOs were bringing massive amounts of funding into Kosovo, particularly from USAID, ECHO and DFID.

The limited number of key donors facilitated coordination on the ground, since it was easier to divide up responsibilities and ensure coverage. In addition responsibility for security in Kosovo was divided geographically between NATO members; NATO member governments tended to fund those parts of Kosovo for which their forces had been assigned responsibility, coordination meetings were carried out in their national languages, and NGOs from those countries tended to cluster around that funding correspondingly.

This level of funding and political support meant that NGOs found themselves with more say in programming than previously, with greater responsibilities attached. This took place against a background in which humanitarian coordination was being scrutinized more than ever, particularly in light of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, which had characterized weak coordination of the humanitarian response as a 'hollow core'. Despite this NGOs did not always coordinate well, even in an environment such as Kosovo where coordination was relatively easy.

Winterization and Sectoral Coordination

The most obvious example of this was in assessing the need for and programming the delivery of housing reconstruction for the returned Kosovar Albanian refugee population. One example of good coordination was the Rapid Village Assessment that began in July 1999, where 17 NGOs began assessments using a form developed by UNHCR, WHO and UNICEF. (This exercise had a precedent in a similar exercise led by UNHCR before the war.) However, this was coordination by default and, although it started well, it did not provide sufficient coverage; KFOR troops and the Mother Teresa Society were invited into the assessment process by UNHCR to mitigate this.

Despite working with information from donors to identify gaps in coverage, by late September there had been little progress in “winterization”. With NGOs not delivering as expected and donors growing increasingly frustrated, in a series of emergency meetings UNHCR brought KFOR in on logistics support and began to steer towards private contractors. Despite these problems, the harsh winter of 1999-2000 did not have as much negative impact on local communities as was expected; nevertheless there was a sense that coordination had not worked as it should have.

Despite this notable exception, the Council did not get directly involved in sectoral coordination of work on the ground simply because existing processes went relatively well. In any case aid effectiveness was not an issue that the Council had mechanisms to deal with, particularly where it involved criticism of other NGOs. The Council dealt primarily with two types of issues, neither of which could be addressed in a UN-mediated forum such as the general coordination meeting:

1. Problems in the UNMIK structures which required a coherent NGO response. The best example of this is the formation of the Minority Action Working Group described below, but another compelling example were civil-military issues, which became a serious concern for NGOs for the first time in Kosovo. These primarily concerned relations with KFOR, particularly how they dealt with NGOs on the ground in ensuring access to and security for affected communities, but also the postwar transformation of the (military) Kosovo Liberation Army into the (civilian) Kosovo Protection Corps.
2. Issues which directly affected NGO operations, such as the development of NGO registration procedures. Although UNMIK established an NGO Liaison Office in mid-2000, many NGOs believed that UNMIK perceived them as a potential revenue source, due to the goods they imported into the country tax-free. While this process was initiated by UNMIK without consultation with the NGO community, Council members were able to represent the NGO perspective and ensure that the NGO registration process was neither unrealistic or onerous, based on similar processes that they had experienced in other countries. More basic concerns were also addressed through the Council – such as the spate of burglaries of INGO offices in mid-2000, which required pressure on the Kosovo Police Service before they would address the problem.

Relations with other NGO Coordination Bodies

Two other NGO coordination bodies were formed in Kosovo post-war, both of which were directly influenced by the INGO Council itself. The Islamic Council of NGOs came together independently, while the Local NGO Council was formed by OSCE, based on its mandate to build civil society. Neither of these bodies had a significant impact on policy or operations since their membership was not large, but both represented key stakeholder groups that were unrepresented by the INGO Council, and there were regular discussions about how to relate to them.

The IO, supported by ExCom members, reached out to both groups, working with OSCE and sitting as an observer on Local NGO Council meetings, and inviting both groups to send observers to INGO Council meetings, an offer which was taken up by the Islamic Council. There were also efforts to increase the membership of the INGO Council in general. Overall this approach was unsuccessful, possibly simply because newly-arrived NGOs that did not belong to the Council were going through their own steep learning curves and had little surplus time for outreach; and all the bodies were unclear about what benefit closer relations would bring.

The Alliance for Rights and Tolerance

One critical role played by the Council was in creating a shared awareness around the needs of different ethnic groups in Kosovo. While the Albanian community faced many challenges on their return, the Serb community now faced more existential questions that led many to flee Kosovo. For NGOs that had worked primarily if not exclusively with the Albanian community before the war, acknowledging and responding to this change in fortunes was difficult, but made easier through discussing the perspectives of recently-arrived colleagues with different perspectives. There was a sense that the UNMIK administration was failing to address protection issues regarding minorities, particularly since UNMIK Pillar 1 dealing with humanitarian matters had closed in June 2000.

Many NGOs with a protection mandate felt it was essential to have more of an impact on discussions within UNMIK, based on their experience on the ground. However, while cross-cutting issues were discussed in the Council and ExCom, the minorities issue threatened to take over the general meetings. Following the withdrawal of MSF from minority enclaves in August 2000, a group of around 12 Council members established a Minority Action Working Group in September. The Group's first action was to issue a "Statement Against Ethnic Violence" which was signed by 84 international NGOs. In order to become more inclusive the Working Group changed its name to the Alliance for Rights and Tolerance, although the same core group of 5-6 individuals continued to be the driving force, with several organisations contributing funding.

In October/November 2000 the group supported an assessment by an external consultant to review minority conditions in Kosovo. The Do No Harm Assessment provided a basis for lobbying donors to put more money towards minority issues, and by 2002, the Alliance was able to publish a Good Practices Training Manual and run a series of workshops across the province based on the manual. The work of the group was generally well-regarded and it gained a permanent seat in the relevant UNMIK meetings dealing with minority protection.

The history of the Alliance illustrates how a coordination body can manage a critical issue by enabling individual members to form sub-groups but also allowing those sub-groups to take on a life of their own. If Alliance members had tried to hold their discussions in the general meetings, it would have polarized the Council as members without an interest in protection issues lost interest or disagreed with the active approach, and it would have been impossible to get consensus. By forming a sub-group, the Alliance could move rapidly to issue their first statement as a group, and other NGOs with sufficient interest could sign up to it on a voluntary basis. That statement established a credible voice for the group that enabled it to build up its efforts piece-by-piece. The core group also held a number of retreats as a way to focus on their collective goals and objectives, away from their day-to-day responsibilities.

Although the need to create a separate group could be seen as a failure on the part of the Council to handle a difficult issue, with hindsight it is much more obvious that this separation was a sign of the flexibility of the Council. However once the core group of Alliance individuals ended their contracts and left their positions, the Alliance lost momentum, despite minority protection continuing to be a live issue in the ensuing years. This illustrates the weakness of a Council structure in following issues over time, especially in the absence of full-time staff working to support key initiatives. As member organisations moved away from humanitarian work and into development, protection issues became less of a priority for NGOs in general, and no local human rights groups were identified to take on the responsibilities.

Critical Factors

- One advantage of the arrival of new organisations and individuals into the NGO community was the infusion of new and different expertise and approaches, especially when NGO staff were arriving from other operations (such as Operation Lifeline Sudan). The existence of the Council meant that such new perspectives could be shared more easily between organisations, even if only on an informal basis. In this way NGO coordination can also have a learning aspect, since there are not usually any other mechanisms for transferring knowledge between organisations. This was particularly important given that a large number of the NGOs arriving in Kosovo did not necessarily have much (if any) humanitarian experience – but these were unfortunately the NGOs least likely to join the Council.
- Unlike many other post-conflict countries, Kosovo was small and secure, making it significantly easier for INGOs to develop their work. The needs within Kosovo were comparatively clear (although lines between “relief” and “development” were blurred) and, apart from the emergency need for shelter, not huge in scale or scope. In practical terms, nearly every NGO had their head office in Pristina, a small city where all important meetings were held within a one square mile area. All organisations (even those with a history in Kosovo) were essentially starting from scratch in the new environment.
- The IO position allowed ExCom members to be effective, not just by handling basic secretariat requirements – setting up TORs, election procedures, and 'legal' structures – but by facilitating communication and maintaining the momentum of key issues through the ExCom. This was particularly true for issues that required consistent pressure and circulation amongst internal and external stakeholders, where a full-time support staff could keep the process going and ensure that it did not fall through the gaps. The difference after the IO left was noticeable, as the burden of these tasks shifted to ExCom members and increased their workload considerably.
- It is not essential for an NGO coordinating body to have all NGOs as its members in order to be seen as a credible representative of the NGO perspective. The body must contain a critical mass of major operational INGOs (preferably with members bringing in a significant majority of institutional funding) in order to have credibility; this same level of control over institutional funding brings with it responsibilities which are (usually) recognised by the NGOs themselves, but may need to be reinforced by their peers.
- The Council provided an informal accountability mechanism, particularly for long-standing members: it offered a venue for informal peer review of member activities, a forum in which to discuss openly member policies, and a mechanism to build consensus. One aspect that was singled out was the way in which Council discussions pressured members to be consistent in their statements to different actors – the prospect of embarrassment amongst peers was strong enough to restrain behaviour. However there was no formal accountability or disciplinary measures available to the Steering committee regarding member behaviour.

- The Council would have been completely ineffective without a core ExCom who were prepared to invest their time in the slow and painful development of joint activities, as well as show up at external meetings to represent the interests of the NGO community rather than themselves. Of course involvement in the ExCom also had its own benefits in terms of access to better information at a higher level than most NGOs could, access to senior decision-makers in other organisations, and visibility for their organisations. As with many other places however, the ExCom tended to be dominated by the larger (and usually American) organisations, leading to some smaller NGOs feeling excluded from the structure. While there were elections, there was the possibility that individuals were being elected because of their organisation rather than their own capabilities.

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