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

Case Study:
Occupied Palestinian Territories
1967-2010

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Background/Context

International organisations have been providing relief in the occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) since the war in 1967. Due to the occupation, intermittent conflict and general economic decline, between 1993 and 2003, the oPt received USD 6 billion in international aid - half of these funds disbursed since September 2000. While the amount of aid given to oPt (and Israel) is "unparalleled", the oPt continues to experience a decline in development indicators or as, described by the international community in the oPT, to "de-develop".[1] While the reasons are for this decline are complex, the provision of aid, particularly relief, as a means of addressing this decline remains controversial.[2] As Mary Anderson notes "everyone ... agree[s] that donor assistance to the oPt plays into and reinforces the Israeli occupation of Palestine.[3] In 2002, nearly 10 percent of all donor assistance was channelled through INGOs representing USD 148 million. This percentage increased significantly between 2006 and 2007.

Unsurprisingly there are very few international agencies that work in the oPt that don't include advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian people on its list of interventions - albeit with different objectives, methods and means. However when speaking out agencies prefer "strength in numbers" as the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), the Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas, the Palestinian people themselves - even governments simultaneously supporting Israel and Palestinians - can, at anytime, single out an INGO and create difficulties for them. The impetus for the establishment of the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) was to create this forum for concerted advocacy. This close collaboration among INGOs is also facilitated by a largely urban operating environment with development and humanitarian aid agencies living in close proximity of each other. The oPt has good communications and transportation allowing for easy networking, meeting and coordination contributing to a relatively "small and collegial" INGO community.

While donors have different budget lines, humanitarian and development aid is largely conflated as in other chronic emergencies. The various coordination mechanisms are also linked. The Local Aid Coordination Committee (LACC) with its Humanitarian Steering Committee (HSC), the Interagency Standing Committee's (IASC) Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the "Friday group" are some of the few coordination forums.[4] The LACC is under the auspices of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), chaired by the Prime Minister and established after the Oslo Agreement in 1993 to facilitate the provision of aid to the oPT. While considered "cumbersome and confusing", a review of coordination of humanitarian aid in oPt since 2000 noted successes in: donor collaboration, mobilising large flows of flexible aid (emergency and budget support) and in doing so mitigating the impact of conflict; strengthened collective representation to Israel (including INGOs); remaining resilient enough to accommodate new bodies and operational links; and raising the standard of review and debate on needs and priorities as well as appropriate instruments to best address them.

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[1] www.aidajerusalem.org; a term used often in oPT by the international humanitarian community indicating that Palestine once had much improved development indicators that have since declined, e.g. maternal and child mortality.

[2] However often simplified to Israeli occupation and Palestinian government corruption (Keating et al).

[3] People noted that aid "relieves Israel of its obligations as an occupier", that it "rebuilds whatever Israel destroys" and "enables" the continuation of such actions, that currently it simply "maintains" levels of poverty resulting from a strict closure regime and other aspects of Israeli control by providing major financial resources for food, employment, etc.' (Anderson 2004:5)

[4] LACC includes government, donors, UN and representatives of AIDA and PNGO, the INGO and a local NGO network respectively. The HCT includes UN and AIDA. The Friday Group includes the UN, donors and AIDA.

The Last 10 Years of NGO Coordination

In 1967, INGOs working in Jerusalem informally formed the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) to provide a forum for information exchange and networking. AIDA is one of the longest standing INGO coordination mechanisms and - according to reviews of general aid coordination and in 2010 the cluster system - the "most important international NGO platform in the oPt".

While AIDA has long been active, since the second intifada in 2000, AIDA activities have accelerated. In April 2001, member agencies established a Humanitarian Steering Committee (HSC) [5] to help the AIDA membership (mainly development NGOs) "adapt their programming in response to the changing situation on the ground". In 2002, to support the HSC, AIDA hired a Humanitarian Facilitator (HF). At the time, no one anticipated a protracted humanitarian crisis, or that the nature of the 'crisis' would become so profound and widespread. With prolonged conflict, increasing demands were placed on the Facilitator. At this point AIDA commissioned a first (and only) review of its strategy and activities.

In 2003, the Review noted that INGOs expected and needed: practically oriented activities, such as addressing visa problems or security issues, support in policy advocacy, an effective bridge and dialogue with the Palestinian NGO sector, and an effective relationship with the broader international community vis-à-vis a focal point and channel for relevant sharing, co-ordination and input. The Review further recommended AIDA explore ways to more fully include and support its members who are based in Gaza. Most importantly member INGOs felt: "the existence of AIDA should enable us to do things better together than we are able to do them alone."

The review motivated and informed the actions of the then Chair, CARE, in collaboration with Oxfam to "professionalise" and expand the AIDA secretariat. ECHO provided a grant to Oxfam to hire a Director and 5 staff. However in hindsight ECHO funding "added a layer of bureaucracy" by introducing a third party for administration and management: "We could have done it without them."

In part helped by an "incredibly open space" facilitated by the OCHA team at the time, AIDA significantly expanded its role: including training in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and security - eventually registering all INGOs and providing staff with AIDA identification cards allowing for preferential treatment at certain checkpoints. This was the first (and only) attempt to vouch for the validity or integrity of member INGOs and indicative of AIDA's legitimacy even with the IDF. Coordination between the host agency (Oxfam) and the AIDA Secretariat was good until personal conflicts between new management in Oxfam and the AIDA Director resulted in the AIDA Executive Committee recommending a physical separation of Oxfam and the AIDA Secretariat offices.

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[5] The HSC membership was: Oxfam GB (Chair), CRS (AIDA Chair), MAP UK, ANERA, WVI, CARE International, Save the Children US, Save the Children UK, ACT, Movimento por la Paz (MPDL) & MDM France.

In 2005, AIDA experienced its first (and perhaps only) big 'shock': the then Director collaborating with an AIDA member INGO staff, absconded with AIDA-ECHO funds and left the country before being discovered.[6] According to interviews, oversight of the Director's activities had "slipped between the gap". The Director, while officially Oxfam staff, was theoretically managed by the Executive Committee (ExCom) of AIDA. In reality, his budget and activities were not monitored closely enough by the ExCom or Oxfam. Needless to say, ECHO and Oxfam chose to close the project.

In 2006, AIDA reorganised itself (including a new Terms of Reference). Instead of a separate secretariat, the members decided to rely on existing INGO-member capacity. The Chair of the ExCom would represent AIDA and the Chair's organisation would provide the Secretariat - the latter effectively meaning only a well-endowed organisation could assume the Chair. For the last 10 years, the ExCom has been chaired by World Vision, Care, and Oxfam, resulting in some criticism that AIDA is "run by white northerners". However the ExCom includes European NGOs and smaller NGOs.[7]

AIDA's Chair is a regular participant in all mainstream coordination: for development aid in the LACC, and within the LACC, the Task Force on Project Implementation (TFPI), and for emergencies the Humanitarian Country Team (see Figure 1: Aid Coordination Structure in oPt, below). AIDA is expected to represent INGOs, while recognising that it is "virtually impossible" to get agreement among INGOs on certain issues.

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[6] Following the investigation it was also revealed the Director had provided a false name, references and police record to AIDA.

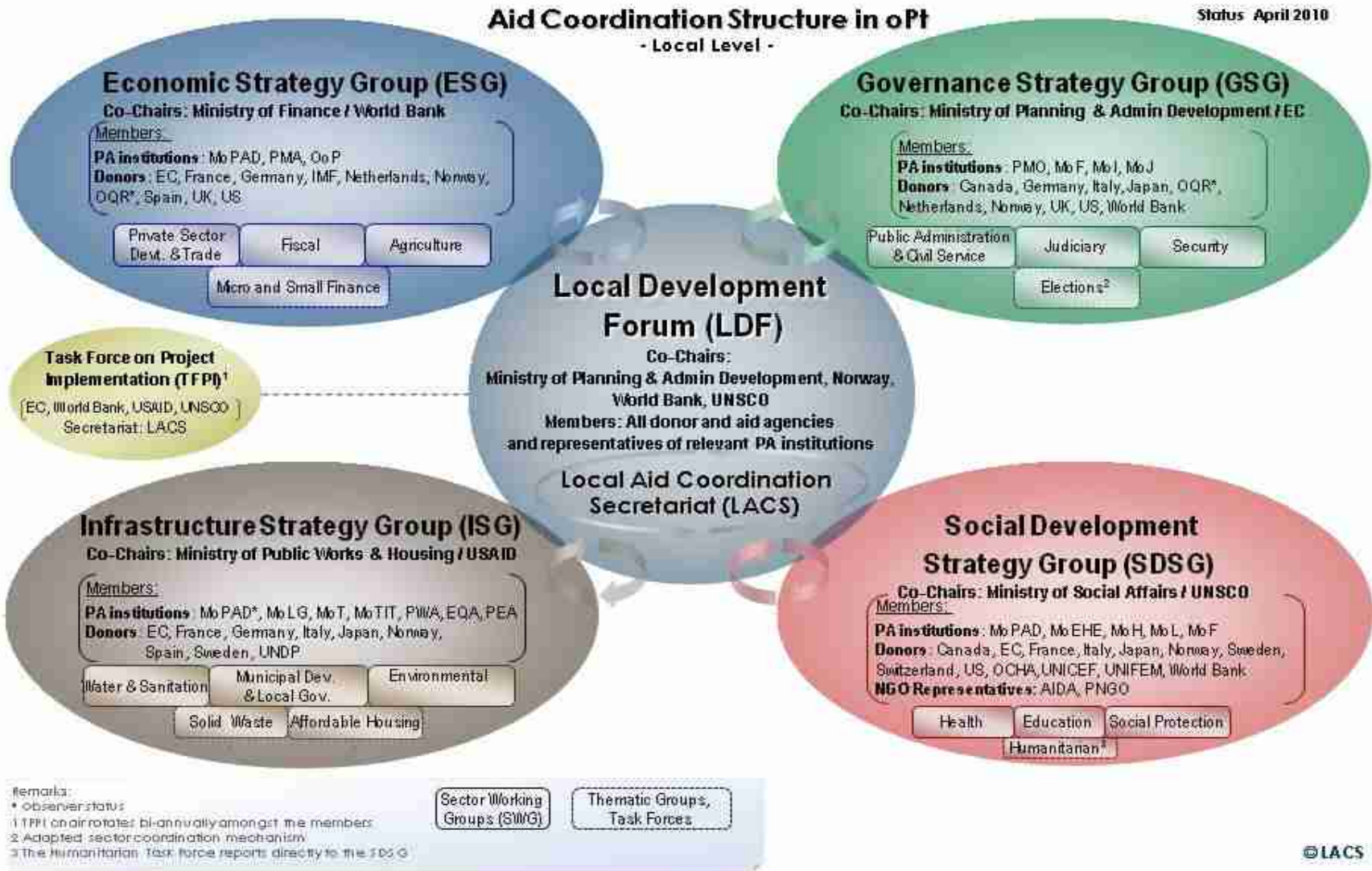[7] ACF-France and the Polish Humanitarian Association

FIGURE 1: Aid Coordination Structure in oPt

AIDA during Operation Cast Lead (Dec 2008 to January 2009)

The most recent period of heightened activity for AIDA was during Israel's Operation Cast Lead (OCL) when there was a significant increase in the number of new and inexperienced INGOs who were not aware of nor abided by the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs (RC-RC-NGO), nor were they sensitive to the historical, cultural and political complexities of providing aid in the oPt. ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance) highlighted AIDA's potential role in its paper *Deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza: Lessons for operational agencies* encouraging "NGOs in Gaza, especially newcomers and smaller single-sector operators...to try to access and work with other AIDA members, not just for information sharing, but also for programmatic and policy-oriented collaboration and joint planning."[8] AIDA invited all new NGOs to apply for membership. If they did not apply (or were not accepted) they were still invited to meetings of the Gaza subcommittee and provided support for quality programming, e.g. Sphere, coordination and information sharing.

During OCL, AIDA participated in the HCT and stepped up coordination in Gaza via the Gaza subcommittee and advocacy with a record 5 AIDA joint statements in 2009/10.[9] In 2010, AIDA is focusing on how to make advocacy more effective, through the development of a joint advocacy strategy and an AIDA Code of Conduct to better inform "any liaison or relations with authorities/donors or any other stakeholders that in any way affect our [AIDA members] ability to deliver impartial humanitarian aid."

Governance, Administration and Membership

AIDA's first official Terms of Reference (TOR), established in 1995, defined its structure (a Chair), its purpose and activities. The TORs were revised again in 2003, 2006 and 2009. There is little institutional memory and no documentation of AIDA before 2001.

After the second intifada, in April 2001 AIDA members established a Humanitarian Steering Committee (HSC) [10] and hired a Humanitarian Facilitator (HF) to support the HSC. Though originally conceived as a policy forum, the HSC progressively became involved in operational issues, especially in those pressing practical matters relating to access, security, visas and relationships with the Israeli authorities.

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[8] continued..."although there is some attempt towards shared statements, the most important benefit is knowledge sharing. It can also be especially useful for smaller NGOs who do not have the capacity to attend all of the sector/cluster meetings to get briefings on key issues such as logistics, security, access and working with local governance structures."

[9] Between 2000 and late 2008 there were only 1-2 statements per year

[10] In 2003 the HSC membership was Oxfam GB (HSC Chair), Catholic Relief Services (AIDA Chair), MAP UK, ANERA, World Vision International, CARE International, Save the Children US, Save the Children UK, Action for Churches Together, MPDL & Medecins du Monde France.

After the Review in 2003 and with ECHO funding, the HSC was disbanded in favour of a more formal governance structure with an Executive Committee (ExCom), Chair, Treasurer, as well as subcommittees and a Secretariat. The HF became the Director of the Secretariat with more seniority and staff housed within a host organisation, in this case Oxfam. Oxfam received overheads to provide logistical support, while the ExCom was responsible for operational management of the Secretariat. The revised 2003 TOR defined membership and observer status and a re-vision of AIDA's purpose. Subcommittees were established, each with a representative member of the ExCom, and included security, advocacy, administration, relationship with local civil society, and fundraising.

Since 2005, AIDA has no Director but instead relies on the Chair who is a member of the ExCom. The ExCom itself is elected annually and is responsible for overall management while the Chair is responsible for canvassing members on issues and representation of AIDA in high-profile meetings. The Chair can hold office for no longer than 3 years. One seat on the ExCom is reserved for the outgoing Chair. Other members of the ExCom are a deputy chair and a treasurer. Subcommittees are now more like "ad hoc working groups" and have their own TORs that are case-specific.

CARE remains the chair for a second consecutive year, largely as no other NGO has the organisational capacity to effectively assume the role. The Chair receives "no support" (or recognition) from her organisation for her role in INGO coordination. And while CARE has provided a leadership role 7 out of 10 years, and World Vision in 3 years, both members of the Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) project, AIDA was not mentioned in the ECB post-OCL evaluation.[11] Lately CARE has also become the treasurer. Recognising the potential conflict of interest, the Chair established rules for approving expenditures including signatures of three ExCom members. Again, this is possible as CARE has significant human resource capacity including an effective financial manager.

There are no official ways of holding the ExCom or Chair to account for their performance, however unofficial ways have included emails to the 'offending' member expressing dissatisfaction with statements made and representation, or unilateral decision-making. The main means of expressing discontent remains simply not attending meetings: "coordination is, after all, optional".

All INGOs are eligible to be members of AIDA if their application is approved by the ExCom. AIDA members must be NGOs and agree to adhere to the RC-RC-NGO Code of Conduct. When members are in breach of the membership criteria or the Code, e.g. members who are USAID private contractors or not acting neutrally or impartially in the provision of aid, AIDA speaks out. For example, INGOs who have stringently adhered to the US 'no-contact' policy vis-à-vis Hamas are at risk of not acting neutrally: refusing to provide information about their organisation, programmes and beneficiaries to Hamas or overtly supporting the Fatah-authored Reconstruction Plan that does not include Hamas. USAID defended the INGO in question and threatened to withdraw *all* USAID funding from Gaza, while AIDA threatened to expel the INGO from AIDA on the basis of a lack of neutrality. It is hoped that recent work on a new AIDA Code of Conduct will provide guidance in future situations like this.

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[11] CARE's ECB evaluation and WV's Evaluation of Extended Response Programme.

There are also regular observers to AIDA, such as OCHA and the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO). While not members, MSF and the International Crisis Group also attend and make some financial contribution. Over the years USAID, DFID and ECHO have also provided funding for INGO coordination. However since 2005 there has been no other sources of finance other than membership funds (in 2003 200USD/year, in 2010 900NIS/250 USD for organisations with a total of 6 staff or more, 450 NIS/125 USD for 5 or less). Funds are used largely to finance monthly meetings. In 2009-10, CARE consented to be the Chair on the condition that it would hire a part-time Secretariat staff with AIDA funds. The single staff is in effect "assistant to the Chair" and is responsible for communications, attending subcommittee meetings, distribution of minutes, updating the website, etc..

OCHA has offered, and AIDA rejected, additional funds to support operating costs, in this case to "keep things simple". AIDA remains concerned about hiring outside assistance that does not have the same cultural and political insights and experience of country directors of operational organisations. And there are concerns about accountability, i.e. how to "keep [any staff] out of the tree".[12] Interestingly, this said by someone that was not aware of the misbehaviour of the previous Director 2003-2005.

Activities

"Very large agencies do not necessarily need an AIDA to talk to the international community or to access security information. However such agencies acknowledged that there was a value in supporting an AIDA that could meet the needs of a range of members."

Provide forums for regular discussion on operational issues and coordinate joint actions to help members conduct their work and achieve their aims. AIDA continues to provide forums for regular discussion on operational issues, especially practical matters relating to access, security, visas and relationships with the Israeli authorities. The most active and consistent subcommittees include the Gaza and Advocacy subcommittees (SC). In 2010, there are also health and agricultural SCs however their success is largely dependent on leadership which in the latter case, has not been consistent.

Between 2003-2009, the AIDA coordination in Gaza was not regular. However since Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza SC meets in Gaza every other week. Jerusalem staff, including CDs, do not normally come to Gaza for the meeting. However the Gaza SC chair facilitates two-way communication and understanding "trying to set realistic expectations on what AIDA can deliver and what Jerusalem CDs are likely to agree to." When addressing operational issues requires contact with Hamas, and AIDA is unable to act on behalf of US-based INGOs, OCHA has also stepped into the role of mediator.

Advocate on issues as agreed by members and organize joint advocacy activities. As mentioned previously, there are few INGOs that do not have advocacy on their list of activities. However joint advocacy has always been contentious particularly given funding-relationship with certain donors: "US regulations are inimical to providing humanitarian aid according to humanitarian principles; neutrally, impartially,...". However many agencies prefer to use AIDA to make joint statements when the risk of repercussions from individual efforts is too high: "NGOs can call a spade a spade in a way that other organisations cannot. Together we are louder and more credible".

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[12] Implying that staff require close management.

As of 2010, AIDA is largely an advocacy body "to stand as a group on ...issues and not be cowed". AIDA has been effective in influencing the UN, donors and government (IDF, Hamas and Fatah) on policy regarding funding, humanitarian space and humanitarian conditions, e.g. in 2009, IDF decided not to renew INGO work visas however through AIDA advocacy this decision was rescinded. AIDA is doing more joint advocacy than ever before (7 statements out of 14 have been published in 2009/10) and with a new twist, i.e. making joint press statements with UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator's office. OCHA is invited to AIDA meetings allowing OCHA to learn directly of relevant issues and to relay messages more readily to appropriate persons.

Also in 2010, AIDA hired a consultant to develop the AIDA Advocacy Strategy in consultation with members to define 'trigger mechanism' for advocacy, i.e. on what issues, how and to whom to or *not to* advocate in a variety of scenarios including acute crises such as Operation Cast Lead (OCL). During OCL it was difficult to organise joint statements particularly those that included US-NGOs. AIDA was not unique in suffering from some ambiguity from US-NGOs: CARE and Save the Children also had difficulties making "family" press statements. By focusing on the impact of restrictions on access and movement of people and goods - on both the provision of assistance and deteriorating humanitarian and development conditions - will allow for greater collaboration and efficacy in advocacy. The strategy also mentions INGO advocacy on behalf of LNGOs as well.

Provide a bridge between the INGO community and Palestinian civil society and NGOs. At the time of writing the 2003 review, Palestinian NGOs (PNGOs) were observers to AIDA meetings and activities. However there was a feeling among part of the membership that this should be expanded upon and the relationship become deeper and more fruitful. The PNGO-INGO relationship had been fractured by the Intifada as PNGOs expressed anger that INGOs were receiving the lion's share of donor funds for humanitarian aid (2000-2003) while INGOs weren't "sufficiently loud" on the injustices experienced by the Palestinian people. The then-Chair attempted to repair the links in part through increased face-to-face contact with LNGOs spending time in their offices. There was mixed success as this commitment to relationship-building with local NGOs was not similarly shared by the then Director of the Secretariate.

In 2010, PNGOs are still not officially members of AIDA but are invited to meetings depending on the agenda item. The Palestinian NGO Network is the most frequently consulted body for advocacy and other means. Opinions are mixed as to why there is not more engagement and collaboration with local NGOs ranging from "they lack the capacity" to "they are very capable and have their own agenda".

Facilitate cooperation and coordination with the broader donor community and serve as a contact for external bodies requiring information about INGO activities in the oPt. Recommendations in 2003 included "AIDA should ensure that any input into [general coordination] bodies is done in a manner that is accountable to the whole AIDA membership. It should not just be the Secretariat or Chair that has a role in this, but any AIDA member can be a 'lead agency' with the consent of other members." In 2010, AIDA's "representative" (Chair) is a member of several LACC working groups, including the Social Development Strategy Group (SDSG)(Figure 1), and as such is expected to canvas its members on relevant issues and "represent the views of its constituency".

However there still remains some dissatisfaction with the degree to which a Chair is representative, particularly of smaller INGO views. This appears to be largely a function of how well a Chair is at "getting input" and has been an issue with previous Chairs; "We would worry what [the Chair] would say." In 2010, the Chair is attempting to delegate representation to other ExCom members with mixed results; familiarity with the issues, the people, and advocacy strategies is something that has to be built over time.

AIDA has represented INGO views to IDF and the Palestinian Authority however more often than not, IDF does not invite AIDA *per se* to meetings but individual INGOs as the IDF prefers to negotiate on an individual basis and avoid 'syndicates'. Fatah or Hamas similarly invite large NGOs to meetings as a convenient way to influence a large portion of the humanitarian/development aid.

Lessons Learned

- The success in the longevity of AIDA is due to its flexibility, adaptability, and focus on information sharing and advocacy; activities that are "better [to do] together than...alone." It is a streamlined structure that does not require large resources from the outside. However AIDA has expanded (and then retracted) to accommodate additional need.

- There is a trade off when the structure relies on a single representative and that representative requires significant organisational capacity. There have been periods when a particular Chair is less consultative. Nor can a large organisation always represent the views of a wide-range of organisations that differ in origin, language, size, etc. Careful thought has to be taken by larger particularly US and European NGOs, on how to ensure that representation accurately reflects the concerns of small NGOs. When there are problems, it is necessary to find ways to ensure the Chair and ExCom are accountable to the broader membership. Governance structures are "not formality for the sake of it, but more to help AIDA to be more open, transparent, accountable and inclusive."

- When it is necessary to employ a secretariat, it is imperative that the governance body of the NGO coordination mechanism invest the time necessary to ensure the accountability of its hired staff, in cooperation with the host agency.

- In a crisis, existing coordination mechanisms are an ideal place to start any 'new' emergency-related coordination. NGOs with existing relationships, knowledge of operating conditions, etc., are key to providing appropriate support and guidance to new INGOs arriving in-country.

- Even with greater resources and a different structure, any coordination ultimately relies upon the commitment and involvement of the members. There are benefits when any change to a coordination structure, particularly during a scale up, results in the coordination mechanism being more inclusive and participatory; even if it only influences others by virtue of its availability and accessibility.

- Joint advocacy strategies, such as AIDA's new strategy, that find the common-denominator, with clear triggers, processes and means to evaluate their effectiveness may result in more effective advocacy.

- The willingness and ability of INGO coordination structures to reach out to LNGOs depends heavily on how effectively the membership communicates this priority to leadership. Leadership then have the responsibility to communicate this to any Secretariat responsible for the work.

- Nothing replaces face-to-face contact for relationship building, particularly with LNGOs, in complex crises.

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