



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

Case Study: South Sudan 1996-2010

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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.

Introduction: Return to South Sudan

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) was established in 1989 as the umbrella operation for UN agencies and international NGOs (INGOs) working in Southern Sudan. From 1990 UN coordination filled the gap left by the absence of the Sudanese government, based on Letters of Association with INGO operational partners. NGOs were clearly unequal partners under the tripartite agreement between UN, Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and the political bias of the UN became increasingly problematic for INGOs. The Southern Sudan NGO Forum was created in 1996 to bring together INGOs associated with OLS to discuss common issues around programming, access and delivery of aid.

Initially the Forum met on a monthly basis in Nairobi, and was represented to UN and donors by an elected Steering Committee of seven to eight NGOs; over time, Forum membership expanded to include non-OLS international NGOs and local NGOs. Through the Forum, the NGO community could present a collective position, although the distinction between OLS and non-OLS NGOs continued to undermine these efforts. However the Forum did create opportunities for NGOs to influence important initiatives such as the Joint Assessment Mission, the year-long UN-World Bank assessment of post-conflict recovery and development needs.

Once the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was finalised between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM in January 2005, Nairobi-based INGOs moved back into Southern Sudan – although more slowly than they could have, finding it difficult to change their operating assumptions and the organisational structures that accompanied them.¹ The legacy of OLS meant that many NGOs were used to having their operations mediated by the UN, but now they slowly realised that they no longer needed the UN to represent NGO interests, particularly in order to access institutional funding. One major challenge was how to interface with the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) – newly formed by the SPLM, an organisation that some NGOs had previously bypassed – which naturally intended to establish a legal framework for NGO operations.

Despite expanding the Steering Committee to 12 NGOs, the Forum struggled to deal with these changes – but it did not collapse. The creation of a monthly Country Directors (CDs) meeting in October 2008 helped to recover the strategic focus that had been lost in the general Forum meetings, as well as to create more social links between Country Directors. Forum meetings were held at 10am, in the middle of the working day when CDs were often too busy to attend; the CDs meeting was held at 6:30pm, making more time for CDs to socialise with each other after the formal meeting was over. A more important contribution to the survival of the Forum, however, was the creation of a dedicated Secretariat function to support the Forum and its associated bodies, reporting directly to the Steering Committee.

1 Similar problems were experienced in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, where NGOs based in Peshawar were hesitant to move their offices to Kabul for reasons which made sense tactically (given the ongoing insecurity) but were not sensible from strategically for ensuring their position in the new environment.

The Role of the Secretariat

The Secretariat concept had been floated before the move to South Sudan, but it proved difficult to get funding until the Forum reconvened in Juba. The Secretariat was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) from February 2008 – February 2010, extended to June 2010 to allow for a rescheduled evaluation specified in the original proposal. This funding was provided through a contract with Catholic Relief Services, which contracted and managed Secretariat staff, security, finance and procurement, and provided logistics support (including maintaining a Secretariat vehicle). Funding will be provided by ECHO until March 2011.

The Secretariat was originally comprised of four staff: an NGO Secretariat Coordinator, an Assistant NGO Secretariat Coordinator, an NGO Security Focal Point and a Driver. An INGO provided space until July 2008, when the Secretariat office moved to a container in the OCHA compound in Juba. An NGO Resource Centre with internet connectivity had been set up in the compound by the UN in 2006, and the Secretariat benefited from the steady stream of NGO staff coming to use the free internet access (although the Resource Centre was unilaterally closed by the UN in January 2010). This arrangement gave the Secretariat considerable access to other offices in the same compound, including the UN Department of Safety and Security and the UN Joint Logistics Centre, but the office space was insufficient, and the Secretariat moved to the Tearfund compound in mid-2010 in anticipation of an increase in staff to include a Policy Focal Point.

An evaluation of the NGO Forum carried out in January 2010 found that, although the Secretariat had not been able to achieve many of the objectives laid out in the initial DFID proposal, it had successfully developed NGO coordination mechanisms and ensured NGO representation in UN, GOSS and donor meetings. One of the primary concerns of the Forum has been in advocacy, where the Secretariat has been able to play a role in coordinating and launching successful actions on issues which concern the entire NGO community, such as two influential position papers on the complicated aid architecture in South Sudan, published by the Secretariat on behalf of the Forum.

Representing the NGO Community

Full-time Secretariat staff were able to attend a greater number of meetings and maintain a wider range of relationships than Steering Committee members since, as elsewhere, Country Directors frequently lacked the time to fill this representational role. One particular representation issue raised by existing arrangements was that the Secretariat Coordinator took on more responsibility for representing the NGO community than was appropriate for a non-elected position.

The advantages of having a consistent NGO presence and position at coordination meetings needed to be balanced against the potential risks of concentrating that responsibility in a single individual: loss of institutional memory and personal relationships when the individual leaves, but also the danger of obscuring the diversity of NGO perspectives with external stakeholders. Following the evaluation the Forum sought to address this by dividing responsibilities for representation, so that each major meeting would have a SC member and the Secretariat Focal Point present, although this commitment proved equally difficult to uphold given the other time constraints on SC members.

Through the Secretariat and Steering Committee, Forum members collectively have access to decision-makers at a level they would not have as individual organisations. Access to meetings, such as the Steering Committees of the various multi-donor funds and UN Humanitarian Country Team Juba satellite, is possible for Forum members only because of the strength that their numbers provide. However that strength must be traded against the obstacles that a diverse membership poses to reaching collective positions and sending coherent messages. The central role of INGOs in delivering basic services raises questions about how involved they should be in developing national policy around those services.

Unfortunately, the majority of INGOs have little to no policy capacity of their own, and any given NGO attending policy meetings would potentially be seen as representing their own interests rather than the interests of the NGO community as a whole. The Steering Committee and Secretariat are perceived as more representative by external actors: the Steering Committee as an elected body, and the Secretariat as an independent non-operational body. This does not necessarily reflect the views of Forum members themselves, who have expressed concern that their voice may not be represented through Forum channels. The introduction of subscription fees in 2010 should help to address this by creating a line of accountability between the Steering Committee and Forum members.

Managing Change Processes

The Steering Committee was able to implement all of the recommendations emerging from the 2010 evaluation, but of particular note was the introduction of membership fees. The Forum had always struggled with funding, and particularly the question of whether INGOs were willing or able to pay for coordination services, rather than rely entirely on donors. While the Steering Committee had been interested in some sort of fee structure for some time, donors had also begun to exert pressure for their introduction prior to further funding. Membership fees were seen as a way of demonstrating that the Forum members were prepared to support the coordination function directly themselves, with the assumption that financial investment demonstrated their commitment.

Membership fees change the dynamic of NGO coordination in three ways. It encourages members to pay more attention to how well the Forum is functioning, since they are now partly paying for it themselves. It creates a line of accountability, which in turn enhances the legitimacy of the Secretariat by demonstrating that they have a clear constituency. Membership fees also acts as a cost recovery mechanism, helping to ensure the sustainability of the body, although it is unlikely that a reasonable fee structure would ever cover all Secretariat costs. The main drawback of the fee system is that it creates new costs in the form of financial management and member liaison duties.

The introduction of fees was managed by planning their introduction well in advance, and then ensuring clear and consistent communication, with core constituents being informed repeatedly before and during the process. A consensus vote was taken at the Country Directors' meeting, pointing out that funding would not be forthcoming if fees were not introduced and establishing that none of the members disagreed in principle to such a system. Country Directors with a special interest met in a sub-group and developed three options: full cost recovery, a flat rate subscription, and a graduated subscription, of which the latter was eventually selected by the Forum members.

Three Critical Relationships: Local NGOs, Security and Government

The two other areas explicitly dealt with by the Secretariat were security and local NGO outreach. The Forum was entirely composed of international NGOs (who usually sent their international staff to meetings), and the absence of local NGOs raised questions about how representative the Forum was, an issue which became more pressing as funding was sought for the Secretariat. As well as interest from local NGOs themselves, donors were interested to know what the Forum was doing to build local civil society as part of wider efforts to reconstruct south Sudan. Civil society remains extremely weak, and often focused around faith groups, which are an uneasy fit with the secular orientation of many INGOs.

There is a correspondingly weak indigenous NGO capacity, although there have been a small number of local NGO networks, particularly the New Sudan Indigenous NGOs Network (Nesinet), but none with a strong operational presence. One of the barriers to better relations between national and international NGOs is that the two groups have been seen as having different interests which can be difficult to negotiate. Seen from a different angle, however, they complement each other: for example, although national NGOs may have weak capacity and financial resources, they frequently have information resources and political access.

Following the CPA, an Indigenous NGO Forum formed around the model of the INGO Forum, and the Secretariat Assistant Coordinator (a national staff member) was tasked to work full time with local NGOs; this role was eventually converted into a local NGO Focal Point in January 2010. The SC had some small successes in supporting local NGOs – for example, successfully lobbying the Sudan Recovery Fund to extend its funding window to allow local NGOs to submit proposals – but the Indigenous NGO Forum itself lacked capacity to act effectively on behalf of its members. As a result in 2010, it was formalised that all Secretariat staff would serve both international and national NGO Forums equally. The two groups maintain separate meeting structures but go through the same membership process; with chairs and deputy chairs sitting on each others' SC. Through the Forum, a working group on local NGO relations was formed and a Best Practice Guide drafted which has been circulated to the UN Country Team, Joint Donor Office and other stakeholders.

Security is another critical area. There are frequent minor conflicts at local level, and large political events – such as national elections in 2010 – can have significant negative impact on stability in areas where NGOs operate. The service provided by the Security Focal Point, primarily information sharing but with an increasing advisory capacity, was widely agreed to have been critical for the NGO community. In particular having a dedicated position enabled better relations with the UN Department of Safety and Security and other UN security staff, improving the information flow between the UN and NGOs. The service was appreciated by all stakeholders.

Similar to the Coordinator position, however, there were questions about whether members had become too reliant on the Focal Point for information, including whether the provision of security advice rather than simply information might cause liability problems for the Forum, especially if security deteriorated (as expected during the 2011 independence referendum). As these questions had grown with time, the Focal Point had attempted to address member capacity through security meetings that initiated joint contingency planning and other exercises, but they remained an issue.

Due to a range of factors, the position of NGOs in South Sudan gives the NGO community far greater influence than they have in other places. NGOs deliver approximately 85% of basic services in South Sudan, making their involvement essential both for the GoSS and the United Nations. The legacy of OLS means that both GoSS and UN have had closer working relationships with the NGO community over a longer period of time, and many staff working for GoSS have previously worked for an NGO or UN agency. However NGO relations with the government had been complicated by the lack of NGO registration procedures, gaps in government capacity in key ministries and poor relations with their official government counterpart.

One major success for the Forum was mobilising NGO involvement in the ten governmental Budget Sector Working Groups with the support of the UNDP Advisor working in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. These groups were a primary vehicle for the government to develop its overall development plan, providing sector level coordination in the creation of budgeted plans for a range of sectors, including accountability, health, education, justice and so on. The Forum was invited to the initial budget planning meeting, where the presence of an SC member and the Secretariat Coordinator as co-chairs was a tangible demonstration of commitment to the government. The SC then presented the situation to Forum members, describing the various Working Groups and circulating a brief on the process; following up through e-mail, the Secretariat was able to get nominees for all of the Working Groups.

Representation on the Working Groups was drawn mainly from the larger NGOs, but with some joint teams where 2-3 NGOs of mixed sizes worked together; and a lack of local NGO representation was never overcome, especially as the government was primarily interested in partners holding larger budgets. Before the Secretariat was created, the government usually had to send staff to each individual INGO to engage them; with the Secretariat in place, the government was able to go through a single focal point to address the INGO community.

Success at the Juba level has not necessarily translated into better coordination in the field, however, where the capacity of the GoSS is even more limited than in Juba. Coordination at state level and below is ad hoc, fragmented and largely invisible except to those organisations directly involved. While the INGO community continues to struggle to address this, the size of the country and the scale of needs means that NGO operations are spread widely. This means that field coordination is less a question of avoiding duplication (which is unlikely) or filling gaps (which is unfeasible) but is more a question of ensuring policy implementation and quality control.

Substituting for Clusters

The high level of international interest combined with the low level of local capacity has led to an extremely complex coordination structure in Southern Sudan, with a range of bodies created at different levels and in different sectors with no overall framework. The focus has been on higher-level policy coordination rather than field coordination, which has led to some sectors falling through the gaps: one example was the failure by UNICEF to establish effective WASH coordination, leading a small number of NGOs to convene their own meeting in September 2009.

The prime example, however, was the NGO Health Forum, created in 2005 to facilitate communication between NGOs, and to enable NGOs to reach consensus positions to feed into the Health and Nutrition Consultative Group (HNCG). The HNCG was set up by the Ministry of Health with support from WHO but, with MoH capacity still weak, it proved to be ineffective and was poorly attended by NGOs.

As a result the NGO Health Forum became the primary health coordination meeting in South Sudan with around 45-50 participants, although largely for information exchange rather than planning. While Ministry of Health representatives were welcome at the meeting, their presence was not required for the meeting to proceed; given existing government capacity, this may have contributed to meeting effectiveness but raised questions about mandate. The Health Forum was run by NGOs for NGOs but, in the absence of viable alternatives, it operated as a de facto cluster meeting.

In response to pressure from government, donors and NGOs, the UN strengthened the cluster system in 2010. It was unclear how meetings such as the NGO Health Forum would be dealt with – whether they would be folded into the cluster system, operate in parallel, or asked to discontinue their work. WHO had funded a sector co-lead for the Health Forum (drawn from the NGO community), but announced that it would withdraw this funding at the end of 2010. At WHO's request, the Health Forum agreed to move their information and coordination functions to a newly formed Health Cluster Working Group (with 12 participants); however the Forum continued to meet to deal with NGO-specific issues.

Although obviously the membership overlapped, the NGO Health Forum was not formally connected to the broader NGO Forum, and the latter has not been involved in sectoral coordination. In 2010 the NGO Forum successfully lobbied for the inclusion of NGO representatives as cluster co-leads, creating a sub-group for Cluster leads and commitments from the NGOs involved to support those co-leads. The accountability of UN agencies for their performance will be dealt with by the NGO Forum Steering Committee, who will address any gaps in cluster performance to the relevant UN agency. However there remain fears on the NGO side that they may not be able to sustain this level of involvement in co-leading clusters without additional funding: WHO has informed the health cluster co-lead that they will not fund the NGO co-lead position next year.

Critical Lessons

- Defining the legal status of NGOs in general has been problematic for the government, and the Forum itself still lacks a legal status. This may create problems in the future since the Forum is recognised as part of the aid architecture for South Sudan informally but has no official status. While this is convenient from an administrative and financial point of view, this raises questions about the representational role that the Forum plays, consisting of an officially unrecognised body representing other officially unrecognised bodies.
- The development of NGO coordination in South Sudan illustrates clearly the dilemma that faces all NGO coordination bodies, when changes in the environment and the membership affect its ability to achieve collective goals. These changes can be managed to the benefit of the members, as when the NGO Forum general meeting was cancelled in 2010 in favour of the more focused CDs meeting.
- Despite the reliance on Secretariat staff, it is the Steering Committee that is critical for the success of the NGO coordination structure. Secretariat staff are not responsible for any decision-making themselves, and the biggest threat to the NGO Forum is disengagement on the part of the Steering Committee. This would be particularly dangerous during a Secretariat handover, when new staff would not have the relationships necessary to maintain the focus of the Steering Committee or to continue working productively with external stakeholders.

- Steering Committees need to be composed of Country Directors who are prepared to make decisions, often on behalf of the entire membership. They must be prepared to commit to a higher level of responsibility and carve out space to reach decisions away from their day-to-day responsibilities, while being realistic about how much time they can commit. This is a difficult balancing act which may be achieved best by spreading responsibilities among members, particularly to help smaller NGOs to have a voice.
- Making coordination meetings useful and engaging is critical to keeping up attendance levels and thus maintaining the network. The timing of meetings is a small but important detail as well as the content. Steps were taken to encourage guest speakers from GOSS or UN agencies at Forum meetings who could expand agency staff knowledge, as well as security briefings.
- Following the CPA, the Forum was able to establish a positive feedback loop to handle the growth in the number of humanitarian actors in South Sudan. The level of access to high-level meetings enjoyed by the Forum meant that joining the Forum was appealing to arriving NGOs; the more NGOs joined the Forum, the more representative it became and the more likely it was to be invited to high-level meetings. A Forum presence at external meetings in turn required Country Directors, and particularly Steering Committee members, to think more strategically in order to ensure that they were able to make contributions at those meetings.
- The larger and more diverse membership makes it more difficult to have focused discussions – particularly on policy issues – and thus more difficult to develop coherent advocacy. However diversity is essential in a mixed environment such as Southern Sudan, where relief and development needs shift over time and location. One recent innovation enabling better representation has been the incorporation of a “silent member” status into the statutes, enabling organisations that choose not to participate formally in coordination to attend meetings with the same rights and responsibilities as other members (paying the same subscription), while their names are withheld from all public documents. In this way the views of a wider range of actors can be gathered and communicated via the Forum while maintaining NGO independence.
- Much of the Forum's recent administrative documents, such as the revised statutes, were adapted from similar material developed by ACBAR in Afghanistan and provided to the Secretariat through direct communication with ACBAR counterparts. This kind of networking between NGO coordination bodies would appear to be extremely useful in order to avoid repeating past mistakes and providing additional support across the sector.

SOURCES

- Interviews with 22 current or former ExCom, Secretariat or NGO staff (from January 2010)
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- FAQ Southern Sudan Health Forum* (2008)
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- Curran, P. (2010) *Co-ordination at the Crossroads - NGO coordination in Southern Sudan*
- NGO Forum Southern Sudan Statutes of Operation* (2010)
- Letter from the Humanitarian Coordinator to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator* (2010)

Appendix 1: NGO Coordination Structures October 2010

