



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

## **Case Study: Sudan 1999-2010**

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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: Balancing NGO concerns in Sudan**

In the 1980s international NGOs (INGOs) working in Sudan were focused primarily on the impact of the drought in the Horn of Africa, dealing with refugees and other displaced groups; at that time coordination in general had yet to become a major concern for the humanitarian community. This changed with the creation of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in 1989 as the umbrella operation for UN agencies and INGOs working in Southern Sudan during the civil war, although the focus of OLS was always cross-border operations in the south and coordination in Khartoum was less active.

The challenge of working in Sudan was both physical and political: as well as being a huge country with poor infrastructure, INGOs have had to balance their efforts to build constructive relations with the government against their need to remain politically independent. All agencies must work with and through the government's Humanitarian Assistance Committee (HAC) under technical agreements with line ministries, while still maintaining an appropriate distance from government policy-making. When this balancing act fails, the consequences can be severe, as the expulsion of 13 INGOs by the Government of Sudan in March 2009 showed.

However the INGO community has maintained a coordination structure in Khartoum since at least 1999, when a relatively informal monthly meeting of INGO Country Directors (CDs) began. In the early stages there was only a small number of INGOs working in Sudan, but as numbers grew over time the meeting developed into the Northern Sudan International NGO Forum (hereafter referred to as the Forum) with an elected Chair and Vice-chair serving on a 3-monthly basis. Their representational role, attending UN and donor meetings, had some success, notably in engaging support for INGO requirements from the government, and laid the foundations for the Forum's current reputation.

## **Revising Forum Structures**

It became clear that the workload for the Chair and Vice-chair positions was high, since beyond convening and chairing meetings, they acted as principal representatives to government, UN and donors, and as an informal contact point for the growing number of Forum members. However there was recognition amongst CDs that the coordinating role was important, generating a personal commitment as well as peer pressure, while the benefits included opportunities to build wider networks, better relations with key stakeholders and more in-depth knowledge of the situation. However being Chair or Vice-chair was a full-time job in itself, being carried out by CDs who already had full-time jobs.

The first attempt to address the workload issue was a revision of the Forum's TORs in 2001-2002, creating a 3-person leadership team at any given time: elected agencies would serve as Vice-Chair for 3 months, then Chair for 3 months, then a new position of 'ex-Chair' for 3 months. Deterioration of the situation in Darfur towards the end of 2003 challenged this arrangement, particularly once visa restrictions were lifted; the influx of NGOs into the country was a major shock to the coordination system. Given the increased coordination requirements, the Forum decided that the Chair and Vice-chair positions needed additional support.

A Steering Committee (SC) was formed, spreading responsibility and ensuring more time, more focus and a higher level of confidentiality to discuss sensitive issues. By 2004 the TORs established a SC of 8 members serving 6 month terms of office, with a Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary chosen from SC members on a 3-monthly basis. The TORs have been revised on several occasions, primarily to adjust these structures rather than revise them completely – for example, by increasing the number of SC members to 9 and removing the position of Secretary in 2006.

The Forum was particularly active in the period between 2005-2009. Sudan had always been a priority country for many organisations on a historical basis but the high visibility of the Darfur crisis saw budgets rise, in some cases becoming the single largest programme within some organisations. The relative importance of Sudan meant that organisations invested more in staff capacity there, sending their more experienced and capable staff with additional resources, with an unintended consequence of an increase in the capacity of the INGO community in general. This was reflected in a dynamic SC, although it is worth noting that the same group of INGOs tended to be elected to the SC over time – a well-functioning core group, but not necessarily representative.

## **The End of the Golden Age**

The next major shock to the system was the expulsion of a large number of operational NGOs referred to above, an event which marked a rupture not just within the NGO community but in the wider aid architecture, since the expelled NGOs were key service providers. Virtually overnight the SC lost half its serving members, leaving the CDs of smaller INGOs to take on their work – at a time when demands on the NGO community had increased massively and the loss of the larger NGOs had also deprived the community of most of its policy specialists.

These events also revealed another coordination gap. It was necessary after the expulsions to identify where there were now programme gaps in Darfur – but none of the remaining NGOs had a presence in all three states of Darfur, no single NGO had ever done an assessment across the three states, and the NGO community was collectively unable to carry out this identification (particularly given the uncertain position of INGOs following the expulsions). This left the NGO community reliant on the UN to lead the assessment, weakening their position even further.

Following the expulsions, the Forum changed its approach. While regular monthly meetings still take place, open to all CDs of Forum members, each SC member was assigned a smaller group of 7-8 members to meet with, discuss the situation in a more confidential environment and explore possibilities for moving forward. This helped to maintain the cohesion of the Forum and gave the SC a clear mandate to continue to address the government rather than withdraw, but this level of engagement was only possible during the crisis period. Working in small groups required more time and effort on all sides and, as the situation normalised, momentum was lost, turnout dropped, and the small groups stopped meeting regularly; however topic-specific small groups are still convened.

Previously, accountability between the SC and the Forum could be characterised as relatively weak, with the Forum meeting only monthly to receive information from SC members and therefore not included in many of their discussions. As an example, policy briefs developed by the SC had not been circulated amongst Forum members for approval, on the basis that, once elected, SC members were tasked with representation in a similar way to a parliamentary system. This was acceptable to Forum members because they had a relatively stable shared understanding of the situation to draw on; however the new small-group approach had the unforeseen side-effect of increasing accountability between the SC and other Forum members.

## **Establishing a Secretariat**

While the small group approach was successful in keeping the Forum together, the pressure on the SC made it clear that additional support was needed; at a minimum there were basic administrative tasks that were essential to maintain the Forum's visibility (such as contact lists, mailing lists and a website) and a need for continuity in NGO representation. Discussions about forming a Secretariat had begun even before the expulsion, including preparation of a funding proposal by an Oxfam policy officer, and, following the expulsions, efforts to establish such a body were renewed.

The proposed Secretariat of three staff was intended to go beyond basic administration, including: policy development that did not easily fit into individual NGO interests (e.g. funding mechanisms such as the Common Humanitarian Fund); NGO representation across a wider range, such as accompanying high-level visits on field missions; maintaining strategic links to international networks and organisations such as ICVA and InterAction; and managing information more systematically between members and with external stakeholders. The Secretariat was also viewed as a risk management strategy in dealing with the government, since a collective approach meant that individual NGOs could not be identified as being responsible for specific advocacy initiatives.

The process of setting up the Secretariat took nearly two years, far longer than originally intended, mainly because members were already working overtime and few staff could spare the time to work on it. In that space of time conditions on the ground had changed (including the March 2009 expulsions) and there was a completely different SC in place at the end of the set-up process. While the Secretariat funding was being negotiated, additional staff were identified to provide interim administrative support with the help of ICVA.

Forum member FAR (Fellowship for African Relief) volunteered to host the Secretariat, a welcome choice due to a combination of its good relations with the government, available office space and relatively low international profile. ECHO provided funding through an existing bilateral grant to FAR, although the budget was controlled by all 9 SC members and achieving a balance between the various stakeholders responsible for the Secretariat was seen to be crucial for its success. However there remained questions about what legal status such a Secretariat should hold, with the related question of whether the HAC would approve the body and grant visas to its staff.

Concerns about visas for Secretariat staff proved to be well-founded when the selected Coordinator was refused a visa, and the Secretariat is still not in place. ECHO agreed to fund the Secretariat function for a further year, even though most of the funding was not used due to the administrative problems described above. It is evidence of the Forum's resilience that members have continued even with the setback of losing the Secretariat: SC members second their staff to support the Forum on a part-time basis and explore alternative structures to deal with critical policy issues. However former SC members expressed concern that, although the Forum had survived it was (perhaps inevitably) not the same body as before. In particular there is perhaps less common ground as a result of the wider range of agency mandates amongst Forum members, and a more cautious approach to advocacy.

## The Debate around Membership

Throughout these developments the Forum has had almost no barriers for entry. INGOs would sign up on a membership list and receive an invitation to meetings, with no legal or financial requirement for membership. While the Sudanese government sometimes claimed that the Forum did not represent all INGOs in Sudan, the Forum has usually included all major operational INGOs (with the exception of organisations such as MSF who do not usually participate in such forums).

From the beginning the Forum has not allowed national NGOs into its meetings, to ensure that the meetings provided a space where issues could be discussed confidentially. The role of local NGOs is problematic for INGOs, who have concerns about the difficulty that local NGOs have in maintaining their neutrality – more than one national NGO coordination body exists, but they tend to be more or less politicised. Perhaps the most visible is the Sudanese Council of Voluntary Agencies (SCOVA, established in 1979), known mainly for pro-government demonstrations, with whom the Steering Committee held a meeting in 2009 with the intention of building bridges.

From a good practice point of view, most INGOs would prefer to have at least some dialogue, if not increased partnership with local NGOs, and in this respect NGO coordination has been a failure. However in October 2009, the Tripartite Joint Technical Committee (TJTC) organised a workshop on the theme of “Towards a More Effective Partnership”, which was attended by 48 national NGOs and 26 international NGOs, as well as government, donor and UN agencies. While the workshop itself was viewed as a positive step and several concrete recommendations were agreed by participants, the follow-up was weak and the recommendations were not implemented.

However a second meeting was proposed by the TJTC for November 2010, a two-day “National Partnership Form” to reactivate the process and develop a partnership framework for national and international NGOs. This initiative is particularly urgent in light of the Sudanese government's drive for “Sudanization” of the humanitarian sector. After March 2009, INGOs were instructed to hand over their work to national NGOs within 12 months, but this was unrealistic and was not strictly applied by the government. The Forum is the only body able to provide a coherent NGO voice on this issue, issuing a position paper to help the government, INGOs and other stakeholders to negotiate a reasonable solution to problems of poor local capacity.

## Changing Approaches to Advocacy

This type of advocacy has been core business for the Forum from the outset, usually around three major issues of concern: relations with the government, security and funding. The collective nature of these issues has meant that they are relevant to all Forum members, making it possible to get consensus more easily. However this has been accompanied by much discussion about what constitutes advocacy and how to effectively pursue it. The Forum has been a valuable space to discuss questions such as whether individual, joint or collective statements are most effective, or whether such public action should be secondary to behind-the-scenes lobbying.

The advocacy role of the SC is now more muted, partly because new members lack the necessary time to invest, partly because of risk management by the remaining members following the expulsions, and partly because of the change in the policy environment favours a different approach. While advocacy is still active at the national level (for example on the Sudanisation issue discussed below) there is now less connection to network bodies (such as ICVA and InterAction) and almost no advocacy via members with offices in Geneva, New York or other key political centres. While this may be an appropriate course of action for the remaining NGOs given government sensitivity, it may leave the NGO community in Sudan weaker over time.

## Strategic vs Operational Coordination

One area where the Forum has had unquestionable success is in establishing itself as a credible actor in the eyes of the government, UN agencies and donors. SC members represent the NGO community at high-level meetings such as the Tripartite Joint **Technical Committee** EXPLAIN (TJTC) and Darfur High-Level Committee, and has sufficient access to place key issues on the agenda of other high-level meetings, particularly through supportive donors. The Forum is on the standing agenda for nearly all international visitors, on the basis that Forum members are a source of timely and accurate information from the field (although it is worth noting that such international visitors meet primarily with the Chair and Vice-Chair, rather than the entire membership).

As noted above, until 2009 all Forum work was done on a volunteer basis by members – not just by SC members, but also by the staff they made available for Forum business. Larger INGOs were able to direct their policy staff to provide support – taking minutes, drafting papers and so forth – which gave the SC additional capacity. With the expulsion of many of these NGOs, however, these policy staff were no longer available, placing additional pressure on the SC. Individual Forum members also contributed by reporting back on sectoral and cluster meetings that they had attended, and participating in working groups around key issues such as human resources, communications and the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF).

Partly because questions of government relations and security are prerequisites for operations, operational coordination itself has not been a priority for the Forum, especially since there are existing operational coordination mechanisms, either through government offices or the UN cluster system. The size of Sudan and the difficulties of travelling in-country also influences relations between coordinating bodies in Khartoum and those in state capitals. Issues of concern are similar at both levels, but programme issues are dealt with more at state capital meetings. At the beginning of the Darfur conflict, for example, there were informal agreements (with the support of the Forum) between INGOs on who would take responsibility for specific areas, and in some cases (such as West Darfur) agreements on issues such as avoiding staff poaching.

These ad hoc agreements became informal forums, which then formed working groups and eventually elected steering committees. There have been steering committees in all 3 states of Darfur and at least one, in Nyala, had full TORs drawn up by participants. The advantage of this arrangement is that it can provide a much more effective and efficient flow of information from the field to the capital (and sometimes vice versa), but in Sudan there was a feeling that the NGO community did not move on state level coordination early enough or integrate state and national level coordination effectively, and that the government was able to use this disconnect to influence NGO operations.

## **Security and the Limits of Coordination**

Security has always been a core concern for Forum members and, as levels of violence have waxed and waned, the NGO community has tried various collective approaches to improve security management. In the context of Darfur in particular questions of security are also questions about preserving or expanding humanitarian space, and must be dealt with sensitively. In late 2005 and early 2006 there were discussions about the possibility of an NGO security body similar to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO, discussed in the Afghanistan case study), but it was clear from the outset that it was highly unlikely that the Government would approve a separate body.

As levels of violence increased following the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006, agencies discussed a possible collective threshold for withdrawal, but without reaching a conclusive agreement. A joint UN/NGO 'Strategy To Regain Humanitarian Space' was proposed – dealing with a range of issues including removing bureaucratic restrictions and strengthening field staff capacity – but was never implemented. In 2007 the Humanitarian Coordinator proposed that the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) deploy Security Officers as part of the Saving Lives Together (SLT) initiative, but slow deployment and variable staff quality meant this failed to deliver the expected outcomes.

There have been some successes in security coordination, including lobbying DSS to improve incident tracking. Under the SLT, INGO representatives attend Security Management Team meetings at both Darfur and state levels, and an SMS incident notification system was established by DSS in West Darfur. Neither of these were the result of NGO coordination, but local coordination has made them possible. NGOs have developed joint resources for their community, including contingency planning guidelines in 2008, an advisory note on kidnapping in 2009, and a position paper on the provision of security by local authorities.

The SC was able to have a definite impact working with national embassies to plan for NGO staff evacuation. SC members identified which nationalities were represented in member NGOs, and which of those nationalities did not have diplomatic representation in Sudan. Visits were made to individual embassies (often with an NGO staff member from the relevant country) and relationships developed where possible. Responsibility for leading this process was shared between 3 SC members, and visits were made to the HAC at the same time to reassure the government that these were core business continuity issues to deal with uncertainty.

Overall, however, these security problems illustrate the limitations of coordination in the face of both practical constraints and political uncertainty: despite generally productive relations with the HAC, the 2009 expulsions were the result of a political decision made above the HAC level.

The Forum has never discussed what its exit strategy might be, largely because none of the members can envisage a time when humanitarian needs in Sudan will be fully addressed. The Forum has survived because it offers added value for its 66 members in three main ways, all of which encourage Forum members to continue participating in Forum discussions. First is access to information through the various other members; second is access to decision-makers (including donors) at a higher level than would otherwise be possible; and third is mutual support and a sense of solidarity in a difficult operating environment. SC membership provides similar benefits but to an even greater degree, and also increases the credibility of an agency.

The next year in Sudan is filled with unknown variables, especially the independence referendum for southern Sudan in June 2011. Humanitarian needs are unlikely to disappear soon, and it is possible that coordination may be disrupted again through further expulsions. The test for the Forum is whether the SC is able to provide both leadership and support to the INGO community in a potentially volatile environment, as well as providing an anchor for the wider humanitarian community in addressing existing and future problems on the ground.

## **Critical Lessons**

- The Forum has done an excellent job of keeping the NGO community informed of new developments, thus decreasing the risks to their staff and programmes. They have been able to represent INGO views at national and international forums (including the Humanitarian Country Team) and to institutional donors and government delegations visiting the country.
- This has to be counter-balanced by the failure of the humanitarian community overall to provide a coherent and consistent stance to the Sudanese government. Although the Forum is not responsible for e.g. the decline in safety and security in Darfur since the last round of expulsions, or the ongoing lack of access to IDPs and rural populations, it is clear that the Forum's advocacy on these issues has not had the desired impact.
- Approaches to advocacy are highly context-specific, and direct approaches may not always be the most productive means of addressing key issues where governments are extremely sensitive about criticism. Indirect and mediated advocacy, working with sympathetic government offices, UN agencies or donors, has proven to be more successful in Sudan, although it is more difficult to measure the impact of this type of advocacy.
- When setting up support bodies such as a Secretariat, it is essential to ensure a balance between the responsibility of its host agency and its SC. There needs to be an understanding on the part of the host and SC of their relative responsibilities and liabilities, and a high level of accountability from the host to all stakeholders.
- A strong Secretariat needs a strong SC to balance it. The SC should not become over-reliant on the Secretariat staff at the expense of SC member engagement. However a strong SC can easily become a weakness, as when the SC lost half of its members and the Forum was unable to find member NGOs with comparable capacity to replace them. The key seems to be taking a resilient network approach, with an SC composed of member NGOs with different mandates who can spread responsibilities reasonably widely and provide institutional memory. This may be difficult to balance with a desire for free elections for SC membership.
- Within NGOs there is often a lack of understanding of what being a CD involves in terms of coordination. In evaluating CD performance, HQs do not attach high value to coordination activities despite the fact that this is often essential for the organisations work. In Sudan, some CDs from larger agencies had agreed with their HQs that a specific percentage of their time would be spent on Forum activities (in at least one case including this in their job description) and this investment paid off for the entire humanitarian community.

## SOURCES

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