The Importance of Coordination in Humanitarian Action

Dr. Mohamed A. Dahir, PhD

The Importance of Coordination in Humanitarian Action

Dr. Mohamed A. Dahir, PhD

Adjunct Lecturer at the United Nations University for Peace- UPEACE

Email: abdinoorm@gmail.com

Abstract

Effective humanitarian coordination is crucial in responding to crises, ensuring that aid is delivered efficiently and sustainably to those in need. This article discusses the importance of coordination among humanitarian actors, including host authorities, intergovernmental agencies, governmental agencies, NGOs, and local populations. It highlights the benefits of coordination, such as improved efficiency, reduced duplication and gaps, enhanced accountability and transparency, and strengthened community engagement. The article also explores the challenges to coordination, including institutional and management obstacles, credibility and reputation concerns, and the need for inclusive and collaborative approaches. The role of emerging technologies in enhancing coordination is also examined. Ultimately, the article emphasizes the need for a systematic and inclusive approach to coordination, recognizing the different strengths and capacities of humanitarian actors.

1. Introduction

Humanitarian action is a critical and complex endeavor in the face of crises, be they natural disasters, armed conflicts, or epidemics. Its primary goals are the saving of lives and the relieving of suffering. The cornerstone of an effective humanitarian response is the coordination among all actors involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001; ATHA,

2008). This includes a wide range of stakeholders such as host authorities, intergovernmental agencies, governmental agencies, NGOs, and local populations. The systematic coordination of their efforts ensures that aid is delivered efficiently, effectively, and sustainably to those in need. For the purposes of this discussion, coordination is defined as a *"systematic utilization of policy instruments to deliver humanitarian assistance in a cohesive and effective manner."* These policy instruments include strategic planning, data management, resource mobilization, and providing leadership (Oxfam, 2006).

While all operational stakeholders share the common objective of alleviating suffering and saving lives, wide variance in organizational structure, technical expertise, mission, and political interests may hinder or prevent natural coordination on the field (Donini, 1996). Indeed, the term *"coordination"* itself may prompt debate, with some actors advocating for the alternative idiom of *"operational cooperation"* to avoid the connotation of a top-down, hierarchical system (Minear et al., 1992). Despite these challenges and the potential for increased bureaucracy, the benefits of coordination can be tremendous. It not only improves humanitarian operations by reducing duplication and addressing gaps, but, more critically, the beneficiary population also gains from better-coordinated activities (United Nations, 2005; Sphere Project, 2004).

2. Historical Context and Key Actors

The evolution of humanitarian coordination has been a journey toward a more structured and coherent system (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001). The legal basis for this discussion is the principle that the responsibility to provide for the basic needs of a population lies first with the affected state. It is only when the state is unwilling or unable to provide for such needs that the focus shifts to the complementary or auxiliary role of humanitarian organizations (ICRC, 2004).

The first attempt to organize the UN humanitarian system was the General Assembly Resolution 2816 of 14 December 1971, which created the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) *"to mobilise, direct and coordinate relief"* (Minear et al., 1992). This effort, however, was not a success (Donini, 1996).

A more comprehensive framework was later established by General Assembly Resolution 46/182, which created the post of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). This led to the establishment of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), which was later replaced by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 1997, with a more streamlined mandate focused on coordination, advocacy, and policy development (UNGA, 1991; IASC, 2006). Due to its broad and often early presence on the ground, UN agencies were central in the early development of coordination strategies. However, the importance of coordination has now grown to encompass any number and character of humanitarian organizations (Oxfam, 2006).

Effective coordination requires an inclusive system that spans three basic networks of humanitarian organizations. A review commissioned by the UN's ERC identified these networks to which most humanitarian organizations belong. They are:

United Nations Agencies: Within this network, essential coordination functions are adopted by the ERC, the IASC, UNOCHA, and the Humanitarian Coordinators (HC, at the country level). The UN system is often seen as a key driver of coordination due to its institutionalized approach (Donini, 1996; United Nations, 2005).

The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement: This network encompasses the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and National Societies. It operates under coordination mechanisms such as the Seville Agreement (IFRC, 1997; ICRC, 2004).

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): NGOs are linked through three main consortia: InterAction, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR). The Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) also facilitates thematic coordination within this network (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001; Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007).

A key distinction between these networks lies in the binding nature of decisions taken by lead actors in a coordination network. In the UN and Red Cross systems, such decisions are often binding on participating agencies, whereas in the NGO network, adherence to decisions is often only invited or strongly encouraged (ATHA, 2008). An effective coordination approach must be inclusive, recognizing and leveraging the different mechanisms across all three networks to build a collective response (Oxfam, 2006).

3. The Importance of Coordination

The importance of humanitarian coordination enjoys nearly universal recognition in the field. It allows for the most efficient, cost-effective, and successful operations possible (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001; ATHA, 2008).

Efficiency and Resource Allocation: Coordination is a significant impetus behind calls for humanitarian action as it promotes efficiency in terms of cost, labor, and resources (Oxfam, 2006). A coordinated effort ensures that resources are not wasted and are channeled to where they are most needed. A common framework for identifying priorities and agreeing on a division of labor can significantly improve the overall humanitarian response, ensuring that organizational strengths, such as geographic presence or technical expertise, are fully utilized (United Nations, 2005). Sensibly and sensitively employed, coordination instruments inject an element of discipline without unduly constraining action.

Reduction of Duplication and Gaps: A core objective of coordination is to avoid overlaps and identify gaps in aid, which is a key operational consideration when maximizing the impact of multiple aid providers. The *Cluster Approach*, endorsed by the IASC in 2005, was specifically designed to address identified gaps and enhance the quality and efficacy of the response through improved predictability and accountability (IASC, 2006). It ensures *"sufficient global capacity, predictable leadership, strengthened accountability and improved strategic field-level coordination"* (United Nations, 2005).

Enhanced Accountability and Transparency: Transparency and accountability, especially to the beneficiary population, are fundamental principles on which the success of humanitarian assistance and coordination hinge (Sphere Project, 2004). This is complemented by adherence to codes of conduct and best practices, such as the *Principles of Partnership* (Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007). A well-coordinated system ensures that actors can be held responsible for their actions and that decision-making power is, to the extent possible, in the hands of the people affected by crises.

Strengthened Community Engagement: Strengthening the capacity of local actors is an important consideration in the development of a coordination approach. An inclusive coordination strategy that recognizes and incorporates local capacity and coping mechanisms is crucial (CaLP, 2020). This approach results in long-term benefits in terms of self-reliance for the population and facilitates a smoother transition from humanitarian assistance to development activities (ATHA, 2008).

Adherence to Principles: Humanitarian principles and international law should underpin all aspects of humanitarian assistance and, by association, all discussions of coordination (ICRC, 2004). The principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality are fundamental to humanitarian assistance and must be considered in coordination strategies. As a member of a wider group, actions taken by one humanitarian organization that compromise a key principle may have *"unintended and potentially dangerous results for other organizations acting in the same area"* (IFRC, 1997).

4. Obstacles and Challenges to Coordination

Despite its importance, humanitarian coordination faces significant challenges. There exist a number of challenges to the efficient and effective implementation of coordination strategies. One such challenge is the criticism often levied that coordination adds another level of bureaucracy to a system already often plagued by politics, conditionality, earmarks, and demands (Donini, 1996). If coordination strategies are to be adopted, it is stressed that they should not be implemented at the expense of unnecessary or unacceptable delays in the delivery of urgently needed assistance (Minear et al., 1992).

Institutional and Management Obstacles: Within the humanitarian community's response to an emergency, there may exist *"varying levels of competition, financial pressure, territoriality, and internal tension."* Vague or ambiguous organization mandates, as well as overlapping or competing agendas, can test any organization's willingness to cooperate and result in substandard coordination practices (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001).

Credibility and Reputation: If an inadequate coordination strategy is developed or an adequate policy is only partially implemented, there may develop the risk of harming the credibility and reputation of humanitarian action in general, and especially in the specific locale. This may also potentially delay the arrival of essential aid to the affected population in place (Oxfam, 2006).

Three Types of Coordination: The provided document delineates three basic types of coordination, each with its own benefits and challenges (ATHA, 2008):

a) *Coordination by command*: This form, based on strong leadership and authority, is often ineffective as actors may not respond well to a system where power is highly concentrated and exercised through the use of *"carrots and sticks."*
b) *Coordination by consensus*: This approach views leadership as important, but recognizes that coordination should be gained through consensus. Case studies suggest that although this approach may result in coordination, such cooperation risks decreasing as time progresses (Donini, 1996).
c) *Coordination by default*: In this type, basic coordination activities, such as information sharing and a functional division of labor, take place largely on the strength of their *"context-specific utility."* These strategies are ad-hoc and unique to the circumstances (Minear et al., 1992).

5. The Role of Emerging Technologies

Emerging technologies have enabled and streamlined humanitarian coordination in recent years, leading to cost savings and resource efficiency (UNOCHA, 2017; CaLP, 2020). The use of technology is a form of operational coordination, focused on logistical and sectoral efforts. For example, actors with a developed skill set or with exceptional information gathering, analysis, or comprehensive data sources are able to disseminate information in a way that maximizes its utility and effect (United Nations, 2005).

Mobile apps and social media have facilitated better communication between relief workers and affected communities (CaLP, 2020). Artificial intelligence (AI) has participated in decision-making by analyzing data and making proper projections, while biometrics have been used for the identification of targeted communities even in contexts where people do not have national ID cards, such as in Somalia (WFP, 2018). Furthermore, digital cash transfers have made milestones in reaching otherwise inaccessible communities (CaLP, 2020). The use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and remote sensing has also facilitated assessments, monitoring, and the search for disaster survivors, leading to a more prioritized response (UNOCHA, 2017). These

technological advancements have the potential to further enhance coordination efforts and the principled delivery of humanitarian assistance.

6. Conclusion

Humanitarian coordination is a critical component of effective humanitarian response. By working together and leveraging each other's strengths, humanitarian actors can deliver aid more efficiently and sustainably, ultimately saving lives and alleviating suffering (Sphere Project, 2004; Oxfam, 2006). The development of common strategies, policies, and mechanisms, such as the Global Humanitarian Platform and the Cluster Approach, has improved coordination efforts in recent years (IASC, 2006; Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007). However, challenges persist, and it is essential to continue to adapt and improve coordination approaches to meet the evolving needs of crisis-affected populations (Donini, 1996; Reindorp & Wiles, 2001).

The use of emerging technologies, such as mobile apps, social media, and artificial intelligence, holds promise for enhancing coordination and improving humanitarian response (UNOCHA, 2017; WFP, 2018; CaLP, 2020). By prioritizing coordination and collaboration, humanitarian actors can better respond to complex emergencies and support the recovery and resilience of affected communities. Ultimately, effective humanitarian coordination requires a commitment to inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, as well as a willingness to learn and adapt in the face of changing circumstances (Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007; ICRC, 2004).

In complex emergencies, the incursion of humanitarian organizations and material can be overwhelming. The timely, effective, and appropriate delivery of humanitarian assistance is therefore of great importance (United Nations, 2005). The development of common strategies, policies, mechanisms, and tools, such as the Global Humanitarian Platform and the Cluster Approach, has improved the delivery of assistance over recent years, while recognizing the importance of collaborative and inclusive processes aimed at building on the different strengths and capacities of actors (IASC, 2006).

Not only are the humanitarian operations themselves improved, but, more critically, the beneficiary population gains from better-coordinated activities (Sphere Project, 2004). Coordination is a detailed, varying, and often complex undertaking, but case studies have demonstrated the need for multifaceted cooperation among humanitarian actors (Reindorp & Wiles, 2001; Minear et al., 1992). By recognizing the importance of an inclusive, system-wide approach, continued progress may be made, building on the different strengths and capacities of all humanitarian actors (Oxfam, 2006).

References

1. Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP). *The State of the World's Cash Report,* 2020.

2. Donini, Antonio. *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda,* Occasional Paper #22 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute, 1996).

3. Donini, Antonio. *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda,* Watson Institute, 1996.

4. Global Humanitarian Platform. *Principles of Partnership (PoP),* 2007.

5. Humanitarian Coordination: An Overview, ATHA Thematic Brief Series, 2008.

6. Humanitarian Coordination: An Overview, January 2008. ATHA Thematic Brief Series.

7. Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, 2005.

8. Humanitarian Response Review, United Nations, August 2005.

9. IASC, *Cluster Approach Guidance Note,* 2006.

10. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). *Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response,* 24 November 2006.

11. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). *Humanitarian Principles and International Humanitarian Law,* 2004.

12. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). *The Seville Agreement and Supplementary Measures,* 1997.

13. Minear, Larry et al. *United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis, 1990-1992,* Occasional Paper #13 (Providence R.I.: Watson Institute for International Studies, 1992).

14. Minear, Larry et al. *United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis, 1990-1992,* Watson Institute, 1992.

15. Oxfam International. *OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Coordination,* December 2006.

16. Oxfam International. *OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Coordination,* 2006.

17. Reindorp, Nicola and Wiles, Peter. *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience,* June 2001. Overseas Development Institute.

18. Reindorp, Nicola and Wiles, Peter. *Humanitarian Coordination: Lessons from Recent Field Experience,* 2001.

19. The Sphere Project. *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.*

20. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (19 December 1991). *Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations.*

21. UNOCHA. *Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Humanitarian Response: Opportunities and Challenges,* 2017.

22. World Food Programme (WFP). *Biometric Authentication for Beneficiary Management: Field Experiences,* 2018.