

# CRACKS IN COORDINATION:

# TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN COUNTRY TEAMS

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A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION





## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

In emergency contexts, humanitarian needs often surpass what any single organisation can manage alone. Coordination among aid agencies is crucial to ensure comprehensive coverage of needs and prevent gaps and duplication in response activities. Effective coordination, however, requires more than just [participation and representation](#); it also requires strong trust and healthy team dynamics.

This paper presents a snapshot of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) dynamics based on the experiences of over 30 NGO Forum Coordinators in various humanitarian and nexus contexts. The findings highlight critical gaps in trust, healthy conflict, and commitment within HCTs. Addressing these issues could significantly improve response performance and outcomes for affected populations.

### HCT Dynamics

A team is any group of people who perform interdependent tasks to achieve a common mission or specific objective. Humanitarian Country Teams are arguably the most important teams in the humanitarian response system: They are responsible for making the strategic decisions that guide the response at the country level.<sup>i</sup> These decisions directly and indirectly determine the overall response performance and the outcomes for crisis-affected populations.

HCTs, as with any coordination mechanism, consist of multiple agencies with different mandates, including political and development mandates, and differing policies, resource levels and capacities. While HCT members generally have an overall common goal of aiding people in need, they are also in competition for funding and must manage different donor requirements and head office directives.

It is perhaps no surprise that recent Interagency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs) have found that the team dynamics in HCTs are of concern. In Ethiopia, “the HCT was everything but a team, leading to serious dysfunctionality.<sup>ii</sup>” In Afghanistan, there was considerable division and “acrimony in the HCT.<sup>iii</sup>”

“I’ve never thought of Humanitarian Country Teams as teams. I know the word “team” is in there, but it’s just never occurred to me. That speaks a lot to the dynamics.” NGO Forum Representative

As emotions can provide valuable data,<sup>iv</sup> to get a sense of NGO Forum Coordinators' experiences of dynamics at HCTs, ICVA conducted a word cloud exercise (**See below**). Participants overwhelmingly had poor experiences at HCTs and felt frustrated, demotivated, and bored, which speaks to a lack of relevant, open and action focused discussions. They also felt excluded and unrepresented, which speak to poor engagement and consultation, which has critical implications for good decision making and response performance. HCTs meeting should be the most interesting and engaging meetings in a humanitarian context. Something is clearly not right.





Figure 1: Refer to the word cloud (HCT meetings make me feel)

## The Building Blocks of Team Performance

There are many models of team performance, trust is critical to team performance. This paper uses the 'Five Dysfunctions of Team' model, as it is straightforward and provides practical insights. It identifies a set of interlinked behaviours that can promote or inhibit team performance, all founded on the level of trust between team members: A lack of trust between team members leads to a fear of conflict; the absence of conflict prevents people from voicing their genuine concerns about an issue. This leads to a lack of commitment to the goals of the team. As people are not committed to the positions or outcomes of the team, they avoid any accountability to others. This results in poor attention and consequently, poor team performance.

This model also shows that in high performing teams, the presence of trust leads to a culture of healthy conflict where disagreements are debated; there is an alignment to a common set of objectives and a culture of accountability to high performance, which leads to good results.



## Experiences of NGO Forum Coordinators in HCT Meetings

ICVA conducted live Mentimeter surveys with NGO Forum Coordinators to get a snapshot of their experiences of the dynamics at HCT meetings. The survey employed an adapted version of a questionnaire based on the model. Two meetings were conducted: one online with 25 INGO and mixed forum coordinators and deputies in February 2024 and one in-person with 16 Mixed and National NGO Fora at the ICVA NGO Forum Leadership Exchange in Geneva in March 2024. The findings of the survey and discussions on the first three building blocks of the model - Trust, Conflict and Commitment - are presented below.

**Trust** - Trust is the foundation of all successful human cooperation, engagements and transactions, whether in societies, organizations, and personal relationships. Trust requires vulnerability, as it means taking risks with what you care about. Trust also helps people manage risks in uncertain situations and having working relationships built on trust allows us to get better, faster results, with less stress.<sup>v</sup>

“I kept finding that my inputs at HCT meetings were not included in the minutes. I wrote on multiple occasions to ask them to be put into the minutes, but the minutes didn’t change. I eventually gave up participating in HCT, what was the point if my words didn’t matter?” National NGO Leader & HCT Representative in conversation with ICVA, May 2024

The survey results show significant gaps in key behaviours that build trust among HCT members. Participants were generally ambivalent about both the confidentiality of HCTs and the skill level of their members. Across the board, sentiments were pessimistic in terms of time dedicated to relationship building and risk sharing.

They also noted leaders rarely admitted when mistakes were made. This is a missed opportunity for building trust: 93% of 157 humanitarian leaders surveyed at the 2024 ICVA Annual Conference stated:

“they are impressed when an NGO admits a mistake: It shows accountability and leadership.<sup>vi</sup>”

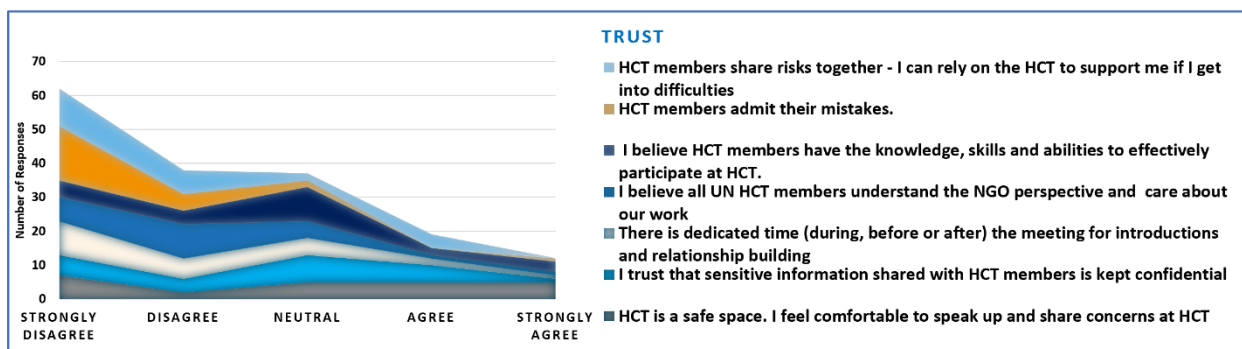


Figure 2: Responses from INGO & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators, and National & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators



**Healthy Conflict** - Trust is required for healthy conflict: Conflict allows individuals to express their differences and to recognize diversity with people’s experiences. Without trust, teams are unlikely to engage in unfiltered, passionate debate about key issues. Successful leaders recognize that effective decision-making in their organizations will always involve conflict: conflict in ideas, conflict in approaches and conflict in how ideas are deployed<sup>vii</sup>. Stifling conflict can be counterproductive: It can increase the likelihood of destructive behaviours like gossip, shouting, silence or withdrawal.

“The current humanitarian system is essentially built on distrust. Competitive, risk averse and compliance focused leadership behaviours are rewarded, which really impacts on effective response. Organisations and donors need to reward collaboration, risk-taking and engagement if we want to see a change.” INGO Forum Representative

The general sentiment among participants is that HCTs are largely conflict averse and difficult issues are avoided. There was an overarching sense that HCTs and UN-led coordination bodies are broadly information sharing platforms and not strategic decision-making bodies that encourage debate. Some participants felt this was a deliberate strategy. There was a slightly more positive outlook in terms of whether diverging views are voiced at HCTs. However, there was a broad level of agreement that conflict was not addressed sufficiently.

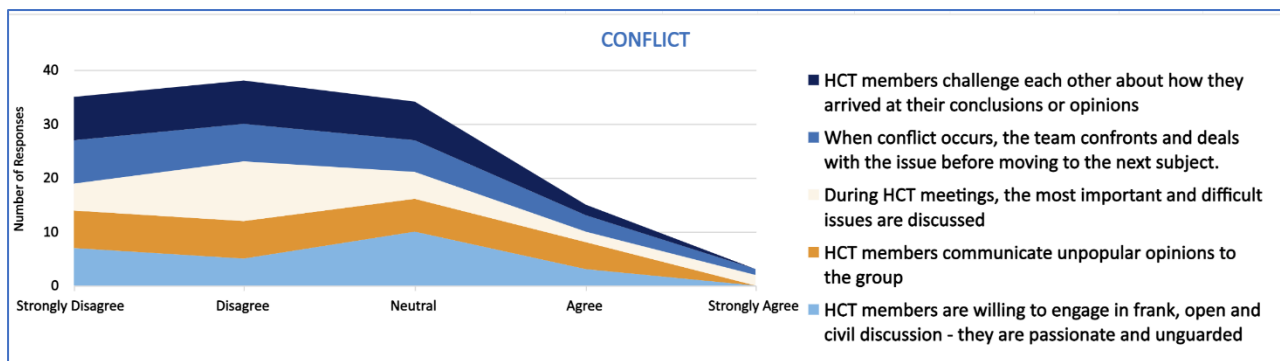


Figure 3: Responses from INGO & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators, and National & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators

**Commitment** - Without conflict, team members struggle to commit to decisions, as they do not feel they have shaped them. This can create an environment of ambiguity and confusion. We often assume buy-in with a decision, but experiences have shown that members of coordination mechanism often do not know or uphold an agreed upon position or policy paper.<sup>viii</sup> It’s easy to mistake silence with consent: It is critical coordination leaders check that people understand and agree with a proposed decision, otherwise members end up working at cross purposes.

Participants, and in particular national NGOs forum coordinators, reported that there is little space and time for meaningful discussion at HCT and that meetings are largely information sharing, which would be better done as an email. Members generally lacked clarity on the purpose and priorities of HCT, and the HCT agenda did not necessarily reflect the response priorities. While national NGO Fora were reasonably confident that decisions at HCT had buy-in, there was less optimism among INGO Coordinators that everyone was onboard. Participants flagged the lack of workplans, clear meeting structures and lack of follow up on action points.



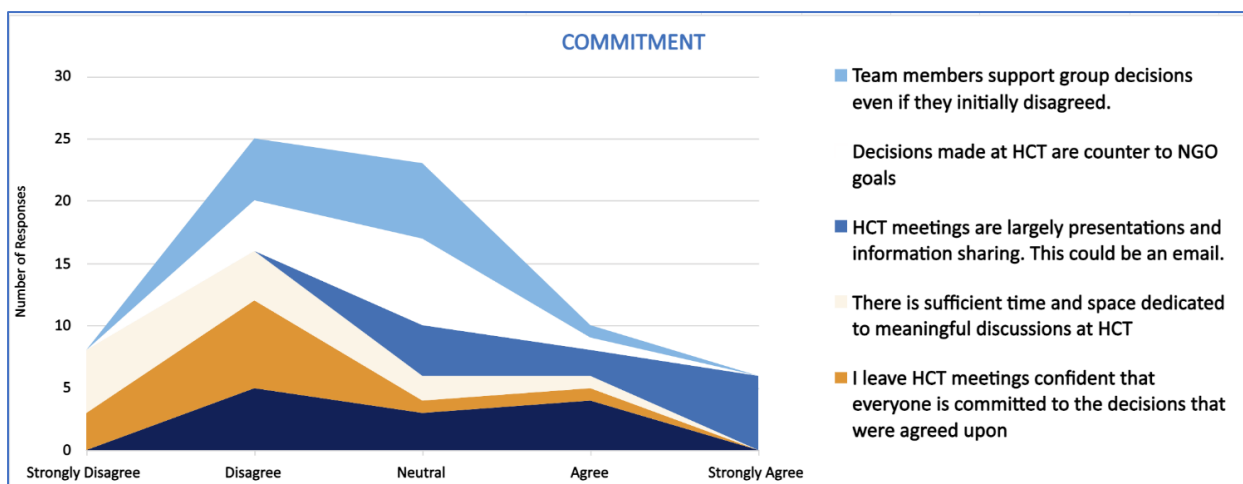
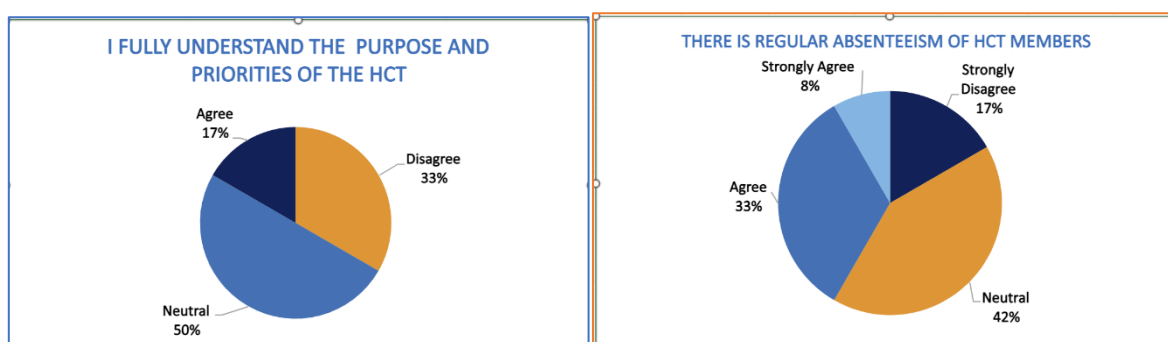


Figure 4: Responses from INGO & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators, and National & Mixed NGO Fora Coordinators



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The commonality of experiences among NGO Forum Coordinators and NGO Forum staff who participate in HCTs suggests there is a systemwide problem with HCT functionality, based on an absence of investment in trust-building and creating safe spaces for discussion. Investing in strengthening trust in coordination mechanisms could support better information sharing and decision-making, which will lead to improvements in response performance and ultimately in improving assistance, services and protection for people in need. Building trust and safe spaces in teams therefore needs to be seen as a mission critical issue and not an add-on or “nice to have.”

### Overall Recommendations:

- This paper provides a brief snapshot of HCT dynamics from NGO Fora Coordinators’ perspective. An in-depth review of the HCT and other coordination mechanisms’ dynamics should be conducted with a more representative sample of agencies. This review should also identify the key barriers and enablers for coordination leaders for strengthening trust in HCTs.
- Conduct 360 reviews or feedback sessions in coordination mechanisms that examine soft skills and levels of trust.
- OCHA and agencies hosting coordination leaders should invest in training in soft skills. Soft skills are vital skills as they are key to success, but they are often the hardest skills to learn. This requires early and ongoing investment. <sup>ix</sup>

- The HLSS should develop and rollout guidance for effective meeting management for coordination leaders. Many issues could be resolved by better meeting agendas, objectives and approaches.
- Recruit coordination leaders on their relational skills and emotional intelligence, as well as their technical competence and experience in complex environments.

“We are working in contexts filled with fear. It’s so hard to trust anyone when you don’t know who they are, particularly in complex contexts when humanitarian staff are being targeted and arrested. Meetings have been recorded and shared by colleagues to the authorities. We need to expect that, but rather than avoiding communicating we need to be careful to keep our language neutral, and keep our conversations focused on the response and helping people in need. A clear humanitarian identity can help protect us, as does being fair and transparent.” INGO member in conversation with ICVA

### Recommendations for Building Trust in HCTs:

- Build trust by having smaller and ideally in-person meetings – ideally no more than 12-15 people for meaningful discussion. If this is not practical then arrange separate types of meetings, large ones for information sharing and small ones for active discussion and decision-making.
- Ensure space for discussions: Rather than conducting the whole meeting in plenary, break people into working groups to debate specific topics and present back to plenary so more voices are heard.
- At the start of meetings, coordination meeting leaders should state the meeting objectives. This is not the same as the agenda – this is about stating what decisions the meeting is expected to make. They should also signpost the expected behaviours such as confidentiality, speaking with a humanitarian voice and encourage openness and respect for diverse opinions.
- Given concerns about information leaks and reprisals, it may be helpful to discuss and put in place specific confidentiality requirements such as leaving phones out of the meeting room, anonymising agencies when speaking.
- Onboard new HCT members so they are familiar with the objectives and ways of working of HCT. ICVA provides an onboarding module. Please contact the ICVA Humanitarian Coordination team for more information.
- Give time for relationship building. Humanitarians are all busy, but networking is key to building trust and beneficial for finding opportunities together. Provide dedicated agenda time (e.g. a coffee break) for networking. HCT retreats and social events were also considered helpful for this.
- Provide NGOs and in particular NNGOs dedicated time on the agenda and speaking slots to ensure they are consulted, and their concerns are included. Some NGOs have found a work around the lack of consultation at HCT by establishing regular meetings as a small group directly with the HC/RC.





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Humanitarian Hub, La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva  
[secretariat@icvanetwork.org](mailto:secretariat@icvanetwork.org)  
[www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)