

Adapting Humanitarian Coordination

Challenges, Innovations, and Future
Directions for NGO-led mechanisms

Executive Summary



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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This is an independent report, the views and findings expressed in it are the responsibility of the author only.

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INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

The world is increasingly entering a period where conflict and climate related humanitarian emergencies are becoming both more frequent and more intense. Since the formalisation of the global humanitarian 'system' and the creation of the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) structures in the early 1990s, there has also been an increasing and well documented shift towards a more multi-polar international order with far more complex geo-politics. This has come with increasing risks to several established international norms in recent years, with humanitarian principles and respect for international humanitarian law being more overtly threatened.

Against this backdrop state and non-state actors have been increasingly instrumentalising aid, and directly or indirectly restricting humanitarian assistance in contested environments. This issue is likely to worsen as the impacts of the global climate crisis bleed into more and more highly contested civil conflicts. To continue to deliver principled assistance under these circumstances, international and national civil society, along with multi-lateral institutions, have increasingly been implementing or considering alternative humanitarian coordination

NOTES ON THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

This report is drawn from analysis of four current major humanitarian responses: Syria, Nigeria, Sudan and Myanmar. The focus of this work has primarily been on contexts where there is active discussion of non-traditional coordination mechanisms in place, particularly focusing on complex political and civil conflict crises. These have been chosen as such scenarios often create more significant constraints for IASC coordination mechanisms.

The term 'traditional' IASC coordination models is used to refer to the current internationally led humanitarian coordination system under the umbrella of the IASC at global and response levels with relevant supporting humanitarian clusters, task forces and sub-national coordination systems (and noting that humanitarian coordination had been taking place for many decades prior to the IASC). By their nature 'alternative' coordination models vary in construction but generally refer to civil society or community-led structures that

and response models, to varying degrees of success. This has included assistance being coordinated more directly by International NGO (INGO) and National NGO (NNGO) networks, and community-led coordination structures. A prominent example is where aid in non-state-controlled areas is delivered cross-border, with or without the agreement of the state.

Whilst such mechanisms are far from a new concept, if the current trends continue it is likely that such modalities will become more frequent. Although often developed as 'work arounds' to the barriers facing the system, they may also present opportunities for enhancing abilities to deliver principled humanitarian assistance in complex settings in manners that are more contextual, locally owned and accountable. It is critical that there is reflection at both response and global levels on what has and has not worked to date in such settings and how civil society actors at all levels can support such a continuation of principled aid modalities. This research offers some analysis drawing from specific contexts and their implications for global and response level humanitarian coordination.

are not fully part of the IASC system in its usual implementation. It is important note, however, that in virtually all settings, linkages will exist between the two and vary to great or lesser degrees dependent on the context.

There are also multiple other contexts both today and historically where civil society led humanitarian coordination and response models are present to varying degrees and which could not be included within this research for time and resource constraints. Initial findings are therefore offered within this report, but further analysis and research is strongly encouraged across multiple contexts to iteratively shape effective alternatives in humanitarian coordination.

ALTERNATIVES IN COORDINATION

WHY A FOCUS ON ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION MODELS?

In an increasingly complex global environment, the international humanitarian system is continuing to evolve, driven by both internal reform pressure and external contextual factors. Analysis suggests that the combination of these two factors at global and national levels is driving the current focus on contextually specific coordination. Externally, the global humanitarian system is facing a far more challenging environment as a result of both worsening crisis and a more difficult political environment:

- **A changing nature of crisis** – Humanitarian needs are higher than ever with increasing levels of civil conflict, continually rising displacement, worsening health outbreaks, and deteriorating food insecurity globally. With the climate crisis unfolding, the world is arguably entering a state of ‘polycrisis’ or ‘permacrisis’ with compounding crises worsening one another, a trend that is likely to continue.
- **More complex and contested geopolitics** – at the same time, the geopolitical environment has become more complex in recent decades, with a shift from more unipolar power structures to a multi-polar order. At the same time, rising populism and nationalism are leading to direct and implicit attacks on multilateralism, international laws and global norms. This is further eroding principled humanitarian space including where states are increasingly willing to instrumentalise or militarise humanitarian aid.

EVOLUTION AND ITERATION OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

Since the creation of the IASC in the 1990s, the global humanitarian (eco)system has continued to develop. Several reform processes have taken place, including the creation of the cluster system, the Transformative Agenda, and the Grand Bargain including its 2.0 and 2.0 iterations. Alongside these reforms, professionalisation has occurred with the evolution of standards, commitments and processes.

Three key trends are important to note:

- **Increasing centralisation** – Despite renewed calls for progress on localisation and power transfer, significant parts of the humanitarian system have increasingly centralised. A higher proportion of funding is channelled through the UN than previously, and the formalisation of processes has led to power and decision making centralised in an internationally focussed central system.
- **Limited meaningful progress on power transfer** – Whilst there are many strong positives of a more professional and coordinated system to be celebrated, there is recognition that the system has been slow to meaningfully transfer power to local and community actors, particularly in coordination and leadership. A heavy focus has tended to be around driving participation of local actors in traditional international coordination structures and far less on adapting international support to existing local capacities and systems in a context.
- **Increasing roles of civil society** – despite the centralisation, the role of civil society has evolved over the years, with NGOs (both international and national) taking or reclaiming larger roles in humanitarian leadership, including formal positions in coordination structures, co-leadership, and professionalising NGO Forums and networks, albeit with far more barriers still for NNGO and community networks.







OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

As a result of this changing context along with both pressures and desire to reform, the humanitarian system is arguably very close to a necessary pivot point. An inability to continue business as usual due to financing and contextual constraints, coupled with increasing claiming of space by civil society and local actors is likely to increase pressure to think contextually and creatively around humanitarian coordination and delivery mechanisms.

TYPES OF ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION MECHANISM

By their nature, coordination models that develop under complex and constrained environments tend to vary in focus and format as they are often designed to fulfil a bespoke need. In the four contexts analysed – Syria, Sudan, Nigeria, and

Myanmar- several models are being implemented or considered, from formalised NGO Forums with significant staffing to local community structures coordinating response while operating under the radar. Despite contextual differences, similarities are common. The following sets out various attributes that are demonstrated – noting that these are not binary choices and structures will often develop a mixture relevant for a crisis context.

 <p>Primary Function</p>	<p>Representation</p> <p>More traditional NGO Forums fulfil a role coordinating and representing member agencies, with a particular focus on advocacy, collective engagement and addressing constituency specific issues.</p>	<p>Operational coordination</p> <p>Increasingly several civil society coordination mechanisms are taking on operational coordination roles which may include area or sectoral coordination, common services and emergency response</p>
 <p>Types of Aid Actors</p>	<p>Community & local</p> <p>Alternative coordination has developed or iterated around community or local structures that have scaled up or pivoted towards crisis response. This is often in cases where existing civil society mutual aid have been in place.</p>	<p>International NGOs</p> <p>In other contexts, INGOs or a mixture of INGOs and NNGOs have coalesced around alternative coordination models in response to ongoing gaps in response coordination or rapid adaptation to new crisis environments</p>
 <p>Financing & Resources</p>	<p>Intermediary financing</p> <p>Coordination systems are playing a role in intermediary financing, including examples of INGO or NNGO systems acting as a facilitation point for intermediary or diaspora financing or supporting and facilitating NGO pooled funds</p>	<p>Coordination financing</p> <p>Financing of alternative coordination itself ranges from significant bilateral funding to INGO networks for dedicated staff, to volunteer self organization. Local and community networks lack dedicated funding most often.</p>
 <p>HDP Nexus</p>	<p>Acute crisis response</p> <p>Coordination mechanisms frequently are developing and being used in response to acute crisis, coordinating emergency response in complex settings where intentional systems may be slow to pivot or respond</p>	<p>Nexus approaches</p> <p>In other settings alternative coordination mechanisms have developed to support in contexts which go beyond the scope of the IASC systems, including joint humanitarian, development, peacebuilding operations.</p>
 <p>Profile & Visibility</p>	<p>High profile</p> <p>In some scenarios, highly visible NGO Forums and coordination systems are present, undertaking public facing representation and advocacy and sharing operational information and context analysis with external actors</p>	<p>Low-profile</p> <p>In other cases, alternative mechanisms are specifically working in low-profile or 'underground' modalities, most often because of direct safety and access threats, or due to the utility of strategic 'grey space' for access.</p>
 <p>Location & Modality</p>	<p>In situ</p> <p>Coordination mechanisms have developed directly in responses, often at sub-national or areas levels to fill gaps that international systems may not be able to plug in to as easily.</p>	<p>Remote/support</p> <p>In other cases coordination mechanism have developed specifically to support remote assistance in areas that are hard for international actors to access.</p> <p>Cross-border</p> <p>In some cases, coordination has formed specifically for aid delivery across state borders without consent of the state or de facto state, often coordinating across both sides.</p>

A PREDICTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ALTERNATIVES

Work by Beals E. in 2023 identified several key predictors of typologies and contexts where alternative mechanism for humanitarian assistance may be required as a result of threats to the access environment. Categorising these into four broad themes, they can be used as a useful indicator for global and response level coordination structures for where coordination and response arrangements may urgently need to adapt during points of crisis.

- **The nature of the crisis:** Where there is a major crisis or escalation leaving existing mechanisms overwhelmed - and particularly where there is a heavily contested and violent civil conflict. Natural disasters within politicised environments will fall into these and may increasingly become common. Particular note should be given to where development contexts pivot to emergencies as these can be slow to adapt.
- **The national political context:** Situations where there is a heavily authoritarian state or non-state authority controlling areas are likely to face more significant challenges in the international system working directly. Historical aid denial, restrictions on information or transparency all raise this risk.
- **The access context:** Where humanitarian access has become an instrument of the conflict itself, with ongoing or historical aid

instrumentalisation, attacks on humanitarians and undermining of humanitarian mechanisms, particularly where a state or de facto state becomes a primary impediment to access.

- **The geopolitical context:** Situations where there are effective stalemates on political solutions, often due to the political support of a P5 UNSC member state or a regional bloc protecting a state/non-state conflict party.

These predictors can provide a useful tool for national and global coordination mechanisms to consider alternative approaches for humanitarian coordination and assistance. Where a high number of the predictors are present, this could be used to immediately begin works considering alternative or complementary mechanisms in order to have multiple options as crisis develops. Tied in with IASC Scale Up Protocols, these could form the basis for a bespoke team working during emergency scale up phases to quickly look at alternative financing, coordination, common services and other mechanisms whilst longer and more bureaucratic processes play out.

LESSONS FROM ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION

Drawing on analysis of the four main responses considered, and global mechanisms, several key lessons are drawn out for non-traditional coordination approaches:

- **Planning strategically around coordination:** proactively and constructively assessing approaches to coordination mechanisms is critical, avoiding 'business as usual' approaches. In practice, this means relevant parts of the system having strategic conversations built on trusted inter-agency relationships around coordination and response, being willing to consider different approaches, regularly and transparently reviewing the coordination approach to test its fitness for purpose. Effective systems that are designed

around existing capacities and structures already in place can be critical here in order to maximise relevance, agility and accountability whilst strengthening local/community preparedness and response capacity.

- **A 'Whole Systems' approach:** Considering humanitarian coordination systems as a whole rather than specific constituent organisations or areas can be beneficial. This may mean that less traditional humanitarian actors such as local community groups or the private sector being active in a part of a response out of necessity, and different agencies utilising different access approaches, with the effectiveness of the entire system considered holistically. This requires

coordinators to be able to work across a complex ecosystem and build trust with diverse stakeholders, driving honest conversations around comparative advantages. Viewing access from an affected population perspective rather than agency perspective of presence or access is fundamental to ensure focus on a people centred approach rather than focus on the system itself.

- **Taking early action:** particularly in acute crisis, the need to pivot quickly to new emergencies or changes in context is essential, but often not sufficiently implemented. Alternative coordination and response mechanisms can provide a driver and vehicle to support this, given the scale and bureaucracy of international systems which can be slower to respond. Acute crisis management expertise remains a gap globally with challenges in the IASC systems being able to quickly adapt, particularly in complex political emergencies.
- **Leadership:** Trust is the cornerstone of a whole systems approach to humanitarian assistance, and more work is needed in supporting systems leadership approaches that are able to draw multiple diverse parts of a response together in complex scenarios. Investment in senior NGO coordinators and recognition of relevantly experience coordinators and NGO Forum Directors as senior leaders is essential to help NGO coordination platforms to be effective and strategic.
- **Effective coordination networks:** the effectiveness and accessibility of coordination mechanisms themselves are fundamental to their success. Significant work has been ongoing to support NGO forums and networks through ICVA, Interaction, SCHR and the NEAR Network amongst others and offers an important platform to continue support. In more complex settings, NGO networks are taking on operational coordination functions and several key lessons can be drawn in developing these, balancing distinct operational coordination responsibilities with member representation functions.
- **Financing and risk:** direct financing of coordination mechanisms and most importantly through to local actors is fundamental to their effectiveness yet remains a challenge. The reality of what is needed will depend on the context, but use of alternative pooled funds, intermediary funding mechanisms owned by NGOs or local actors, and consideration of rapid seed financing to bespoke coordination mechanisms can be critical, particular in the early stages of crisis. A mature and collective approach to risk is needed to support this – civil society actors need to be able to take risks in acute and complex crises in order to respond quickly and effectively, whilst avoiding simply

transferring risk to local coordination and response systems.

- **Logistics and common services:** In many contexts with constrained access, common services traditionally managed by the UN (logistics, pipelines, telecoms) are constrained. Civil society networks taking on some of these functions can be important and several 'Humanitarian to Humanitarian' (H2H) initiatives have developed in recent years that offer mechanisms that can be adapted to a context. Information sharing mechanisms are critical in alternative coordination systems, particularly in sensitive and contested areas and should be proactively developed, working to build trust with those at risk.
- **Regional and global coordination:** contextualised regional or sub-regional coordination structures such as the 'Whole of Syria' architecture can be critical in supporting bespoke coordination mechanisms in difficult environments. This is particularly true where a central nation state or de facto authority is instrumentalising aid and relationships with country level humanitarians are difficult. Global civil society networks have also been shown to be essential in supporting alternative coordination response early and linking them with global stakeholders, supporting a grounding of global policy decisions in crisis, or facilitating direct support.

RISKS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

There are multiple well-documented benefits of a more contextual and locally led coordination and response mechanisms – they can drive more relevant, accountable and contextually appropriate aid, often more agilely in times of crisis and with a stronger link to those directly affected. Such approaches also support community and local emergency preparedness and response capacities, a factor that will continue to increase in importance in the coming years with the climate crisis.

It is also critical, however, to acknowledge that alternative coordination mechanisms are not a panacea to broad humanitarian coordination challenges and they can come with several key risks. Considering these is useful in developing and supporting alternative coordination in a manner that drives the most effective aid delivery. Risks include:

- **Unintentional fragmentation** – By adopting alternative coordination models, there is a risk of increasing fragmentation of the humanitarian system, creating competition and undermining the IASC structures.
- **Unintentionally undermining operational effectiveness** – Increased attention on alternative coordination mechanisms can actually risk undermining them given that some mechanisms are effective precisely because they are low profile or ‘underground’.

MORE OR LESS ACCOUNTABLE?

Reduced or unclear accountability is often raised as a potential risk of alternative coordination and response models, particularly by stakeholders from multilateral institutions. To some degree, civil society networks and mechanisms lack the same vertical accountability that the UN and IASC systems have – within these structures, clusters are accountable to a lead agency and the HCT is accountable through the Humanitarian Coordinator to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (and eventually to the Secretary General and ultimately to member states of the UN). Similar global, hierarchical systems are not in place within civil society or NGO networks which can create challenges to managing accountability in traditional

- **Unintentionally constraining humanitarian space** – There is also a risk that the use of multiple mechanisms could undermine a principled approach to aid delivery and limit humanitarian space. This may be true where parts of response are seen as ‘unprincipled’ or competition between mechanisms leads to a race to the bottom on access.

To mitigate all three risks, however a ‘whole system’ approach - one that builds on mutual trust and respect between organisations - can help to develop coordination approaches that bring together multiple diverse actors around a common goal. This requires collectively working to the comparative advantage of multiple parts of a system rather than a binary either/or style approach. Strategic and transparent conversations between all parts of a response are critical here, along with recognition that the principles and effectiveness of the humanitarian system as a whole are more critical than any one specific actor or type of organisation. Operational experience in recent years has shown that the use of regional/ sub-regional mechanisms built on trust and collaboration can help minimise competition between parts of a humanitarian response if implemented effectively in line with this.

ways. These networks can range from highly informal to fully formalised (with many iterations in between), but often rely on a high degree of trust between those involved, notwithstanding increasing use of codified processes, policies, operating procedures and codes of conduct for NGO networks. Particular attention should be paid within civil society networks to ensuring that there are effective transparency and accountability mechanisms in place, balancing emergency response requirements with the need for robust accountability.

However, it is fundamental to note that vertical accountability is far from always effective in terms

of driving accountability to affected populations, and accountability between partners, or with donors. Multiple evaluations and primary interview with UN and non-UN stakeholders have highlighted accountability within the IASC structures and UN agencies being applied selectively or minimally at times. Even where it is applied robustly, questions can remain over how much accountability this

drives towards those affected by crisis, rather than those paying for aid. One potential benefit of more locally led coordination systems is that they often have a far stronger social contract with affected populations and as a result may have greater informal mechanisms of accountability to affected populations themselves.

GUIDANCE FOR ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION

Drawn from the lessons above, several operational recommendations are offered for alternative coordination mechanisms:

- **Develop and support contextualised coordination mechanisms** - Coordinators should work to develop bespoke approaches based on a local context and review these regularly. This should include a 'whole systems' approach, working through and strengthening existing capacities, and with international support tailored to enhance these. Focus should be shifted from 'how to incorporate local actors into international coordination structures towards 'how to adapt international mechanisms around a local context'.
- **Agile crisis response** – Response in acute crisis situations should be agile, rapid, risk-sensitive and based on the specificities of the context. Protracted crises and development contexts are often slow to pivot with agencies lacking up to date emergency procedures, preparedness plans and having limited emergency response technical experts in place.. Drawing on limited and contextually relevant crisis and surge support can be critical to moving quickly to adapt to changing circumstances, particularly when considering how to work through and reinforce existing local capacities and systems that are likely already responding.
- **People-centred access** – Access should be considered from the perspective of affected populations first and foremost, and not agency or specific coordinating structures. This may include coordination structures prioritising supporting less traditional humanitarian actors and mechanisms. The use of independent or semi-independent access and analysis capabilities can be useful to drive this and minimise self-censure.
- **Effective governance** – governance and leadership within civil society coordination structures is essential. This is likely to include investment in senior leaders with expertise in system leadership, ensuring that governance systems and steering committees are trained

and supported, and developing clear principles of coordination within structures and between different parts of response.

- **Bespoke financing arrangements** – Coordination systems should give specific focus to effective financial mechanisms with a focus on financing that can rapidly and effectively get funding to those with the best access. Beyond just advocating for direct donor funding, good practical examples are present around civil society intermediary financing and pooled funds which can offer positive solutions, and coordination systems can be used to encourage rapid seed funding from private and diaspora stakeholders during acute crises.
- **Common services** – Coordination systems should focus on assessing and facilitating effective common services in constrained environments, contextualised for the environment. Multiple H2H offerings are scaling up including supply chain, safety and technology services, and active lessons can be drawn across contexts including on challenging issues such as money transfers outside banking systems.

A GLOBAL ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Alongside, the global humanitarian system is critical in creating an enabling environment for context-specific development of coordination and response approaches. Several key recommendations are outlined below.

- **Refocussing efforts on humanitarian space** – against the backdrop of eroding humanitarian space, international actors including the UN and member states should focus efforts on reclaiming and maintaining principled humanitarian space. The use of independent facilities to monitor and follow up on aid issues could be useful here, and allow response level focus to be on negotiating bespoke access arrangements.
- **Effective and diverse humanitarian leadership** – The need for enhanced and more diverse humanitarian leadership has been demonstrated through multiple evolutions of the architecture over the past four decades and is likely to still require significant work. In particular attention should be given to systems leadership approaches, working through the HC/RC talent pools and civil society leadership mechanism to encourage a more diverse and effective set of humanitarian leaders able to lead complex systems.
- **Agile and effective crisis response** – There are significant gaps in global emergency response mechanisms with rapid crisis response either slow to adapt and respond, or ill-suited to the nuances of complex contexts and existing local response capacities. Dedicated resources for emergency and crisis coordination that can be activated at speed is important, but this should be as agile as possible, designed to support existing first responders and context specific emergency mechanisms with tailored financing and targeted surge support.
- **Global financing approaches** - Financing mechanisms are critical to enabling a holistic approach to humanitarian response. It is essential that global multilateral and bilateral financing mechanisms are strengthened to drive more funding directly to operational actors and local entities. In parallel, the development and use

of alternative civil society led pooled funding mechanisms can be effective, particularly whilst longer term direct financing is worked out. Creative financing can also include diaspora or philanthropic financing, particularly as rapid seed funding in acute emergency contexts to support local first responders.

- **Learning across contexts** – Consideration of less traditional models remains an under analysed topic. Whilst significant research has taken place into local leadership and locally led mechanism, this has often come from a perspective of how local actors or civil society can be incorporated into existing humanitarian coordination rather than adapting for existing capacities.

The recommendations and analysis in this report offer initial proposals on approaches and work that could support more contextually effective coordination and response in the future. As several humanitarian leaders have noted in 2023, change in the humanitarian architecture is very unlikely to come from top-down reform processes. At a global pivot point, there is a significant opportunity for international actors to provide space and support to adapt coordination, leadership and response models – and particularly at points of acute or escalating crisis – in ways that promote stronger effectiveness and accountability.



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