

Adapting Humanitarian Coordination

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



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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Abbreviations

ARO	Annual Review of Operations	NNGO	National NGO
CAP	Common Appeals Process	OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
CBPF	Country Based Pooled Fund	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund	OPR	Operational Peer Review
CLA	Cluster Lead Agency	ORP	Operational Response Plan
DHA	UN Department for Humanitarian Affairs	P2P	Peer to Peer Project (IASC)
DHC	Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator	RC	Resident Coordinator
DINGOs	Damascus Based INGOs	RC/HC	Resident & Humanitarian Coordinator
DRHC	Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator	RHC	Regional Humanitarian Coordinator
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General	RSF	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
EDG	Emergency Directors Group	SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator	SCHR	Steering Committee on Humanitarian Response
GELI	Global Executive Leadership Initiative	SG	Secretary General
GHO	Global Humanitarian Overview	SHF	Sudan Humanitarian Forum
H2H	Humanitarian to Humanitarian	SIRF	Syria INGO Regional Forum
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission	SNA	Syrian National Army
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator	SNA	Syrian NGO Alliance
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team	SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary General
HLA	Humanitarian Leadership Academy	UNSC	UN Security Council
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan	UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution
IAHE	Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation	WoS	Whole of Syria
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee		
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative		
ICCG	Inter Cluster Coordination Group		
IHL	International Humanitarian Law		
IHRL	International Human Rights Law		
INGO	International NGO		
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also IS/ISIL)		
JIAF	Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework		
JOPS	Joint Operating Principles		
LNGO	Local NGO		
NES	Northeast Syria		
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation		
NIF	Nigeria INGO Forum		

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Introduction and summary of findings

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INTRODUCTION

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

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 and pre-date the IASC, 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 a manner that is 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.

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This report has been developed for ICVA and is intended to provide analysis and guidance to civil society networks and actors, donors and multilateral institutions when considering coordination in complex environments. Conducted between November 2023 and March 2024, the following research questions guided the analysis:

1. What is the **historical context** that has led to alternative modalities becoming more frequent?
2. What **current models exist in relation to alternative approaches for aid delivery**, leadership and coordination, particularly in relation to cross-border or non-state-controlled areas?
3. What role are **NGOs playing in response leadership and coordination** in such models and what roles could/should they be playing?
4. What **lessons and practical recommendations can be drawn** for new or

existing crises which may consider such modalities, including basic building blocks for potential NGO coordination structures?

5. What **support is required and what opportunities could be harnessed at global levels** to support NGO roles in humanitarian leadership and coordination?

6. What **risks and opportunities exist** in such scenarios for maintaining or strengthening principled humanitarian access, including opportunities for addressing current global power imbalance?

The research drew on interviews with 41 key informants from a mixture of UN, INGO, NNGO and donor stakeholders at response and global levels, in addition to the author's own experience and a literature review.

NOTES ON THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

SPECIFIC CONTEXTS CONSIDERED

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 global¹ and response levels² 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 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.

‘LOCALISATION’ AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The benefits and necessity of a more locally-led humanitarian system have been well documented and articulated over the years^{3 4}. This paper is not intended as a ‘localisation’ paper per se, to the extent that it does not argue for, or analyse, localisation for localisation’s sake. The findings in this report, however, are clear that ownership and leadership of humanitarian coordination by all levels of ‘local’ actors, including communities and community groups, sub-national or national civil

society is critical in promoting effective, rapid and dignified assistance. The exact nature of this will vary context by context noting that definitions of ‘local’ are themselves contested within countries and regions. The term ‘locally led’ is used in this report rather than ‘localisation’ and refers to leadership by varying degrees of organisation, civil society, or communities relevant for the context.

OTHER RELEVANT WORK

Given the remit of humanitarian coordination architectures, this study touches on a significant range of topics across the humanitarian system. In addition to the authors’ experience, the research for this paper has drawn on research by Emma Beals on humanitarian assistance in contested environments in Convoys, Cross Borders, Covert Ops: Responding to state-led arbitrary denial in civil wars; lessons from Syria, Myanmar and Ethiopia (2023). It has also drawn earlier series of papers by Jeremy Konyndyk on humanitarian system reform for the Centre for Global Development, including Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area Based Humanitarian Coordination Model (2020), as well as work on Survivor and Community Led Crisis Response through L2GP in recent years. It has also drawn off a significant number of operational and policy initiatives being implemented by ICVA, InterAction, SCHR, and the NEAR Network in recent years supporting the implementation of effective humanitarian coordination and NGO networks and forums.

AUTHOR NOTE

This report was developed by Garth Smith, who has worked in the humanitarian sector across conflict and natural disaster environments in South Asia, East Africa and the Middle East. He is a former INGO Country Director and NGO Forum Director, and has worked closely with UN, INGO and National coordination structures at multiple levels.

KEY FINDINGS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM BESPOKE 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 local 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 individual constituent organisations or areas can be highly beneficial. This may mean that less traditional humanitarian actors or the private sector being active in a part of a response out of necessity, utilising local and community first responders to a far greater degree, and different agencies utilising different access approaches in different areas, 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 and avoiding agency competition. Viewing access from an affected population perspective rather than agency perspective is fundamental to ensure focus on a people centred approach rather than a focus on powerful agencies and 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 expertise remains a gap globally with challenges in the IASC systems being able to quickly adapt in complex political

emergencies and often failing to work through local response capacities that are operational or emerge.

- **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 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. Investment in senior experienced systems leaders as NGO coordinators and Forum Directors is critical to support complex systems.
- **Financing and risk:** direct financing of coordination mechanisms and most importantly financing through to local actors is fundamental to the effectiveness of alternative coordination systems, 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 often 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.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION

Drawn from the lessons above, several operational recommendations are offered for alternative coordination mechanisms, outlined in more detail in the full report below.

- **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 coordination, and with international support tailored to enhance these rather than replace them. 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 despite such contexts having a high likelihood of crises reoccurring. 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 from an agency or institution perspective. This may include coordination structures prioritising support to less traditional humanitarian actors and mechanisms where necessary. The use of independent or semi-independent access analysis and reporting capabilities can be useful to drive this and minimise self-censure where the same agencies are reporting on access violations and negotiating access.
- **Effective, accountable leadership:** governance and leadership within civil society coordination structures is essential. This is likely to include investment in senior leaders with expertise in systems 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 and regional supporting environment:** work should be continued to provide ongoing support through global and regional NGO networks and systems, and by international NGOs, to create an enabling environment that supports more effective and contextualised coordination platforms at country and local levels. This is particularly critical in crisis periods where global and regional interlocutors can provide necessary support and linkages with wider global structures, institutions, and financing mechanisms.

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.

Endnotes

- 1 IASC (2022) *Structure of the IASC 2022-2023*, [Link](#)
- 2 IASC (2017) *Standard ToR: Humanitarian Country Teams*, [Link](#)
- 3 I. Wall & K. Hedlund (2016) *Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review*, [Link](#)
- 4 Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, Daniel Maxwell (2022) *Localisation: A Landscape Report*, [Link](#)

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Why alternatives in coordination?

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The creation of the IASC in 1991¹ brought together a formalised global system of humanitarian coordination for the first time to strengthen the way that agencies cooperated, resolved issues and advocated collectively. The creation established many of the common frameworks that exist today, including the Common Appeals Process (CAP), latterly Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (subsequently OCHA), the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). With subsequent reforms including the Humanitarian Reform process in 2005² and the Transformative Agenda in 2010³, a coordinated and complex humanitarian architecture has iteratively developed, leading much of the international response to both acute and protracted crises. In the past two decades, significant work has gone in to developing standards, processes, policies and procedures to support the implementation of the humanitarian system through the IASC and the mechanisms that underpin it.

As many commentators have noted in the intervening years, however, the humanitarian architecture is a highly complex and fluid ecosystem, made up of a diverse and nebulous group of stakeholders and mechanisms operating in complex and often difficult contexts. Coordination mechanisms that operate outside, alongside or under the radar of the IASC structures have been seen to greater or lesser degrees since and before the IASC's creation. In the recent past, however, there has been an increased interest by international humanitarian organisations in such approaches given the operational and contextual challenges that many have faced in delivering effective assistance. The following section offers some analysis of why this has been a particular topic of interest amongst humanitarian agencies, concluding it is likely a mixture of having to operating in a more challenging global and response specific context, alongside innovation and progress in power transfer driving a re-consideration of the most effective response.

AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

THE DEVELOPING NATURE OF CRISIS

At the start of 2024, humanitarian needs are amongst the highest in recorded history. Based on OCHA's figures, nearly 300 million people are in need of assistance, the number of displaced people has doubled in a decade, over 250 million people are food insecure and 20% of the world's children are caught up in conflict⁴.

Worsening crisis drivers and a global 'poly crisis'

Violent conflict has escalated over recent years with more countries in conflict than ever before and more civil wars or internal conflicts, with numbers continuing to escalate. This is causing direct suffering and displacement, but also undermining vulnerability to non-conflict disasters and natural hazards, further increasing the humanitarian need. The worsening climate crisis is also driving escalating severity, regularity, and length of climate disasters and is increasing community vulnerability to both natural hazards and to conflict crises, worsening the humanitarian impact. Climate crises and disasters are increasingly being seen in politicised and conflict contexts, complicating access and increasing needs whilst entrenching

more protracted crisis situations.

As a result, the world is increasingly seeing more concurrent, more recurrent and more compounding crises within the same locations. As the climate crisis and conflict escalation worsens, the world is arguably entering a 'polycrisis' or 'permacrisis' state with the impacts of emergencies stacking on one another. At the same time, the level of humanitarian financing has not risen commensurate to the increasing needs with a record short-fall in humanitarian financing in 2023 and alarm bells ringing for 2024 seeing an increasing decline of overall funding.

The future outlook for global crisis

As these trends continue, the international humanitarian system may well have to significantly adapt – learning to operate in a new state of global polycrisis, working under increased pressure for ever higher needs with an ever-smaller relative budget. Natural disasters and climate crises increasingly occurring in politicised and conflict environments will compound complex access issues, putting extreme pressure on the international humanitarian system operating as it does currently with large scale multi-year responses

to protracted crises and with one-off irregular major disaster responses. This may ultimately force the global humanitarian system to make progress on better supporting national, local and community actors in taking the leading role in humanitarian preparedness and response.

THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Increasingly complex geopolitics

At the same time as increasing need, many commentators have noted that the world order has moved from a more 'unipolar' state since the end of the cold war with the predominant global power centred around the USA, to a 'multipolar' world with several increasing blocks of power and less straightforward diplomatic mechanisms. This is of particular relevance for the international humanitarian system which has historically been heavily linked with 'western' or 'global north' donors who provide the majority of the funding and diplomatic support. A more multi-polar world has created increased complexity for international humanitarian actors who necessarily work in spaces heavily influenced by global geopolitics.

Multilateralism under threat

Hand in hand with the development of a more multi-polar world, there has been significant debate around multilateralism itself being under threat, with a rise in populist and nationalist political governments across the world through the 2000s. The picture is likely complex with some decline in support for multilateralism and globalism, but also multilateral institutions shifting to adapt to the multi-polar world with less homogenous soft and hard power holders which complicates their operations and governance. Many commentators have noted increased threats and undermining of multilateral institutions over the past years however, again creating challenges for a humanitarian system linked or working alongside such structures.

Entrenched political crises

Against this backdrop, arguably the focus of international geopolitics and diplomacy has more recently been on addressing the symptoms of crises and conflicts, and less on root causes and long-term solutions, with many of the world's major protracted conflicts seeing little meaningful progress – and little meaningful attempts at progress – towards long term solutions. This is arguably impacting current humanitarian responses in two core ways: 1. crises last longer with populations

displaced and affected by conflict for years or decades on end; and 2. diplomatic institutions are turning to humanitarian assistance not only as a short-term fix but also a longer-term response to an inability to make progress towards sustainable solutions.

INTERNATIONAL NORMS, ACCESS, AND AID INSTRUMENTALISATION

Declining respect for international norms

Many political and humanitarian actors have noted a declining respect for IHL, IHRL, and norms around humanitarian principles by state and non-state actors across the spectrum, including traditional donors and other states. Several major crises have thrown this into sharp focus, including most recently Ethiopia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Myanmar and oPt, with impunity for IHL breaches and grave violations more common and overt.

Increasing aid instrumentalization

Whilst far from a new phenomenon, aid is being ever more instrumentalised by both state and non-state actors, particularly as humanitarian resources have increased over the years, and humanitarian actors become more 'visible' as institutions. Concerningly this worsening aid instrumentalization is increasingly being seen in sudden onset natural disaster environments – types of disaster which had historically benefitted from more protection of humanitarian space in comparison to conflict crises. Recent crises in 2023 such as the Syria/Türkiye earthquakes, Libya's Storm Daniels, Myanmar's Cyclone Mocha amongst others highlight that state and non-state groups have increasingly been willing to overtly restrict and instrumentalise aid in the immediate aftermath of a natural disasters for political or military purposes, and concerningly international efforts by the UN and donor countries to unblock restrictions have been limited in success, particularly in the crucial first days following the disasters.

Constrained international institutions

Major multi-lateral institutions have become more paralyzed to varying degrees linked with these developments, with the UN Security Council (UNSC) particularly entrenched with an inability to make progress on humanitarian and peace resolutions in highly politicised conflicts. Humanitarian resolutions on new political crises are increasingly untenable, and existing humanitarian resolutions have ended up being politicised and heavily traded for non-humanitarian aims by P5

members in particular. This has bled into pressures on the wider UN system - both its institutions/agencies and member state mechanisms - with conflicting pressure and less compromise making a clear way forward on key issues more difficult.

A focus on access symptoms, not causes

Related to the above, there has been an increasing focus in the international humanitarian and political systems on addressing short term access symptoms and fixes and less on the root drivers

of access challenges. On a political level, this has been seen with a focus on addressing immediate threats of principles and access. At the same time, several commentators have highlighted that the UN and key donors have heavily focused on individually negotiated access pathways and often at central nation state level given the UN's mandate (with heavy ERC support). Notwithstanding some important successes here, opportunities to focus on reclaiming humanitarian space on a broader global scale have potentially been missed as a result.

EVOLUTION OF THE HUMANITARIAN (ECO)SYSTEM

FORMAL HUMANITARIAN REFORM PROCESSES

Since the 1990s, a number of humanitarian reform initiatives have taken place against internal and external challenges. The IASC was created in 1991 along with the ERC, Department for Humanitarian Affairs (latterly OCHA), the CAP and CERF. The Humanitarian Reform process⁵ led to the creation of the cluster system and UN lead agencies in 2005, and the Transformative Agenda⁶ (2010) refocused efforts on three core pillars – coordination, leadership, and accountability, creating the L3 emergency activation mechanism, which more recently became the 'system wide scale up' protocols for major crises⁷. In 2015-2016, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) led to the creation of the Grand Bargain focused on strengthening effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian system⁸, and the revised Grand Bargain 2.0 (2021) and 3.0 (2023) with tighter focuses⁹.

In addition to the large-scale systemic reform processes, a multitude of key initiatives and agreements have been established since the 1990s working alongside these. These included common standards such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)¹⁰, Sphere Standards¹¹ and issue specific standards¹²; common charters including the Humanitarian Charter¹³, Charter for Change¹⁴, Pledge for Change¹⁵; and major policy and operations initiatives such as Stay and Deliver¹⁶, Money Where It Counts initiative¹⁷ amongst many others. Throughout these initiatives, common and recurrent themes have included longer term and more sustainable approaches to humanitarian aid and wider development support ('building back better', early recovery, resilience focusses, disaster

risk reduction, the humanitarian development peace nexus for example), a power shift to those affected by crisis and away from a global north power system (localisation, locally-led response, decolonization, community led-crisis response), and a strengthening of meaningful accountability (standards, feedback processes, transparency mechanisms and cost effectiveness initiatives).

AN ITERATIVE EVOLUTION OF THE SYSTEM

Both organically and through the reform processes outlined above, the humanitarian system as a whole has evolved and expanded significantly over the past 40 years. A small number of key trends over the course of that evolution are outlined below relevant for the analysis on alternative coordination mechanisms contained within this report.

Professionalisation of humanitarian assistance

A major professionalisation has taken place at all levels with increasing structuring, standards, processes, and commitments, particularly in larger and international organisations including donors, the UN and INGOs. This professionalisation has bought major positives for the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian assistance, but has also risked increasing bureaucracy, overheads and limiting agility or innovation in complex and emergency situations.

Humanitarian financing

Prior to 2023, humanitarian financing in absolute figures had increased significantly over recent decades, and also seen a number of structural reforms including the creation of CERF and the Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) intended to provide rapid and flexible funding for

crises. Overall financing has not kept pace with increases in humanitarian need outlined in the Global Humanitarian Overviews (GHO), however resulting in effectively an increasing real terms cut comparative to needs and some commentators are predicting that 2024 will see a continued downwards trajectory of overall humanitarian financing. Critically, despite being a major focus of reform efforts, humanitarian financing to local actors (community groups, national and local NGOs) remains extremely low with only around 1.2% of all humanitarian financing going directly to local actors and a further 2.1% going indirectly. Comparatively, the proportion of financing going to the UN and multilaterals has actually increased to around 61% of all funding as of 2023¹⁸, against a 10-year average of 56%. Pass through of financing by the UN and INGOs is likely higher than these figures identify but continued issues with transparency of budgets makes meaningful analysis largely impossible.

Prioritisation and humanitarian boundaries

Prioritisation of humanitarian assistance has been a topic of discussion for decades, but a significant refocus on the topic in the international system has been seen in the past few years. Arguably this has partly been driven by a desire to strengthen the effectiveness of assistance, and partly by impending donor cuts forcing the hand of the system which is faced by real decisions around where to cut existing operations. Some positive progress has been seen in the past year in terms of reform of the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) creating mechanisms for identifying those people most in need and proactive discussions around the boundaries of response, although these have also risked increasing politicisation of response in some contexts and some commentators have raised concerns around attempts to minimise reporting of needs or undermine the scale of humanitarian crisis, rather than prioritise targeting. Within the IASC system, many of the decisions around prioritisation have nominally been decentralized by the ERC to RC/HCs.

Critically, and perhaps tellingly, engagement with several responses and global focal points has highlighted that the question around prioritisation of resources has heavily been centred around moving to more limited service delivery or targeting, and there has been far more limited discussion in prioritisation conversations around more cost-effective use of funding, or more direct financing of implementing actors with less use of UN or INGO

intermediaries.

Accountability and transparency

Significant reforms in accountability and transparency have happened over the past decades. Transparency has iteratively improved, including through initiatives such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) and some progress has been seen on increased in transparency on budgets and humanitarian financing. Significant improvements in specific accountability initiatives, including on preventing, identifying and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and misconduct by humanitarians. A big focus around accountability, however, has arguably been focussed on technocratic approaches (complaints and feedback lines, consultations and assessments run by humanitarians for example) and on approaches run by the sector itself, coordinated through humanitarian agencies. Far less meaningful effort has been put into seeing accountability as a power transfer and centring ownership of accountability in affected populations through governance, transparency and freedom of information reforms.

AN EVOLVING AND CENTRALISING COORDINATION ECOSYSTEM

As the humanitarian system has professionalised and expanded, several key themes have emerged in relation to the actors that make up the constituent parts of the IASC coordination mechanisms.

An increasing range of operational actors

Since the 1990s, far more actors - and a more diverse range of actors - has been encompassed within the humanitarian architecture with the latest State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) identifying nearly 1,000 INGOs, 4,000 NNGOs and nearly 200 organisations making up the Red Cross & Red Crescent movement. Civil society account for nearly 87% of recorded staff in humanitarian organisations, nearly doubling since 2012 to over 600,000 in-country aid workers (compared to 84,000 UN staff in-country)¹⁹ despite funding being channelled through multilateral institutions primarily. The majority of those civil society staff are from National and Local NGOs, a figure that is likely underreported and does not account for community first responders in many cases.

A stronger role of NGOs in recent years

INGOs have increasingly taken on and been given space in the global and country level coordination

architectures over the intervening years of IASC coordination. Whilst the size and scale of NGO Forums varies significantly by context, in general NGO Forums have professionalized and expanded significantly from initially a more advocacy and representation focus to covering strategic and operational leadership functions, supported significant investment by ICVA, InterAction and the NEAR Network amongst others. At country level, a majority of HCTs, ICCGs, clusters and some other mechanisms have some level of NGO representation or co-leadership and on very rare occasions, co leadership of an HCT, ICCG or of a Refugee Response by NGOs has been put in place, with the Education Cluster now being formally co-led by an NGO globally. Three quarters of HCTs have local actor representatives on them and a small number of clusters are being co-led by NNGOs, although numbers remain far below ideal ranges²⁰. At global level, INGOs have increasingly taken coordination and leadership roles in the IASC structures, with representatives in the IASC Principals, EDG and co-chairing task forces/ workstreams coordinated through the standing invitees of ICVA, InterAction and SCHR. Despite these developments, however, many commentators have continued to raise concerns that the global systems remain overly focussed on multilateral institutions and do not sufficiently take account of civil society within the coordination mechanisms.

An increasingly centralised IASC system

Slightly counter-intuitively given the increase in the number and range of actors in the system, there appears to have been at least a partially increasing centralisation of resources and power throughout the system towards UN agencies and away from civil society. Humanitarian reform efforts have brought significant positives, but as the system has grown and professionalised, a higher proportion of overall finances is now being channelled through the UN than in the past, and power in decision making is heavily centralised in UN-led structures, particularly given that comparatively the majority of staffing and operations are delivered by civil society, and even more so at times of acute crisis.

As a result, coordination structures are not effectively taking account of the realities of all actors and humanitarian resources are increasingly being channelled through a small number of 'too big to fail' agencies, raising the risks and consequences when these agencies are constrained. Situations such as Syria, Myanmar, and Sudan highlight the risks to humanitarian operations when a UN agency or the global 'system' loses access or become

compromised with potentially devastating impacts where alternatives are not so readily available and accessible.

A more nation-state centric approach

Several commentators have noted that the UN has become increasingly more risk averse and more focused on negotiated nation-state approaches to access in recently years, a factor likely exacerbated by the UN having to operating in a more complex multi-polar member-state geopolitical context and against increasing threats to global norms. Some major and hard-won access successes have been achieved through UN negotiation efforts in complex contexts, driven both by country level and global sophisticated UN or state diplomacy. Conversely, however, situations such as Syria, Yemen, Myanmar and Sudan have seen the focus of the UN as the major power holder in the humanitarian system being too heavily focussed negotiating access through centralised agreements with member states who are also parties to the conflict, resulting at times in entrenched stalemates and major delays or restrictions in aid delivery. At its worst, this has meant that 'access' has sometimes been considered by some as access of the UN, rather than affected population access to required services with alternative access approaches not considered or side-lined. This issue is arguably exacerbated in contexts where the physical location of IASC coordination structures for humanitarian assistance ends up being negotiated or driven by nation state interests, rather than by what makes most sense for operational delivery of aid for people in crisis, and in some instances has led to civil society and UN leadership and coordination structures being physically separated creating challenges.

It is important to note an inherent but uncomfortable tension that exists here²¹ – international humanitarian law (IHL) is built around nation state agreements and treaties, states remain the primary duty bearer for basic assistance, and rights systems are built around a nation state model. Yet it is also currently the actions of states much beyond those of non-state actors that drive increased threats to IHL and norms and directly cause humanitarian suffering in some contexts.

HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Linked to the evolution of the coordination architectures, leadership within the humanitarian system has garnered significant attention over the years. The original creation of the IASC

took a focus on overall humanitarian leadership and saw the creation of the role of the ERC, the Humanitarian Reform process created leadership of the clusters through UN agencies, and the Transformative Agenda identified leadership as one of the three core pillars of reform. Two major current issues in leadership are important to explore in more detail for the purposes of this report:

Effectiveness within HCTs and the RC/HC

A common thread that emerged from discussions with UN and NGO coordination focal points and from the findings of recent evaluations, IAHEs and OPRs/P2Ps is that there have been recurring concerns around the effectiveness of HCTs and RC/HCs in terms of collective leadership at response levels. In particular, the lack of use of HCTs as an effective and strategic discussion and decision-making bodies has been a common finding in evaluations and from participants for many years. Additionally, leadership coordination platforms are frequently not being used for substantive decision making which is taking place elsewhere (such as in UNCTs or in informal spaces), HCTs are too large to be effective for crisis coordination, are overly focussed on information sharing, and are too UN-agency focussed. Similar themes emerged around RC/HC leadership, with recurring concerns around 'double-hatted' RC/HCs (and in some cases a triple hatted RC/HC/DSRSG) not prioritising humanitarian leadership, and concerns around whether some RC/HCs were engaging in meaningful collaboration and engagement with INGOs and NNGOs or not. In some cases this relationship works positively, but in several others, engagement has been identified as tokenistic at best, and in other cases is barely happening at all.

RC/HCs tend to be individuals appointed from within the UN common system, or from national political system backgrounds, often coming from a development or governance background rather than a humanitarian or crisis response background, and rarely from a sustained civil society background, albeit with a small number of recent exceptions to this. As a result, several interviewees and evaluations have raised concerns that leadership within the humanitarian system, and the coordination systems that it entails, is not effectively taking account of the whole system and all routes of aid delivery, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Systems leadership in a complex system.

Despite being a highly complex system and multiple evaluations and reform efforts focussing

on concerns around leadership as noted above, many stakeholders have continued to note effective leadership as one of the most significant challenges facing the system. Critically, however, this does not necessarily mean a top down, command and control approach to leadership, and more recently calls for a greater focus on systems leadership and leadership strengthening have begun to become more prominent²² to take account of the diverse and complex system that humanitarian leaders work within. It is worth considering that despite the well documented complexity of the humanitarian system, the IASC Scale Up Protocols on Empowered Leadership²³ focus almost exclusively on leadership through a UN dominated HCT and UN led clusters and make almost no mention of the role of civil society beyond brief references to 'consultation' (albeit noting that the protocols are currently under review). Similar concerns have been noted in other IASC and RC/HC guidance documents with the role of civil society in formal policies and guidance heavily limited.

THE ROLE OF 'LOCAL' ACTORS

As noted, the past decade in particular has seen major calls at all levels for progress on local leadership, localisation, decolonisation and a shifting of power away from international and global north actors. Whilst the Grand Bargain and its 2.0 iteration renewed calls and efforts in this direction in 2016, there is generally recognised very slow meaningful progress to date in terms of power shifting, however. Several key aspects important to note on the roles of local actors and affected populations relevant for this study.

Local (co)leadership of coordination

Alongside INGOs, NNGOs and community organisations have also been able to take increasing space in coordination environments in more recent years, albeit to a far more limited degree than international organisations and with longer ways to go. Overall higher representation is being seen in major coordination structures such as HCTs, ICCGs and clusters with three quarters of HCTs having dedicated NNGO members and a nascent but slowly increasing co-leadership of clusters by NNGOs. Nationally led humanitarian NGO networks have also increased in frequency, capacity and leadership in recent years with multiple dedicated National NGO Forums and bespoke networks at national and community levels supporting coordinated efforts. At a global level, and with support of the NEAR network, ICVA, and

other mechanisms, NNGOs have been able to increase engagement with global structures and in key global meetings, with a small number of national co-chair or representation positions on IASC structures or workstreams.

Participation vs leadership

Meaningful collective leadership that encompasses NNGOs and local actors is still largely missing, however, and many interviewees noted concerns that the participation of NNGOs and community organisations in coordination and leadership structures risks being performative or tokenistic in several cases. Analysis suggests that even the seemingly positive data risks masking a real picture – an increase in the number of local organisations or NGOs on an HCT is generally positive, but may be of little impact if the HCT is not effective or if decisions are taken in a different room (formally or informally). An increase in NNGO co-leadership of clusters is positive but is of little use if co-leads are given limited power or space by the CLA.

Arguably, the humanitarian system is still seeing some of the same issues identified in the 2004 tsunami response and concerns that were noted in

the joint evaluation around an international system frequently being deployed with a standardised and internationally focussed approach to coordination which is inaccessible for local actors. In its worst outcomes, this is undermining existing coordination and response mechanisms as a result. Considering a meaningful transfer of power to local actors of all forms, and the impact of this on effective response in the evaluation of coordination systems is critical, rather than numerical targets of participation.

Whilst progress has been limited, there are some rays of hope, and increasing self-organised efforts of locally led networks to proactively drive change in the international system. This gives a possible window of opportunity for accelerating efforts around power transfer within coordination system that can enhance the effectiveness and accountability of aid.

WHERE THE SYSTEM IS TODAY AND WHAT THIS MEANS

Against the backdrop of major iterative reform over the past 40 years, the humanitarian system is the largest and most complex it has ever been. Three key persisting thematic challenges run through the coordination architecture in its current form that are making effective aid delivery and coordination more challenging.

A highly centralised coordination architecture despite the complexity of the ecosystem

The 'traditional' IASC structures are heavily centralised with a largely hierarchical formulation. There is an inverse relationship between power and affected populations – despite reform efforts, those affected by crisis and those operating closest to them have the least power, and those in country capitals and global HQs have the most power. Seniority and capacity of staffing is also most often centralised at country capitals with sub-national coordination, clusters and forums suffering from limited support despite front line operations and decisions taking place there more often.

Mandate-based and sectoral siloes persist with in-built agency-focussed incentives

Notwithstanding the critical importance of common technical standards and strategic thinking, the current traditional coordination structures risk entrenching siloed approaches. Financing can be driven through sectors/clusters, or through mandate-specific UN agencies rather than the basis of what communities and individuals actually need which is often far more multi-sectoral and fluid. At worst this leads to supply side planning rather than demand driven planning, and a protection of agency space to the detriment of meaningful access of populations to the aid they require, by whatever form is most relevant.

Local actors are marginalised with access, effectiveness and accountability suffering as a result

Those most linked with affected communities are disenfranchised from the prevailing systems – language, resources and knowledge all act as formal and informal barriers to proactive

engagement. Whilst improvements have been seen, many have noted these as too slow and at times, tokenistic. Ultimately opportunities are being lost in scenarios where local actors have better access, acceptance, accountability or cost effectiveness as a result, a problem that will worsen as resources become more constrained and crisis

more recurrent. These problems are particularly severe in acute crisis scenarios where the need to adapt quickly is essential and community and local actors are always the first responders yet are most easily side-lined.

SUMMARY: WHY THE INTEREST IN ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION

Against the backdrop of the challenges and developments outlined in this section there is some emerging discussion around alternative or diverse coordination systems outside or alongside the IASC beginning to take place, albeit in early stages. This is likely being driven by a combination of push and pull factors, and a combination of internal and external factors:

- **A centralisation of power and resources amidst changing nature of crisis:** a more homogenous, UN led system, coming at the same time as increasing external threats to access, IHL and international norms from all sides has created humanitarian environments where formalised structures are less able to ensure access, and principled response than they once were (or at the least, it has become more evident that they cannot). Coupled with movement into a state of global polycrisis alongside real terms financing cuts, this is forcing conversations on appropriate mechanisms where there has not been the incentive or urgency to do so before.
- **Civil society claiming more space:** at the same time, INGOs, NNGOs and community-based organisations have increasingly been able and willing to claim their seat at the table within global structures and there is increasing recognition at all levels of the importance of a more diverse system

and stronger links to affected populations – albeit all with major formal and informal barriers to this persisting. This is leading to pressure from within the systems for change and shifts in power and linked to wider global debates around inequality and entrenched power systems. Some degree of distrust of the international system to self-correct and slow progress on reform efforts since the Grand Bargain are likely also influencing this.

In 2023 and 2024, increasingly there are calls for renewed humanitarian architecture and system reform discussions from several angles, and a common focus from these conversations has been the role of international support and power shifts – issues that were less substantively tackled on a transformative sense in 2016. It is likely that there will need to be pressure from both angles for real change – a meaningful cultural shift from current power holders, coupled with a claiming of space from those with less power. Many respondents and much commentary has noted that substantive change very likely won't come from a top-down technocratic process.

Endnotes

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CASE STUDIES

This report has analysed four major responses that currently either have, or are exploring, humanitarian coordination mechanisms that work outside or alongside the traditional IASC coordination to varying degrees: Syria (from the start of current civil conflict in 2011, and with the major earthquake in 2023); Myanmar (focussing on the post-coup period from 2021, and Cyclone Mocha in 2023); Nigeria (focussing on the response in the Northwest of the country in recent years); and Sudan (from the outbreak of the current civil conflict in 2023). A short summary of the response and coordination modalities is provided below, and analysis and lessons are drawn together across all of these in the following sections of the report.

SYRIA CRISIS: 2011 ONWARDS

Following years as a relatively stable development context, the Arab spring uprisings saw massive protests in Syria, which led into a major crackdown and all-encompassing civil war from March 2011. The conflict has been characterized by major entrenched areas of control that have shifted over time, with heavily contested front lines and limited progress on a peace process. In recent years, Government forces have regained significant parts of the country, leaving three distinct areas – Government controlled areas (in the centre and south of the country); non-state-controlled areas in the northwest (primarily controlled by Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkish supported Syrian National Army), and Kurdish controlled areas in the northeast. At times, ISIS and affiliates-controlled parts of Syria as part of a self-declared caliphate, but have largely lost control - though still remain present more or less underground and as an insurgency.

In addition to humanitarian response run from Damascus, increased recognition of the need to support cross-border response was seen as a result of aid denial, entrenched front lines and access complexity from late 2012. Humanitarian actors working in contested and then non-state controlled areas were operational from Türkiye, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan as a result. The 'Whole of Syria' (WoS) architecture was established in 2015 to create a centralizing strategic function under the co-leadership of a Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (RHC) and a separate RC/HC in place inside Syria.

Aid denial and instrumentalization has been extreme in Syria and documented from the first month of the conflict onwards, persisting to date across the country. Against a backdrop of grave rights violations this has included restrictions on humanitarian supplies and personnel accessing entire areas, denial of operations across front-lines, refusal of registration and visas by the government for humanitarian agencies operating in non-state controlled areas, control of reporting and assessment information by several actors, restrictions on reporting protection or access issues and diversion or corruption by multiple actors.

The presence of ISIS and other proscribed groups, along with sanctioned Syrian entities has complicated the response with civil and criminal restrictions by several major donors on 'material' support to proscribed entities, and in some cases criminalization of even travelling to geographic areas, albeit with nominal humanitarian exemptions. Sanctions have also been heavily used, particularly against central state entities and those linked to the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, leading to both explicit restrictions, and to de-risking by financial institutions and suppliers.

Cross border coordination (primarily North/NW Syria)

Predominately focused initially on North Syria from 2012/2013 onwards, cross border assistance grew from Syrian actors and diaspora groups working to establish physical and financial assistance into non-state controlled and contested areas. This was then increasingly supported by a number of INGOs (and back donors), particularly where there were trusted relationships developed between INGOs and Syrian NGOs, and forward leaning approaches to risk.

Initially response in the North was coordinated directly between agencies operating in non-state controlled and besieged areas developing policies and processes to support this. Increasing formalisation of the approach began to take place between 2013 and 2014 with the hybrid INGO/ NNGO Northwest Syria NGO Forum being formally created and expanding from 2015 onwards and several dedicated Syrian NGO networks expanding in scope and size. In 2014, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2165 was passed providing

explicit authorisation for cross-border assistance into Syria without the agreement of the Syrian government, initially from Iraq (NE Syria), Jordan (S Syria) and Türkiye (N Syria). This led to an accelerating formalisation and consolidation of the coordination system through the IASC structures, creating the WoS mechanism with distinct operational hubs in Damascus/Syria, Southern Türkiye, Northern Iraq and Jordan and a Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC) in Türkiye, all with the intention of drawing together parts of the humanitarian response into a strategic whole. Additional complexity has temporarily been seen in the response in intervening years however, particularly with crackdowns on and expulsions of INGOs by the Turkish Government in 2017, leading to coordination centres for the UN, INGOs and NNGOs being split and some INGOs heavily operational in NW Syria unable to physically locate staff in Gaziantep at times, the main operational hub for the northwest.

Alongside these structures, low-profile and underground cross-border assistance has been coordinated through groups of INGOs operating in contested and Government controlled areas, primarily coordinated through mechanisms in Lebanon, and involving support, partnership and pass through between INGOs and NNGOs, though public documentation on this is not provided in detail for safety reasons.

Following multiple successive renewals since 2014, the UNSC authorization was iteratively eroded, losing border crossings in the south and northeast, seeing more conditions imposed, and in 2023 being lost altogether after vetoes by P5 members. Following the loss of the authorisation the Government of Syria and ERC negotiated a bilateral agreement for consent by the government for the UN to cross the Turkish border¹, an agreement which has been renewed once to date. This has led to intensive discussions around the nature of future operational coordination in northwest Syria, with multiple aid agencies concerned that arbitrary refusal of consent in the future could limit the ability of the UN to operate or provide support, although the picture remains unclear. Over the past years as the resolution had become increasingly threatened, UN and joint discussions have centered on a concept of 'reducing reliance' on UNSC mechanisms which in effect was intended to transfer more funding and

operations to NGOs, albeit with mixed feedback from interviewees on the effectiveness of this process at times.

Alongside the ongoing conflict, in February 2023, a major 7.8 earthquake struck Southern Türkiye close to the border with Syria, causing major damage and mass casualties in both countries. During the initial emergency phase of the earthquake, cross-border assistance was constrained by both physical access issues and political issues, and international search and rescue in particular was not deployed cross border into Syria, largely as a result of an inability to find member states willing to cross into Syria. As a result, the majority of search and rescue and initial phase response was coordinated directly by Syrian organizations operational inside northwest Syria, and with headquarters in Gaziantep.

NE Syria NGO Forum (NGO led operational coordination)

The Northeast Syria NGO Forum (NES Forum) was established to support operations within NES and cross-border from Iraq as conflict escalated from 2014 onwards. Following the loss of UNSC cross-border authorization from Iraq to northeast Syria in January 2020, the Northeast Syria NGO Forum rapidly re-oriented towards a context in which UN and IASC coordination mechanisms abruptly stopped, albeit with some cross-line UN and UN-funded assistance from government-controlled areas operating today. This created major challenges in the ability to share data, physically meet and coordinate, and work together, although significant effort has been exerted to create mechanisms for joint collaboration. Over the past three years, the NES Forum has iteratively established operational response capacity and supporting functions to fulfil roles that may traditionally be filled by OCHA or specialized UN agencies in other contexts.

This has included the development of an inter-sector coordination function, sector leads, information management, access, advocacy, and liaison services which operate on behalf of NGOs operational in northeast Syria, alongside publication of sit-reps and operational information for NGO and external audiences. Increasingly the NES Forum has been structuring its services around two inter-related but distinct pillars: 1. Those services

1 NGOs generally are operating cross-border on the basis of necessity and formal legal opinions that the consent of the Government of Syria is not required for access under International Humanitarian Law.

provided for members representation and support, including advocacy, information sharing etc, and 2. Those services focused on wider humanitarian operational coordination, including sector and inter-sector groups.

Whole of Syria architecture and sub-regional NGO coordination

As the WoS architecture was created in 2015, INGOs came together around a similar coordination structure with a sub-regional NGO Forum for Syria Crisis created, the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF). This mechanism has been in existence since then, tasked with coordinating between INGOs operational across Syria and the neighboring refugee hosting countries, representation with the IASC led WoS structures, as well as forming a linkage point between the NGO Forums in the distinct operational areas of Syria – the NES Forum and national networks in the northeast, the NWS NGO Forum and Syrian NGO Networks in the northwest, and the Damascus based INGOs (DINGOs) in government-controlled areas.

As some UN agencies have moved away from a WoS approach over the years - either by design or as a result of funding cuts to coordination positions, NGOs have increasingly leaned in the opposite direction, creating stronger links between coordination platforms at WoS and Syria hub levels for an overall response. This has included work more recently towards the development of 'principles of coordination' and linkages between the governance of sub-regional and response area level platforms to support agility at the same time as a coordinated response, as well as work to enhance trust and collaboration across multiple diverse coordination structures of INGOs and NNGOs in different parts of the country.

SUDAN CRISIS: 2023 ONWARDS

After a period of more stability, violent conflict escalated significantly in Sudan in April 2023 and has continued to date between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), characterized by highly violent skirmishes and mass displacement. The conflict took many international organizations by surprise and led to significant disruption of aid in the initial phases with access severely restricted for many INGOs and the UN, and major evacuations of international, and some national, staff, leaving coordination actors

across several physical contexts.

There have been significant restrictions placed on aid agencies by the Sudanese Government throughout the crisis, with visa denial being commonplace and movement restrictions or impediments severe. Prior to the crisis, a heavily centralized system was in place through the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) with pre-existing bureaucratic impediments to aid delivery and lengthy permission processes. In addition, collapse of the banking system and issues with financial transfers have affected the ability of agencies to effectively channel money to those who need in, all the more so outside of central urban environments. The UN and some donors have engaged in intensive high-level negotiations, the creation of Joint Operating Principles (JOPs)¹ in late 2023, and the creation of a Sudan Humanitarian Forum (SHF)² to bring together political actors over humanitarian access and issues but a lot of these developments have yet to show real promise in terms of an ability to scale effective aid delivery³.

Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs)

ERRs are community-based structures which developed largely off the back of youth organising following protests in 2019. Exact figures are difficult to identify, but at least 70 ERRs were operating in late 2023 across parts of the country. These are generally bespoke set-ups providing required services and may range from large scale structures with organizational set-ups to small highly targeted groups.

With some exceptions, international support to ERRs has remained limited for the months following the outbreak of the crisis. Sudanese and INGOs have provided some support, and small amounts of pooled funding and pass through has been provided, but the mechanisms themselves commonly flag concerns around the lack of financing⁴, and the majority have come from local organizations and diaspora to date⁵. INGOs and the UN have more traditionally worked through registered Sudanese NGOs, and so have faced challenges in engagement with the ERRs particularly given that many are unregistered, may not be formalized and may have links with political or military actors to varying degrees. There has been increasing attention on ERRs in recent months amongst international organizations, albeit with some concerns raised by stakeholders than media articles and attention by international organizations has not translated to meaningful

funding and support in practice⁶.

Intra-ERR coordination has developed since the outbreak of the conflict through initiatives such as the Khartoum ERR's coordination mechanism⁷ and Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit⁸, in addition to ad-hoc coordination within and between them. Many of the ERRs are linked with resistance committees and political mechanisms, and have suffered direct attacks by armed forces on both sides, with significant risk to their operations.

Cross border assistance

Alongside actors working directly inside the country, as access became heavily constrained by the security situation and bureaucratic impediments, some agencies switched to cross-border assistance, predominantly from Chad, and to a lesser extent South Sudan in order to rapidly support aid operations inside Sudan. Coordination has evolved along with operations with ongoing debates at the time of writing of the most effective approaches and modalities for coordinated cross-border assistance.

NGOs were able to pivot more quickly than UN agencies and inter-agency structures, albeit still with major hurdles for INGOs⁹. Where agencies had presence in neighboring countries and existing relationships on both sides of the border, they were more able to quickly adapt and new agencies scaling up for the first time generally faced greater challenges as may be expected. Some respondents noted that strategic grey space has been helpful for cross-border assistance, as agencies were able to negotiate direct agreements or take advantage of non-rigid processes to continue access. Some noted concerns that as cross-border began to become more formalized with the UN negotiating access mechanisms, and engaging with central nation state entities, this risked escalating and exacerbating bureaucratic hurdles that had been possible to solve through field level negotiations by civil society actors, though at a smaller scale. Some commentators have noted that common services and coordinated logistics through the IASC structures, whilst useful, have arguably been oriented significantly towards UN agencies, and not a wider consideration of support to all access modalities and civil society actors in areas that they have better access. Challenges in the physical location of leadership arrangements and coordination mechanisms have also been raised, similar to issues seen in Myanmar and Syria – the UN relocated many of

those staff who were not fully evacuated to Port Sudan and are working through Port Sudan as a staging post for operations with an air bridge from Dubai and attempts to negotiate passage of aid through the country cross-line and state negotiated cross-border agreements. Several NGOs, however, pivoted to operations cross-border or through local partners directly with increasing focus on operational coordination and delivery from other locations such as Chad and South Sudan.

Further analysis on the access and coordination environments can be found in the SCORE Report for Sudan here, the iMMAP Cross-Border Access Analysis here, and the Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit's overview of ERRs here, amongst other sources in the appendix.

MYANMAR CRISIS: 2021 - PRESENT

Myanmar has a long history of humanitarian response with cyclones, political restrictions and conflict, in addition to the Rohingya Genocide. Following a period of relative stability, and international assistance more focused on development and state building, in 2021, a sudden coup toppled the government and it was replaced by the military junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), which blocked much humanitarian access to the country, reverting back to a situation seen several decades ago. Today the country remains divided with areas of control split and still heavily contested between junta and opposition forces.

Bureaucratic hurdles and impediments are extremely high, with heavy restrictions on visas, movements and any aid delivery outside of government-controlled areas. Many aid organizations now operate with international staff situated in Thailand or other regional hubs as a result of visa difficulties. Registration requirements were formalized and strengthened in late 2022¹⁰ with heavy penalties creating challenges for humanitarian organizations and several balancing central access with low profile approaches. Numerous evaluations and commentators have noted concerns around a centralised humanitarian coordination structure operational in Myanmar with significant parts of the country to greater or lesser degrees disenfranchised from it.

Cross border coordinated assistance

Given the significant access constraints, organizations have been working cross-border, predominantly though not exclusively, from

Thailand. Cross-border aid has existed since for decades in Myanmar¹¹ given movement of goods and displacement flows despite not officially being permitted by the Thai authorities or the SAC outside of very specific instances. Modalities have adapted based on the specific crisis context, but have often revolved around community and local organisations working across the river border-line providing direct assistance of goods and services into southeastern part of Myanmar. Cross-border assistance suffered from decreased funding in the intervening period prior to the 2021 coup as financing shifted towards development approaches and organizations based out of Yangon or inside other areas of Myanmar, but became an obvious source of refocus following the coup¹².

Coordination has developed over the past 30 years, taking place largely between organizations, with local and international systems, including the Myanmar Local Humanitarian Network (MLHN), The Border Consortium¹³ and the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN)¹⁴, and coordination through informal groupings of cross-border INGOs supporting assistance, somewhat delinked from the centralized IASC structures. Similar to Syria and Myanmar, this has led to differential physical leadership and coordination arrangements, for example with the HCT and UN Representatives based in Yangon, but many INGO or NNGO Directors not based there. In early 2024, an initiative to established a formalised cross-border 'humanitarian corridor' across the Thai-Burmese has moved forward, albeit with debate around whether it entails the most effective approach¹⁵.

Direct assistance and intermediary financing in non-SAC controlled areas

Relatedly, but a separate mechanism, emergency and humanitarian assistance has been provided across the country by local structures and organisations and particularly private businesses. This has been particularly critical in the response to Cyclone Mocha in 2023 in Rakhine State on the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India border region given heavily criticized blockages of cyclone aid and humanitarian travel by the SAC^{16 17} and a more difficult cross-border environment than the Thai-Myanmar border. This type of aid accounts for a small but significant part of the response, particularly in contested and non-SAC areas with a significant part of this response not captured in the international humanitarian coordination structures for security and trust reasons¹⁸. Alongside significant diaspora funding¹⁹, several NGOs have

supported this assistance through intermediary financing and partnership approaches often in a manner this is low-profile and de-linked from formal challenges given the access and security issues and heavy restrictions following the 2022 registration laws.

As a result, the exact scale of cross-border operations is not available through public sources but accounts for significant support, much of it taking place led from offices in Thailand or the region, with a small amount led from offices in Yangon. As a result, coordination is more limited of this assistance, particularly amongst INGOs. Coordination is taking place significantly between Myanmar civil society organisations within and outside the country, and trust in the international system is often cited as a barrier to further linkages between the two. Some efforts are underway to explore local managed and owned intermediary financing options that could provide an easier route for donors to channel funding quickly and in a sustained manner to such organizations. In recent months, the HCT has established an Area Humanitarian Coordination Team (A-HCT) to try and addresses some of the coordination gaps. It remains too early to assess the implications of this approach but concerns have been noted around whether this will be sufficiently adaptive to local capacities already in place in Myanmar.

Additional information on access and coordination in Myanmar can be found in the SCORE report for Myanmar from April 2023.

NORTHWEST NIGERIA CRISIS: 2009 ONWARDS

A longstanding civil conflict has been raging in northeast Nigeria since 2009 when Boko Haram attempted to take control of parts of the country. The crisis has continued to escalate with attacks on civilians and humanitarians over the course of the conflicts with 2 million displaced²⁰. A large international response has been in place for a number of years for northeast Nigeria, with a particular uptick since 2017 and a cluster-system coordinated with support of OCHA alongside a national state of emergency over the years. A Humanitarian Coordinator has been in place since the crisis began with a Deputy Humanitarian coordinator appointed at times in the past decade for the northeast

NGO co-led coordination for northwest Nigeria.

The IASC coordinated humanitarian response

has primarily been focused on northeast Nigeria as a result of the conflict. In recent years, however, there has been an increasing focus on a number of humanitarian agencies on unmet humanitarian and development needs in the Northwest of the country²¹, following localized inter-group conflict that has progressively escalated into regular attacks on civilians by non-state groups and major displacement²². These attacks come amidst a number of health outbreaks, poverty deterioration, and malnutrition and food security issues across the region at times showing similar levels of crisis need to the northeast. At various times a northwest focused task force has been operational through the HCT but the northwest has generally not been included in the Nigeria HRP and a formal decision was taken in 2021 by the HCT not to engage as a collective IASC coordination system in the northwest in the same manner as the northeast²³, with some noting the desire not to expand the focus of the humanitarian system too broadly, and some noting political pressures from the Government of Nigeria on the UN to avoid including the area in the HRP.







In response, a bespoke coordination mechanism has been established since 2021, co-chaired by the Nigeria INGO Forum (NIF) and UNICEF to support coordinated approaches to the response. With dedicated coordination resources in place

in the northwest, this has recently included the development in 2023 of a dedicated Operational Response Plan (ORP)²⁴ through coordinated assessment and joint planning. The coordination structure that has been established has also iteratively put in place mechanisms for sectoral coordination to support its implementation, utilising agencies operational in the area during 2023. In general this mechanism has been developed to work collaboratively with OCHA and the overall HRP focused more explicitly on the Northeast. Critically the ORP for the northwest of the country has included a spectrum of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding initiatives rather than just humanitarian response, and is being utilized by donors to consider dedicated funding for response in the area.

ATTRIBUTES OF NON-TRADITIONAL COORDINATION SYSTEMS

The examples outlined above highlight that effective coordination mechanism for aid in complex environments often develop as a result of the needs with the context and capacities already in place and as such vary significantly. As such, the development of specific tightly defined models may artificially limit analysis of the mechanisms, precisely because

the contextualization is critical. However, several key parameters and attributes are common across these systems, and can provide a framework for considering and supporting coordination arrangements in ongoing and futures crises.

 <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 mechanisms 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>

Endnotes

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- 22 IOM (Mar 2023) *Nigeria: North central & northwest displacement report 11*, [Link](#)
- 23 OCHA (Feb 2023) *Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan 2023*, p. 124, [Link](#)
- 24 Nigerian INGO Forum (August 2023) *Northwest Nigeria Operational Response Plan*, [Link](#)

4

Adapting crisis response early

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PIVOTING EARLY FOR SPECIFIC CRISES

In the vast majority of humanitarian responses, the importance of adapting and contextualising coordination systems for the environment, and empowering local and national capacities is clear and well documented, and should form part of the consideration and evaluation of coordination mechanism in all contexts as outlined in the recommendations below.

There are certain circumstances, however, where consideration of alternative modalities of coordination and delivery may be particularly important or urgent. Analysis of current crises suggest that the primary driver for these types of response is where there is simultaneously an urgent crisis, coupled with a complex and contested conflict threatening access – situations that may become more common as outlined above.

Drawing on the situation in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Syria in 2023, in *Convoys, Crossborders, Covert Ops, Beals E.* developed a number of key predictors for a typology of crisis contexts

in which the conflict and political environment would require adapting away from a UN or IASC focussed approach and towards more appropriate and creative mechanism¹. Based on the predictors identified, a model below is outlined in four board themes that can help global and national NGO and IASC coordination structures identify where responses may have to pivot to alternative approaches early.

The more of these elements exist and the more severe, the more likely that alternative modalities may be required alongside or as alternatives to a current implementation of the IASC structures in parts or the whole of countries. Critically, these predictors can be useful for global NGO focal points and response level coordination structures in for acute crises to enable a rapid adaptation and consideration of alternatives. This could include networks and agencies beginning immediate preparatory work around the enabling environment for supporting alternative coordination mechanisms, financing and an enabling environment

A PREDICTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY ACTION

1. The nature of the crisis

Where there is a non-international conflict or violent political crisis and particularly where there is a major crisis where the ability to meet needs is constrained by the scale or severity, or there is crisis escalation leaving existing mechanisms overwhelmed. Particular attention should be paid to conflicts where there are ongoing and historical breaches of IHL, which are more likely in contested internal or political crises. In addition, natural disasters or climate emergencies within already politicised and conflict environments will often 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.

2. The relevant 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 within them without fear of constraint. Situations where there

has been historical aid denial, restrictions on information or transparency all raise this risk.

3. The specific access context

Where aid is significantly or summarily challenged by political/military actors as a result of the crisis, the humanitarian system has shown difficulty in using a uni-polar approach to aid. This will include situations where aid denial and access have become a function of the conflict itself, where states or de facto authorities are acting as a primary barrier to access and where there are a high degree of targeted attacks on humanitarians, either physically or in terms of ideological undermining humanitarian assistance.

4. The relevant 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 are likely to face worsened restrictions and increased impunity for aid denial putting more restrictions on

traditional aid coordination structures. In addition, countries impacted by global financial issues, including sanctions, bank de-risking, or currency collapse, as well as countries impacted by global counter-terrorism issues appear to be more likely to face challenges in singular aid modalities, and

require exploration of alternatives to navigate and minimise risk.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE COORDINATION

Naturally, not all crises will follow a common framework or pattern and the relationship between various parts of the humanitarian system and between humanitarians and non-humanitarian entities will adapt and evolve over time. However, the above predictors can be used as a guide to consider current and future crises that emerge early in the crisis.

In practical terms, where a high degree of these predictors are present, it is strongly recommended that humanitarian leaders at global, regional and national levels – through the IASC structures and civil society networks - proactively undertake a conversation around the types of coordination and response modality being used and how comparative advantages of these can best be utilised. It is critical to note that this does not propose a binary ‘either UN or NGOs’ type approach, and in fact the opposite –the benefit is in a holistic and agile system that can draw on multiple relationships and strengths for the benefit of overall aid delivery. This concept of a ‘whole systems’ approach to aid coordination is explored further in section 6 below.

Endnotes

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5

Lessons for alternatives in coordination

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Drawing on discussions with stakeholders, the existing literature and analysis at operational, national, regional, and global levels, a number of key themes have emerged in relation to coordination of aid in contexts where the IASC structures and international system are challenged or restricted. These are outlined below drawing together the key lessons within them.

PLANNING STRATEGICALLY FOR EFFECTIVE COORDINATION

A core theme emerging from cases considered has been around challenges in many current responses of thinking strategically across all parts of a humanitarian response. Where coordination mechanisms are working well, they are able to be creative and adapt to a context and consider the full picture of the delivery environment. Where they are working less well, they are tending towards implementing 'business as usual' approaches and in some cases are proactively resisting conversations around strategy or effectiveness which may expose political issues or agency biases.

Using alternative mechanisms to drive contextualised and relevant coordination

The international humanitarian system – as with any large and established system – is subject to its own institutional biases, and challenging its own approaches is often difficult. Less traditional and NGO-led coordination modalities have helped drive alternative approaches early, and recognition within the global system of their utility and benefit supports more effective aid delivery. Where diversity of approach has been seen, it has generally come from groupings of (most often, but not always) civil society or community actors of various levels pushing the boundaries and being willing to take risks - with the more traditional coordination systems adjusting and following as a result.

The importance of early and ongoing coordination discussions

Alongside this, early and open strategic discussions around the concept of operations for coordination within formal channels is critical, and even more so in acute crises or where there are sudden shifts in context. Respondents and documentation noted frequently that tough conversations or creative thinking around coordination is often pushed down

the road during crisis periods only for responses to sometimes come back to suggestions months or years down the line – with trust eroded and opportunities lost. Where an up-front conversation around coordination modalities is taking place (within NGO coordination modalities themselves and/or at IASC country/global levels), this is stimulating critical consideration of the best approaches for aid delivery. A similar theme is seen in protracted crises - despite mandatory IASC requirements for responses to conduct an annual review of the effectiveness of coordination, only one third of responses did so in 2022¹, and half of those were undertaken through an OPR or P2P mission rather than fully self-directed. The lack of such conversations is missing opportunities for self-reflection and creativity in more meaningfully exploring alternative arrangements that are more fit for purpose for a given crisis. Critically this requires openness and trust across all parts of the system to be effective and a focus on the system as a whole rather than competition between constituent types of organisations.

Trust as the cornerstone of effective alternatives in coordination

Trust is highlighted as perhaps the most critical aspect for effective traditional and non-traditional coordination approaches working together in IASC-constrained contexts. An absence of trust (between affected communities and humanitarian actors; between INGOs and NNGOs, between UN and NGOs, or within types of organisation for example) has been hugely detrimental to effective overall response and the ability of coordination systems to work together. Some of the most effective examples of coordination models developing for the benefit of a response have been built on long standing trusted relationships that have enabled international support of local actors in complex scenarios, or have led to empowering civil society field or national leadership to strengthen agility.

Trust requires cultivation, transparency and active consideration – in key responses analysed, mechanisms have been effective because of hard won trust relationships between different stakeholders and have sometimes have been undermined by then formalising systems or replacing core staff.

Key points: Planning strategically for effective coordination

- Early and strategic planning for humanitarian coordination systems is critical, built on a willingness to consider alternative and creative coordination modalities.
- This should include ongoing and iterative review as crises progress to adapt and learn, and with investment in trust between different types of actor to support this.

A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO COORDINATION

Alternative or less traditional coordination mechanisms are also highlighting the importance of taking a ‘whole systems’ approach to humanitarian assistance for maximum effectiveness. Recent responses have highlighted the dangers in seeing decisions on coordination structures as a binary choice of a single type of actor. In most responses, the UN, INGOs, NNGOs and communities cannot on their own coordinate effective delivery without other parts and the most successful approaches have recognised the benefits of adaptively using different constituent parts within an overall wider structure – in effect a nuanced systems approach to humanitarian coordination. Systems leadership and systems thinking as disciplines are in relative infancy in the humanitarian architecture compared to comparable external and national government or crisis response sectors, and current humanitarian power dynamics and mechanisms entrench the status quo.

Syria, Myanmar and Sudan are key examples of where willingness to consider the system as a whole (both nationally and sub-regionally) rather than a hierarchical mechanism with one formulation, can benefit overall response, albeit not with their own significant challenges. These also highlight the criticality of not seeing coordination approaches as a binary – an IASC structure fully led by the UN in Damascus for the whole of Syria would undermine trust and effective response, but a complete split of the response into independent

parts and hubs would create division and lose strategic focus for example – the effectiveness is in the balance of the two.

Reflection on comparative advantages

Open and frank discussion around comparative advantages is critical at all levels, with actors willing to discuss where they have strengths and gaps relevant for specific aspects. Conversely where agencies try and maintain their own agency or constituents’ access (UN, INGOs and NNGOs for example), this tends to create a race to the bottom in several cases evaluated. Even within the constituent parts (within INGOs for example) there is scope for conversations around comparative advantages noting that these are not fully homogenous groups. In general, there is a benefit in the system as a whole working to respective advantages and advantages based on the context – ongoing operations have shown for example that in some cases the UN can open doors through diplomatic channels for example but then a local agency will have better acceptance or ability to work when once that door is opened. Or the UN may be best placed to coordinate complex air asset operations for an acute period but hand-over rapidly to more local organisations. For any organisation, being willing to give up power, step back, or not enter a context is inherently difficult, but progress here is critical and nuanced coordination can

support this.

Strategic use of grey space in coordination system

Notwithstanding the need for transparency and accountability, a recognition of the importance of strategic grey-space within a humanitarian context is highly important. This is particularly true given that many contexts where alternative mechanisms are in place or being considered are where aid and access are being instrumentalized and require less formulaic approaches. The use of strategic ambiguity and grey space can be critical, particularly in smaller networks and for national operators. In several authoritarian or politicised contexts, 'underground' humanitarian operations are, in reality, well known to state or de facto state authorities and security actors, but those mechanisms have been able to deliver humanitarian aid as the scale is small enough or there is sufficient deniable plausibility of knowledge for them to. An over-focus on centralization and command and control approaches can undermine the benefits of this grey space and the access that it provides. However, this aspect should not be taken lightly and a holistic approach to sharing risk is even more critical than normal in such contexts where local actors may invariably be exposed to significant dangers by operating and coordinating outside of formal systems. To support a balancing of nuanced strategic grey space and accountable response, proactive conversations on whether a coordination system is principled or not are critical, and documentation of (often difficult) decisions is essential.

Consideration of access from an affected population perspective

In multiple responses, concerns have been highlighted that access too often tends to be

considered by traditional coordination mechanisms from an agency access perspective, and far less often from whether populations themselves are able to effectively access required services in dignity irrespective of who is able to provide that aid. This risks creating scenarios where access is misanalysed and resources are potentially misallocated as a result, prioritising the presence of the traditional IASC structures and lead agencies even where they may not have the best access. In several highly contested contexts, there has also been an increasingly centralized focus on nation state negotiated access agreements through the traditional coordination structures and UN. This can provide direct benefits and in some cases result in sustained access following significant investment in political negotiations, but in other cases has led to a significant amount of time and resources - including at the highest levels - is focussed on trying to negotiate state access agreements where alternative approaches and delivery through NGO or community coordination structures may have been more effective and agile.

As noted above, there are also concerns that there has been an over-focus on individually negotiated nation state access agreements by senior UN officials or donor countries which is limiting focus on meaningful political solutions to the actual crises themselves by political actors, ultimately perpetuating protracted crises. Where implemented effectively, the use of diverse and alternative coordination models as part of a wider system has demonstrated possible solutions to complex access challenges, in particular allowing pragmatic and tailored negotiations by actors with differing levels of access, and enabling different parts of a response to negotiate access with different stakeholders, ultimately prioritising a more people-centred access approach. This can allow international UN and diplomatic entities to focus on a wider reclamation of humanitarian space globally.

Key points: A Whole Systems Approach to Coordination

- A Whole Systems approach should be used in developing coordination, harnessing the comparative advantages of different types of coordination systems and actors for a strengthened overall response.
- Access conversations need to be centred always on access of *affected populations* rather than agency access, and alternative coordination systems strategically utilised to support complex access approaches in difficult environments.

DEVELOPING CONTEXTUALISED COORDINATION EARLY

A common theme in alternative coordination mechanisms is that they have often been most effective where they have taken well managed risks, adopted no-regrets approaches and driven early action in a crisis in a manner that is heavily contextualised and adapted to the context. Similarly where coordination systems have been slow to adapt to circumstances or overly risk averse, this has risked weakening humanitarian action.

Developing a contextually relevant coordination approach

The most effective alternative coordination models are generally created bespoke by those more linked with aid operations and affected populations, but what this looks like in practice this will depend heavily on the context and on what surge capacity is needed. In major disaster contexts, both recent and historical evaluations have highlighted that parachuting standardised global emergency systems without consideration of the nuance of a context can undermine effective response and local coordination capacity. Similarly in protracted crisis or more stable contexts where development-focused coordination mechanisms have been in place and there is a new emergency, there can be a tendency for coordinators and agencies to continue to work through existing structures, (and often conflict party central governments in civil conflicts) without adjusting to the nuances of the new crisis. Several people have noted that particularly in development to emergency contexts, over-use of the UNCT as a decision-making platform in humanitarian crises, or UN-only meetings, has compounded this as decisions are taken without civil society or Red-Cross/Red Crescent movement engagement. NGO and community led coordination structures have offered an ability to more quickly adapt in such scenarios by creating a bespoke coordination arrangement that is more contextually relevant for any given crisis and more adaptive to change complex crises.

Working with what already exists

Particularly in contexts with an existing strong civil society or experience operating in crisis modalities, civil society and community networks often already are in existence or develop quickly in crisis moments. These networks and agencies

often come with trust, acceptance and existing relationships that can enable effective and efficient response in the short term, a quicker transition to recovery and better nexus implementation. Where traditional coordination mechanisms have been imposed with more limited consideration for what already exists, not only are these opportunities lost, but they are risking undermining existing capacities and structures and worsening acceptance. Empowerment of coordinators at operational or 'field' levels can be critical here to help ensure that coordination mechanisms are as close to affected populations as possible. In complex crises, active discussions around the types of decisions that need to be taken at operational, country and regional/global levels is critical – several of the analysed responses have highlighted that a lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities in coordination structures (either between NGO led networks or between NGO networks and the IASC system can create challenges)

Adaptive and rapid crisis coordination

Particularly within evolving acute crisis responses, alternative coordination modalities have proven effective where they are able to adapt to changing situations and information at speed, often taking calculated risks to adapt to an emerging or evolving crisis. Conversely, where agencies and coordination systems lack professionalized and well-heelled crisis response or contextually relevant surge support, they struggle to quickly adapt and establish the most effective modalities and coordination.

Somewhat counter-intuitively for the humanitarian sector, several respondents and evaluations have noted that many protracted crises and humanitarian coordination platforms often lack dedicated emergency response expertise outside of agency-specific surge teams. From a systems perspective, emergency preparedness plans and crisis simulations are happening within agencies, but frequently not created or updated at inter-agency level, even including in contexts seeing recurrent crises. At national response level, HCTs or ICCGs are frequently not designed or set-up to manage major emergencies and rarely train or undertake joint crisis exercises, procedures that are standard practice in national crisis response systems.

At global levels, the scale up protocols do not generally provide a dedicated and encompassing inter-agency crisis response functionality, focussing more on resource mobilisation and structures - and the EDG and IASC Principals meetings fulfil roles across both acute crisis and protracted situations, often having to balance the two. This means that in moments of acute crisis where consideration of alternative coordination modalities are critical, the opportunity to do so is often lost and existing modalities are continued. Some respondents have

noted similar issues within civil society coordination itself as well – whilst many major INGOs and networks have professional and dedicated emergency expertise themselves, an interagency crisis response approach designed contextually for a specific crisis can be missing.

Key points: Developing contextualised coordination early

- Coordination systems are most effective when designed around the nuances and specificities of a given context, building on what already exists in terms of first responders and civil society. Harnessing rather than replacing this is often critical in effectiveness.
- Rapid, nuanced and adaptive approaches in crisis moment are critical but often too slow. Working quickly as humanitarian actors to pivot in emergency situations (particularly where there is more limited emergency capabilities) is critical and early conversations around alternative coordination approaches should be a core part of this.

EFFECTIVE COORDINATION NETWORKS AND NGO FORUMS

The importance of effective INGO/NNGO/mixed coordination platforms is highly important in their ability to effectively support operations and to engage with external systems. A huge amount of successful work has been undertaken over the past decades in supporting, professionalising and strengthening INGO, NNGO and community platforms with dedicated support from global and national networks including ICVA, Interaction and the NEAR Network. A full analysis of broader themes in effective NGO Forums is beyond the scope of this analysis and well documented elsewhere but four key themes relevant for contexts with a constrained IASC system and alternative coordination mechanisms are outlined below:

The importance and risks of informal influencing

A common trend emerges around the risks and benefits of informal spaces and relationships relevant for alternative coordination mechanisms. The importance of coordination mechanisms and representatives being able to develop personal relationships with power holders and focus on

nuanced influencing is key. Even within the traditional IASC systems, multiple stakeholders have noted that decisions are frequently not actually made in HCTs or EDG meetings, but agreed outside of these in informal or non-accessible spaces. This risks severely limiting the power of less traditional coordinators and representatives to influence these, and particularly for local actors who are more often disenfranchised from the informal diplomatic and ‘expat’ spaces that UN and INGO officials inhabit (though this can be seen in INGO contexts as well – for example where there is a significant divide, physically or figuratively, between UN senior leaders and NGO senior leaders).

Similar challenges are seen in acute crisis response and disasters – the informal relationships that exist between emergency responders who have often worked together in multiple crises around the world creates barriers for local actors or more diverse coordination mechanisms outside the ‘system’ to engage. A greater recognition of this by those within the existing systems is key, along with leaders in alternative coordination mechanisms focusing on the softer elements of influencing and

advocacy to drive change as much as the formal meetings and systems.

Making the case for financing and dedicated leadership

Dedicated financing of coordination structures is critical and more so in such scenarios where civil society plays a far greater role. This is particularly true for local networks who suffer from greater challenges in overheads compared to INGOs, but equally is critical for international and mixed mechanisms, and the absence of effective funding has been a major stumbling block for the effectiveness of such modalities. Early and transparent engagement between NGOs and donors is critical here, along with donor representatives at country level being willing to consider alternative approaches and sensitization with donor HQs on the types of approach required. In some contexts, despite potential donor willingness to fund, NGO networks and coordination systems themselves have struggled to quickly and effectively make the case (with evidence) for alternative coordination approaches, limiting their own ability to secure financing. NGO networks and forums of all types being able to evidence the need, scale and added value is generally critical in getting the required funding to allow them to be effective. In some cases, and particularly for more local networks, creative financing mechanisms through global pooled funds, diaspora networks or philanthropic sources shows some promise, particularly in acute emergencies where speed is essential.

Operational coordination vs member representation

A core challenge that is becoming increasingly evident in civil society led coordination mechanisms is an inherent tension between fulfilling a role as a member representation body (the more 'traditional' NGO Forum mandate) and fulfilling a role overseeing operational coordination. It's important to unpack these proactively as it can lead to the two roles requiring different approaches where members interests do not fully coincide with operational delivery requirements of the overall response. This isn't entirely unexpected and becomes more evident as the networks and mechanisms become larger and more professional – it's arguably a similar tension that the UN can experience in taking an overall systems coordination approach vs a UN-centric

agency mandate approach and is most commonly experience where NGO network members have to give up power for the good of the response to work through other modalities for example. Being open and up front about this tension and considering mechanisms for addressing it can be key, particularly as coordination systems grow and become more established. In Northeast Syria, creating a more explicit separation of the two functions acknowledging that they may have different objectives is being considered to help address this and has relevance for other national and global discussions around collective coordination.

Leadership and accountability within networks

Relatedly ensuring effective accountability within civil society networks is critical as part of effective coordination efforts, although is challenging to achieve in practice. There has been significant progress on strengthening governance processes with INGO/NNGO forums and networks in the past years, but as networks take on more responsibilities, it is important that there is clear accountability and mechanisms for addressing issues if they arise. This can be challenging where NGO Forums are playing a role that goes beyond effectively a democratic representation function for NGOs and into more operational coordination functions as the accountability and priorities become more complex.

Whilst significant support has been given to NGO Forum Directors and hosts, support to steering committee members (particular new steering committee members who have more limited experience in Forum governance) may be increasingly useful given the role that they occupy in the governance of coordination platforms. A number of positive steps have been taking place in recent years including inductions and support for steering committee members in several of the analysed contexts. Internal accountability can be far more complex in alternative coordination modalities as there is often not an external formal accountability link between an NGO Forum or Coordination platform and organisational HQs as there is within the UN system and the Cluster Lead Agency/HC accountability lines. This is not necessary a negative issue, however, and is explored in section 7 below.

Key points: Effective Coordination Networks and NGO Forums

- Effective resourcing, both in terms of senior and experienced leaders and dedicated funding for NGO coordination platforms is critical for their effectiveness and needs to be supported early in crisis. This is essential for both operational effectiveness and for credibility in engagement with external institutions and leaders.
- Open and strategic conversations with NGO Forums and alternative coordination networks on roles, mandates and accountability are important, particularly as the 'formal' scope of services increases or becomes more complex.

FINANCING, PARTNERSHIPS AND RISK

Analysis suggests that financing remains one of the single most critical drivers of successful or unsuccessful NGO-led coordination approaches, particularly in complex settings. As outlined above, despite commitments, financing has become more centralised with the UN structures in recent years, and the level of pass-through financing remains un-transparent and difficult to analyse. Several key lessons emerge relevant for diverse coordination approaches.

Direct financing of local networks and coordinators

Of particular importance, local and community organizations struggle most to sufficiently finance coordination, in part as a result of a lack of consistent overheads or equitable pass through. This becomes a more acute challenge as the international system scales up, and requirements on local coordination focal points increases significantly if they are to engage with it – and particularly as local networks are far less likely to have contingency funding to move dedicated potions at speed. Where locally managed structures have been able to secure financing early, they have been able to make progress. Non-traditional funding could be critical here – dedicated private, diaspora or foundation funding, alterative pooled funds, or a dedicated crisis facility which can seed funding whilst longer term mechanisms kick in and the IASC systems slowly pivot.

The role of intermediary financing and alternative pooled funds

A core feature of where contextual coordination approaches have been able to have impact has relied on effective intermediary financing approaches to be able to more effectively and cost effectively get resources through to front line mechanisms and organisations. Direct financing of local structures remains the ultimate goal, but in several scenarios, intermediaries and pooled funds are likely to continue to be necessary for some time given donor restrictions, and considering their use is critical. The CERF has made very limited progress outside of some dedicated pass through to NGOs coordinated by IOM for COVID and a small number of other crises, and the UN led Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) have made significantly more progress, but with still a long way to go in many contexts.

Increasingly, alternative pooled funding mechanisms and intermediary financing mechanisms being used and considered linked with alternative coordination mechanisms (the Alternative Fund for North Syria (AFNS), START, NEAR Network, Ukraine NGO pooled funds and local led intermediary financing networks for example)²³. These are demonstrating several benefits, including stimulating a diversity of financing to encourage competition over effectiveness, lessen overheads, and increase passthroughs.

Risk-sharing

Closely linked with financing, analysis has highlighted the critical importance of equitable and collective risk approaches in the use of alternative mechanisms of coordination and delivery. This particularly requires equitable risk sharing approaches that avoid pure risk transfer to actors closest to threats. Collective strategic conversations between NNGOs, INGOs, UN, and donors can be effective here, but it's remained a

major challenge in many of the responses analyses, albeit with continued ongoing efforts in Syria, Sudan and Myanmar amongst other contexts.

Key points: Financing and risk

- Alternative coordination mechanisms can provide a catalyst and support for alternative financing mechanisms, including decentralised or NGO led pooled funds and intermediary financing which can help get funding to first responders and local actors faster and more effectively.
- Alternative coordination mechanisms can provide a catalyst and support for alternative financing mechanisms, including decentralised or NGO led pooled funds and intermediary financing which can help get funding to first responders and local actors faster and more effectively.

LOGISTICS, OPERATIONS, AND INFORMATION SHARING

Operations support and common services

A core gap was highlighted by several stakeholders in low-IASC contexts that coordinated logistics and operations support capacity can be a major gap, particular in responses where UN pipelines and common services are both necessary and constrained. Of particular note, pipelines on complex commodities (pharmaceuticals, specialist equipment etc), and common service logistics capacity (warehousing/telecoms etc) has been a bottle neck – with the logs cluster doing great work but heavily UN focused. Where there is limited IASC presence, often the UN led or facilitated common services mechanisms are non-existent even if they could be of benefit for NGO led structures on the ground. Several key promising initiatives have been developing around H2H support at operational and global levels⁴, and could be built out further to enable common NGO pipelines and logistics surge capacity, or at least a menu of options for low-IASC contexts that coordination platforms could draw on.

Data protection and firewalls

Given the contexts that many of these mechanisms work in, the importance of clear data protection mechanisms, confidentiality and firewalls has also proven essential, to protect aid worker and affected populations who are directly at risk. Good practice has highlighted where data sharing protocols are explicitly discussed, agreed, and information sharing is kept light touch, this can strengthen trust between parts of the response and enable a strategic approach that is not over burdensome. Conversely, concerns around over-protection of the wrong information has also been raised in relation to complementary models, with decision making information not shared from centralized IASC, UN or INGO structures with INGOs or NNGO mechanisms – and in worst cases a refusal to share relevant strategic information. Generally, systematised information classification and data protection mechanisms are not routinely in place throughout coordination structures to the degree that they are in national crisis management systems in many countries and much is created from scratch, if at all.

Key points: Logistics, operations, and information

- Coordinated common services amongst NGOs have been strengthened over the years but should be a particular focus for alternative coordination mechanisms where require and relevant.
- In contested and high-risk environments, data protection and information sharing protocols are critical – and need to be documented – do ensure that staff and affected populations are protected but that there is transparency necessary for accountable decision making..

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL COORDINATION SUPPORT**Contextualised regional structures can be highly effective**

Contextualised national and local structures can be critical as outlined above. However, analysis also noted the importance of considering regional structures where necessary and relevant for IASC constrained contexts, particularly in cases where national relationships between state/de facto state actors and humanitarians can become leveraged or compromised. Multiple crises have regional dynamics, particularly where cross border responses are considered, or multi-country displacement is seen. INGO networks have been able to come together effectively around regional structures in some places where the IASC or the UN has not (and in some case where it is constrained by the structure of UN agencies, regional politics or internal UN mandate issues). In such cases, the regional structures such as the Whole of Syria approach can help to mitigate

perceived or real trust issues between specific parts of a response, in support a more holistic whole systems approach.

National NGOs coordination mechanisms in individual contexts have also been increasingly engaging around regional dynamics and thematic issues cross-context, and there may be scope for these to drive effective change, and to support such approaches. Regional structures can be useful in maintaining trust by creating ‘independent’ systems delinking from institutional issues, politics and competition within a response. A global enabling environment to support alternative coordination modalities has also been identified as critical and is covered in detail in section 8.

Key points: Region and global coordination support

- Global and regional support for alternative coordination mechanisms is essential, both in terms of direct support, guidance and surge, as well as in providing advocacy and linkage points with wider systems, the IASC, donors and diplomatic entities.
- Regional or sub-regional civil society networks and coordination can be highly useful in strategic planning across lined contexts or in heavily politicised contexts where access is strained and relationships with conflict parties or nation states complex.

Endnotes

- 1 OCHA (Dec 2023) *Note on IASC coordination structures at country level in 2022*, [Link](#)
- 2 Montemurro M., (2023) *Pooled Funding at a Crossroads: A Comprehensive Analysis*, ICVA and HERE Geneva, [Link](#)
- 3 Bond (2024) *Ukraine Crisis: Two Years On*, [Link](#)
- 4 H2H (ret 2024) H2H Network Directory Website, [Link](#)

6

Risks and unintended consequences

RISKS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

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QUESTIONS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

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Despite the focus of this research, it is important not to see INGO, NNGO or community-led mechanisms as a panacea that will solve all political and bureaucratic issues of the humanitarian sector. As noted in the lessons, a whole-systems approach is where the most promising structures may lie and the plurality of different actors and power structures across the system is a key goal rather than an either-or dichotomy.

In that vein, several key risks are worth noting when mechanisms outside of traditional IASC structures are considered or implemented and all

of these generally focus largely on unintended consequences. They are laid out across three distinct groupings with potential mitigation steps – 1. unintentional fragmentation; 2. unintentional undermining of operational effectiveness and 3. unintentional constraining of humanitarian space (whether in the short or long term). They are noted here as a guide to consider when adopting or supporting diverse coordination mechanisms in current or future contexts.

RISKS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

UNINTENTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

Loss of collective action on strategic access and principles issues - A challenge with a more multi-polar coordination approaches is that complex political negotiations by the UN and donors around humanitarian principles and access with conflict parties can potentially be lost where alternatives models are seen as a work around to these access issues.

Unintentionally undermining multilateralism or undermining the IASC: there is also a risk that that civil society coordination systems unintentionally further erode the ability of multi-lateral agencies to work effectively in the future or undermine the IASC as a system by offering alternatives. This is a particular risk given current active political threats by several major governments towards multilateral institutions. Similarly, despite arguable shortfalls in reform efforts and a less-than-perfect system, the creation the IASC itself and the cluster system, along with iterative reforms, have had huge benefits over the intervening decades. A risk of a binary either UN or civil society system risks undermining this progress and a return to a prevalence of multiple standards, approaches and mechanisms with increased fragmentation to the detriment of affected populations

Exacerbating over-competition: where a more multi-polar approach to coordination becomes too competitive, this can undermine a collective and people centred response. Some level of healthy

competition can drive innovation and challenge to a homogeneous thinking, but analysis of existing cases suggests that where coordination and response modalities become an end in and of themselves rather than a route for overall aid delivery, resources can end up being channelled on mandate or agency bases. There has been much commentary around the dangers of a cluster or agency-based coordination and financing system as this can create perverse incentives and siloed approaches driven by those with power rather than specific needs¹. Area based approaches, NGO forums and locally led mechanisms can be effective in breaking down these siloes and developing geographical support, but they can also risk competition being driven by geography, area 'mandates' or competition for profile between NGO networks rather than a holistic needs based approach.

Mitigation approaches: greater transparency, albeit within a trusted circle, of UN leaders and diplomats with other parts of the humanitarian system and NGOs around ongoing diplomatic engagement and access approaches is likely to be key, alongside collective strategic discussion on systems approaches to coordination that can harness the benefits of different modalities. In some scenarios, this perceived risk has been used to resist progress on consideration of alternative models despite limited actual progress being made on the access issues themselves through high level diplomatic approaches. In essence, alternative coordination approaches often develop because of an inability to deliver principled access through

traditional structures and intentionally harnessing the benefits of a more diverse system may enable nuanced ways forward on difficult access issues.

UNDERMINING OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Over-formalization: whilst analysis above has highlighted that NGO-led coordination structures can be more effective at utilising strategic grey space to support continued aid delivery, over formalisation of such structures can risk limiting the agility and flexibility that enables this. This has been seen both with INGO and NNGO networks which have taken on existing operational coordination functions of the UN in some contexts for example, and for the first time come up against some of the same challenges that UN coordination has experience in the past.

Reduced visibility on aid operations: where complementary mechanisms, and particularly more underground mechanisms are used, there can be a risk of losing visibility on aid operations, particularly at centralised levels. This can undermine the ability to deliver effectively, prioritise, and to attract the right level of financing. This can raise larger questions around accountability of mechanisms in more extreme cases.

Mitigation approaches: maintaining a regular appraisal of comparative advantages of different modalities and annual reviews of a strategic approach within NGO coordination structures is critical and can help coordination be agile and adaptive to what is required. Keeping coordination mechanisms focussed as a facilitative function and reviewing their success based on the facilitation of quality aid delivery - rather than an end in and of themselves - is likely to be crucial here. Active consideration of the benefits of NGO-led or alternative coordination systems is useful to help strategically plan how best to maintain agility and adapt in order to do so.

UNINTENTIONALLY CONSTRAINED HUMANITARIAN SPACE

Unintentionally enabling aid

instrumentalization: complementary models are particularly seen in complex crises where there is aid instrumentalization or diversion, and INGO, NNGOs and community organizations are often (but

far from always) more at risk of being leveraged than diplomatically protected international organizations. As a result, an increased power and greater channelling of resources to such coordination structures could risk either immediate or longer term instrumentalization and pressure on those mechanisms, with less ability to counter-act this pressure.

Unintentional undermining of humanitarian principles: linked to ideas of fragmentation, there is also a risk of unintentionally undermining respect for humanitarian principles more generally if less traditional mechanisms are created. In some cases, they may be seen as avoiding holding states to account for not upholding their duties and humanitarian principles by offering an alternative. It is critical to note that the UN may not be neutral, however, particularly in contested civil conflicts or where there are double or triple hatting RC/HC/DSRSGs who maintain political or development focussed functions; and INGOs and the Red Cross-movement may also not always be perceived as neutral or impartial. Alternative coordination structures can offer an ability to engage with less traditional and potentially non-neutral or non-independent actors where necessary for life-saving humanitarian aid, but this can also risk undermining the reality or perception of a principled humanitarian response.

Mitigation approaches: it is fundamental that institutions at all levels, but particularly global political actors and international organizations continue to – and accelerate – work on reclaiming humanitarian space which has been increasingly under threat. Indeed, part of the rationale of assessing less traditional mechanisms, is to create space for the UN and diplomatic insinuations to focus on systemic solutions to access and principles issues, and less on individually negotiated access challenges case by case where these may be able to be solved through a variety of approaches. Sub-regional or regional structures can be helpful here in providing strategic functions across multiple response modalities where perceived neutrality of UN or civil society actors or competition between modalities is a risk. Ultimately, ensuring that coordination systems – both alternative and the wider IASC structures – are proactively having conversations around whether responses are principled or not and documenting decisions on difficult issues.

QUESTIONS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

In addition to these risks, coordination mechanisms running outside or alongside the traditional IASC systems necessarily raise questions around accountability as noted above. Such systems can create risk around accountability, but the picture is less than clear so are further examined below from two perspectives: accountability within the system, and accountability to affected populations.

SYSTEM ACCOUNTABILITY

The accountability of alternative coordination mechanics has been raised as a concern when seen from traditional coordination architecture perspective. In principle, the IASC system has in built-in accountability mechanisms through the cluster system to CLAs and to the HC, who is ultimately accountable to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (HC to ERC) and the UNSG (RC to SG) through to the UN General Assembly/member states. This provides theoretical mechanisms for follow up in the event of aspects of the system not working and of holding to account agencies and officials outside a response context.

There is a risk that alternative mechanisms, particularly run through NGOs or community structures lack these ingrained mechanisms of vertical accountability and stakeholders within the UN system have flagged challenges with this in multiple contexts. INGO and NNGOs Forums and coordination networks have strengthened accountability mechanisms to members over the past years, but ultimately rely on a significant amount of trust and goodwill and the effectiveness of a Steering Committee or Host Agency in the event of issues, with successful and unsuccessful examples evident in recent years. The need for strong and transparent accountability mechanisms within NGO networks is even more critical in instances where these mechanisms take on a broader operational coordination role given the implications in the event of issues.

However, many stakeholders within and outside the UN system have also flagged that accountability even through the intended UN/IASC mechanisms is applied sporadically and in several cases with limited meaningful enforcement. Multiple examples have been cited, including in UN evaluations, of continued gaps in cluster coordinator positions, a refusal of UN agencies in some contexts to fulfil a provider of last resort roles, RC/HCs being

unwilling or unable to hold CLAs to account and underperformance or malpractice issues by UN officials or agencies resulting in little consequence. Accountability through AROs and HC appraisals also remains complex given that RC/HCs have two accountability lines (to the EDG on the HC side and to the SG on the RC side) and potentially three where they fulfil a DSRSG role in an Integrated Mission. As such, vertical accountability of the IASC system remains far from clear and may not always offer 'better' accountability than a civil society or hybrid structure.

PEOPLE CENTRED ACCOUNTABILITY

It's is critical therefore to consider that a more holistic view of accountability of coordination systems would consider them from the perspective of accountability to affected populations rather than accountability to member states or UN institutions.

When implemented effectively, civil society or community-based coordination mechanisms can create a stronger link with affected populations at the community level, and with an intrinsic trust and some degree of social contract built into community structures. Often communities also have some greater degree of control and ability to influence delivery by organisations embedded within them. Local coordination systems and organisations can also be more effective at holding local authorities to account through a similar existence of some form of social contract. This can therefore create stronger accountability towards affected populations, albeit with less formalised enforcement mechanisms when seen from an international perspective.

As with many issues in such contexts, however, they remain fluid and complex, and alternative coordination systems may also suffer from weak accountability or become subject to political, military or private pressure as a result of their closer relationships. This highlights that accountability in a diverse and internationalized system is complex and fluid – no one system necessarily offers a 'better' or more accountable approach and evaluation of a holistic view of accountability is critical within the context.

Endnotes

- 1 Konyndyk J., Saez P., Worden R., (2020) *Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area Based Humanitarian Coordination Model*, [Link](#)

7

Guidance and recommendations

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Drawing from the lessons and risks above, several key recommendations are provided below for coordination systems for complex and politically challenging contexts where traditional IASC structures may be constrained and NGO-led systems a benefit. These are intended to be used

by current and future coordination systems and NGO stakeholders at global levels to help guide development.

DEVELOPING CONTEXTUALISED COORDINATION APPROACHES

- **A whole systems approach:** coordinators and humanitarian leaders in complex contexts should consider the overall response from a systems perspective, acknowledging that different mechanisms and modalities may be best placed to deliver different parts of a response and creating enabling environments for doing so. This can be challenging and may require coordination systems or agencies themselves to relinquish power and focus on supporting other actors at times for the benefit of the response, proactively working to harness comparative advantages as part of this.

- **Strategic and agile planning, particular in crisis:** proactive conversations around the objectives, focus and boundaries of alternative coordination and response mechanisms should take place (and take place at area/national/global levels) to help guide this. This should happen both within structures themselves, and between various structures to strengthen trust, transparency, and best use of comparative advantages. Caution should be given to avoid replicating traditional cluster or agency focussed systems because they are the 'norm' and rather to developing fit for purpose mechanisms based on the context. Development of documented 'concept of operations' for coordination systems may be useful at an early stage to guide this planning and

discussions, noting that this need not be overly complex, particularly in crisis situations but to set out the purposes, parameters and interplay between systems. Strategically harnessing alternative in coordination is particularly critical for acute crisis situations in complex environments where local first responders and civil society are likely already operating and can adapt and pivot in emergencies far more quickly and contextually.

- **Working through existing capacities:** mapping and consideration of what already exists at various levels (community, local, sub-national, national, global etc) is essential and should drive the implementation of coordination approaches. In an ideal scenario, a significant amount of this can be done in advance of a crisis at local, national and global levels through existing coordination architectures and DRR approaches in high-risk environments, and could be considered as part of emergency preparedness approaches. Such mapping approaches can also be built into early warnings and anticipatory action systems to minimised and strengthen rapid crisis response. Based on existing capacities, coordination approaches should be designed around these, rather than beginning from a perspective of how to bring local actors into traditional international coordination mechanisms.

PEOPLE-CENTRED ACCESS

- **Prioritising access of affected populations over agency access:** access should be considered holistically by coordination platforms, from a perspective of the most effective routes for populations accessing the aid they need. This should include proactively considering alternative and non-traditional approaches in complex and contested environments during strategic conversations, and willingness and trust between

parts of the system to do so. This may require international actors supporting less traditional mechanisms including actors or mechanisms that have political links or touch points at a community level - an explicit discussion and review of humanitarian principles within coordination platforms and on a systems level is recommended to support active consideration of an approach that does not undermine wider humanitarian principles.

NGO GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS

- Development of clear governance mechanisms:** governance arrangements both between and within NGO coordination systems is critical and ensuring that these are articulated and documented. In initial stages of a crisis these can be ‘good enough’ and iterated over time as the situation develops. Several models can be considered, dependent on the circumstances – a fully informal network of organisations with ad-hoc coordination, a semi-structured informal grouping, a formally constituted forum with documented principles and approaches (often hosted by an agency), a fully constituted independent entity capable of operating outside of any agencies. Particular focus should be given to internal and external accountability structures within the governance arrangements in contexts where civil society are coordinating operational response. In contexts where multiple coordination modalities and networks are operating, and operating at different levels, proactive consideration should be given to the relationships between the mechanisms. Developing documented ‘principles of coordination’ between networks is recommended to help drive discussions around collective approaches in the most effective manner and to build trust through open dialogue.
- Dedicated, diverse, senior leaders:** particularly

in complex scenarios, dedicated leadership for coordination modalities is critical in low IASC environments. Consideration should be given to establishing a dedicated leadership focal point or small team that can effectively work at senior levels with the right degree of experience across complex environments. Profiles capable of building collaborative systems with multiple stakeholders are critical, and focus by those leaders on ensuring the development trusted relationships is critical. In many cases, this is likely to require senior and highly experienced staff in civil society coordination positions (national or international), and requires host agencies and donors to finance a requisite level of seniority to attract such profiles. In many complex and sensitive situations, particularly early in a crisis, senior leadership that is known in the context with existing trust and relationships can be extremely useful to help adapt quickly in emergencies, and attention should be paid that such relationships are not undermined by scale up of new staff without such relationships. International surge support to coordination systems can be very important in providing leadership but should be contextually designed – in some cases this may require forward leaning leadership, in other cases a supportive and facilitative role to existing systems and those with long-standing trust.

FINANCING MECHANISMS AND RISK

- Ensuring coordination is financed:** financing mechanisms are critical to the effectiveness of coordination and alternative approaches and conscious efforts should be made very early in a crisis to ensure dedicated financing for senior level coordination resources from the outset. This is particularly true for national or local structures who have more limited overheads and struggle to fund dedicated coordination support. Very lightly earmarked seed financing could be considered by donors, INGOs/INGO Forums, diaspora or private foundations for community-based networks to strengthen their approach, and particularly in a crisis phase as a response pivots and sustainable funding is developed.
- Harnessing alternative financing arrangements:** alternative coordination mechanisms should consider harnessing and supporting alternative financing mechanisms early in crisis given the limits of traditional financing for less traditional coordination and response mechanisms. This could include encouraging the development (or use of existing) alternative pooled fund mechanisms and NGO intermediary financing mechanisms managed by national or international actors (and giving consideration in such alternative mechanisms to issues of bank de-risking and sanctions that can disproportionately affect NGOs in highly contested crises). A global rapidly deployable intermediary financing/pooled fund mechanism or frameworks could help in initial stages of a crisis to get money quickly to

non-traditional structures whilst more established financing catches up, and existing global systems offer options here.

DATA SHARING AND DATA PROTECTION MECHANISMS

- **Data sharing and protection mechanisms** should be explicitly developed early in responses through coordination mechanisms – particularly complex political crises where information, agencies and affected populations are at threat. A simple toolkit with interoperable information sharing tools and clarity on data classification could help this, but trust between different parts of a system is fundamental to the process and requires proactive investment in relationships. The use of national or international NGO intermediaries can be a useful tool where trust in multilateral institutions by local actors is an issue. Ensuring that information management system strike a balance is important - between not being too overly complex so as to make them difficult to implement by front line organisations, but having sufficient information to engage with donors, the public, to strategically plan

response, and to promote accountability.

- **Workable information management systems** should be co-developed that balance the necessity for front-line contextual information without being over-complex for organizations with more limited time and resources. Work on ready-to-go mechanisms that can be used to complement existing HPC processes and can be deployed rapidly is useful, with expertise available globally that can be drawn on.

COMMON SERVICES AND OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

- **H2H and Common Services:** development and coordination of contextualised common services offerings that can support agile and resilient common services should be implemented or designed based on contextual realities and communicated with internal and external stakeholders. Multiple emerging and existent H2H networks and services can be drawn on for rapid deployment in crises. Dependent on the

crisis, these may include common telecoms/radio/internet services; common pipeline sources for commodities; common logistics services (supply, transport, clearance warehousing); cash, common security and safety services.

8

A global enabling system

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This report has highlighted that effective humanitarian response has adapted organically and in-organically in contexts where the traditional IASC structures face significant barriers or hurdles. Two concurrent threads run through the analysis – 1. there is an increasing risk that international responses in the future will be more complex and more constrained and 2. the benefits of coordination and response that is contextualized, locally-led and accountable to populations are significant and can be better achieved with diverse set-ups.

This paper has proposed that evolution and reform

primarily will not come from within the traditional humanitarian system and those who currently hold power, it requires a diverse range of actors and entities to push change and often at the country and local levels. Notwithstanding this, however, global structures and institutions of various forms are critical in enabling that change to happen, creating space and providing support necessary in reconfiguring systems. Several recommendations are made here for creating an enabling environment through the global humanitarian system for contextualised coordination approaches.

A REFOCUS OF GEOPOLITICAL EFFORTS ON HUMANITARIAN SPACE

- **A focus on reclamation of humanitarian space at the highest levels:** a refocus of global institutions and diplomatic channels on systemic reclamation of humanitarian space, and taking action on arbitrary aid denial is critical to minimise increasing instrumentalization of aid at country levels. Some of this can happen through dedicated efforts of UN and member states at the highest levels, and through both diplomatic and civil society actors working globally, noting some progress on attempts to progress legal challenges to aid denial, starvation as a weapon of war and breaches of the Geneva Conventions.
- **Consideration of independent facilities to monitor aid denial and access:** interesting efforts are also being proposed and explored around independent facilities or functions to monitor and reports on issues of aid denial and access and could remove some of the political and internal constraints that the UN and some INGOs face in publishing access and aid denial information. The existence of such facilities could be piloted for specific acute and contested crises and further work is recommended here.

EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

- **A focus on systems leadership by IASC leaders:** particular focus should be given particularly in HC/RC pipelines, selection and training to systems leadership, including a focus on collaborative empowerment inside and outside the UN system. Initiatives such as the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI), Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) and ODI's TANDEM show potential promise in strengthening overall leadership across the humanitarian system. RC/HC guidance and IASC policies, however are particularly limited on systems leadership or sub-national or non-traditional coordination mechanisms and a collective shift is recommended to broaden leadership approaches.
- **Expanding diversity amongst senior humanitarian leaders:** in addition, broadening the pool of HC/RCs, DHCs, RHCs and UN agency representatives should be a focus. Further progress needed on leaders from the global south, but also critically on expansion of candidates from outside the common UN system or political systems, including more former civil society senior leaders being appointed. This may require a concerted push from global civil society networks including identification and ongoing support to a pipeline of candidates pre and post selection.
- **Senior collective NGO leadership:** the importance of effective dedicated civil society coordination leadership is critical. Continuing the significant progress on strengthening NGO Forums,

and building a pipeline of senior civil society leaders with experience in systems approaches, alongside greater recognition of the importance of such leadership could help drive change here. Increased recognition by INGOs and NNGOs of the

importance of senior staff in coordination positions globally and at response levels is important.

EFFECTIVE CRISIS RESPONSE MECHANISMS

Analysis of existing responses highlights that acute crisis response approaches are fundamental in complex and constrained environments, but often fall short with specific crisis response expertise surprisingly limited across the humanitarian sector.

- **Ongoing analysis, monitoring, and anticipatory action:** with increasing concurrent and recurrent crisis there is some promise around the development of effective civil society alert, analysis and anticipatory action approaches to be able to more quickly and effectively respond to crisis with surge support. These should be encouraged, and critically could build in the predictors and analysis above - where warnings or alerts are seen in such contexts, this would enable global civil society and networks (SCHR, Interaction, ICVA, NEAR) to already begin preparatory work on alternative modalities and an enabling environment to support them.
- **Contextual no-regrets approaches from day one:** use could be made of the predictors outlined in section 5 above to proactively engage in a conversation collectively around the best modalities for assistance. Such an approach should recognize that choices are not binary and will develop – in

complex crises with likely predictors or IASC constraints, global and local civil society networks could rapidly begin work on developing and financing alternative approaches at the same time whilst the situation develops, providing more agility and flexibility.

- **Fit-for-purpose crisis management:** dedicated crisis response mechanisms may also be helpful, noting that in many cases country level inter-agency structures such as HCTs and ICCGs are often not designed for active crisis response. This could entail the development of more effective crisis response approaches between civil society networks that can be activated for short periods of time with direct link to global NGO networks and/or the EDG, rather than through HCTs which could continue focus on ongoing response issues. Where development responses pivot suddenly to a humanitarian crisis, consideration should also be given to step-aside policies for leaders with limited crisis experience, at least temporarily, drawing on existing learning in non-international contexts around crisis response. Explicit crisis response modalities could include mechanisms for increasing flexibility and reducing due diligence in the most acute phases to enable more effective response.

AGILE AND DIVERSE HUMANITARIAN FINANCING

- **Financing of coordination mechanisms:** donors including UN agencies and INGOs should (continue to) invest in coordination mechanisms, including alternative approaches from the outset of crises, with a focus on very lightly earmarked support for coordination systems. This could include dedicated standing capacity for senior deployable (and contextually relevant) leadership outside of the traditional UNDAC and scale-up protocols, including potentially light and agile crisis coordination support. Sensitising donors at capital levels on

the real-world benefits of diverse coordination and response mechanisms is likely to be important in helping to make the case for them, particularly given a current level of interest given operational discussions around the Sudan, Myanmar and other responses. Going beyond the usual calls for more financing to local actors, some initiatives have shown promise, including consideration of grants to community structures as final payments (i.e. not requiring the usual due diligence on end-spend that a partnership or sub-grant requires), and private

micro-grants.

- **Making better use of diverse intermediaries:** Donors, the UN and NGOs should proactively consider the use of INGO and NNGO intermediaries as a cost-effective mechanism for getting money to local and community organizations as effectively as possible, and rapidly in emergency contexts. Alternative pooled fund mechanisms (global or local) and intermediary financing systems can create rapidly deployable or

adaptable mechanisms for supporting this in new crises. Ensuring that intermediaries – both UN and NGOs – are required to pass through as near to 100% of flexibility rules as possible could help drive adaptive approaches. Continued work on equitable risk sharing is strongly encouraged to ensure that this is done in the safest and most effective manner.

LEARNING ACROSS CONTEXTS

- **Driving the conversation:** creating space for dialogue and conversations around alternative approaches is critical to drive effective change across the system and stimulate approaches driven by less traditional coordination and leadership structures. As conversations on the Flagship Initiative, the Future Summit, Grand Bargain 3.0 and other initiatives progress, highlighting the contexts in which alternative coordination and response modalities are working (and working in tandem with the existing structures) is critical.

- **Sharing lessons and tools:** in addition, evidence has highlighted the importance and value of sharing lessons, tools and templates between situations. Contextualization is key, but from Syria to Myanmar, Ukraine to Gaza, less

traditional mechanisms have often had to start from scratch where tools and lessons could help drive things. On ongoing effort to map tools and lessons response by response and dedicated cross-modality learning could help a continued and structure support function, working in tandem with ICVA and Interaction's support to NGO Forums. A simple toolkit could be useful to draw together information and examples of what has worked.

CONCLUDING NOTES

This report has provided initial analysis and guidance for global and country level coordination architectures on adapting and supporting contextually relevant coordination systems. As an iterative process in a complex and evolving global context, continued analysis and work in this space is encouraged. Two common themes are worth focussing on going forwards that have underpinned the learning from the analysed context. Firstly, an adaptive and more locally led coordination architecture requires trust across multiple diverse parts of the system. This requires proactive investment in creating that trust and open dialogue around difficult conversations. Secondly, finding ways to work effectively and adapt quickly in acute crisis responses is essential. Getting the right coordination and response structures and resource

to primary responders early not only supports local response and preparedness capacity, but minimises work required unpicking issues created by less contextually appropriate approaches.



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