



OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Coordination

Overview: Oxfam International's position on Humanitarian Coordination

Oxfam International welcomes attempts by humanitarian non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Organizations, and the United Nations (UN) to improve coordination of international humanitarian response, at global, regional and field levels. Better coordination is vital to improve humanitarian responses, reduce death and suffering, ensure the safety of civilians, and end the destructive cycles of vulnerability and risk which characterise emergencies.

People affected by humanitarian emergencies have the right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance. Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies. Other actors should coordinate with them. When the relevant authorities are unable and/or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, they are obliged to allow humanitarian Organizations to provide humanitarian assistance and protection,¹ in accordance with international and national laws.

Within a broad common understanding of rights-based responses to humanitarian crises, effective coordination must recognise the complementarity of different agencies' approaches. It must respect the authority of national governments, but be careful to remain apart from the military and political operations of the UN or any government.

To improve the practical implementation of humanitarian programmes, good coordination requires: cooperation with Government, civil society, and beneficiaries; effective joint assessment of needs, and development of a joint strategy; a division of labour among humanitarian actors so that all needs are met; good information sharing; good leadership on standards and accountability; adherence to best practice and codes of conduct; and an efficient use of resources.

1. Coordination

A coherent cooperative response to an emergency by all humanitarian actors will maximise the benefits and minimise potential pitfalls of any humanitarian response. Any response that involves more than one actor requires dividing activities among the different actors, and managing the interdependencies between the different activities. Oxfam is committed to improving humanitarian coordination. However, coordination is not an end in itself, but a tool to save more lives and reduce human suffering. This must be achieved by delivering the right assistance, to the right place, at the right time - **enabling those affected by conflict and disasters to achieve their rights to protection and assistance.**

2. Background and overview of humanitarian coordination and reform

Since 1990, the humanitarian 'system' has evolved from a relatively few actors to one of many with varying capabilities, skills and mandates. Some emergencies have been characterised by competition, not collaboration, as agencies vie for scarce donor resources. Donors often hinder coordination, emphasising different, and sometimes contradictory, approaches. As well as governments and humanitarian agencies, a range of other actors, including local and international military forces and business, driven by different motivations, are now providing assistance in some emergencies. All this makes coordination more difficult, while existing coordination mechanisms often ignore, or contradict the wishes of beneficiaries, local communities and government agencies.

Humanitarian agencies have yet to employ coordination mechanisms and resources to optimum effect, or to consistently work with national and local authorities as they should. Humanitarian

responses are still characterised by setbacks in mobilising the right people, with the right skills to lead. International humanitarian organisations continue to import staff, technology and supplies when local sources might be more efficient and appropriate.

The international humanitarian 'system' includes a large number of UN, local and international NGOs. The UN alone has six key operational agencies – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) – each established by separate treaties, with its own governance mechanism. The first attempt to organise this system was the creation of the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) in 1971. It was not a success, and two decades later, prompted by dissatisfaction with other ad hoc coordination arrangements and experiences in the 1991 Gulf War, the post of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) were created. Following lobbying from NGOs like Oxfam, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) was created under the ERC, designated Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. In 1997, the IASC created Humanitarian Coordinators charged with leading the UN's humanitarian response in different countries. The DHA was replaced by a new body with a mandate focused on coordination, advocacy and policy development - the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

Local and international civil society organisations range widely in size, capacities and quality of humanitarian response. Many of the largest are represented on the IASC by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), made up of Oxfam, Care International, Caritas Internationalis, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Save the Children Fund Alliance, Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and World Vision. Oxfam and other NGOs are represented on the IASC through two other consortia: InterAction and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).

In 2004, the UN Emergency Response Coordinator (ERC) reacted to the slow response to the Darfur crisis by commissioning a review of international humanitarian action - the Humanitarian Response Review. It highlighted serious inconsistencies and gaps, and resulted in:

- The '**cluster approach**' creating lead agencies for key sectors (such as shelter, health, logistics, water and sanitation, etc.);
- Better recruitment, training and retention of the UN **Humanitarian Coordinators**, including from outside the UN system;
- New financing mechanisms, including a revamped **Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)** to make sure money is available when disaster hits (see OI's humanitarian policy note on humanitarian financing in this series)

The cluster approach aims to make the response more predictable, lead agencies more accountable, and the UN (including the International Organisation for Migration), NGOs, and the Red Cross Movement more complementary. Lead agencies are central to this.¹ If a humanitarian response fails to adequately meet needs, the Lead Agency must redouble its efforts to deliver as the 'agency of last resort'. Following pilots in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Uganda in 2005, the cluster approach has been applied in most major new disasters and many protracted crises.

The cluster approach initially failed to engage well with non- UN agencies, and to be adequately grounded in the field experience of UN or NGO agencies alike. Despite such early shortcomings, the basic approach is sound. Oxfam has critically engaged in the cluster approach across a range of sectors. Like every other initiative, its success depends on being owned by UN field offices, the International Red Cross Movement, International Organisations and NGOs at every level. Its success will be *judged* by improved humanitarian responses, and reduced death and human suffering.

UN, Red Cross and NGO agencies are all exploring other ways to improve coordination at the international and country level, including through the elaboration of the 'Principles of Partnership' by

¹ **Global clusters** are responsible for drawing international capacity together to ensure effective advocacy, adequate technical support, system-wide preparedness, and enhanced surge capacity. National clusters are responsible for identifying response gaps within the given crisis context and refocusing response efforts to better address these gaps.

the Global Humanitarian Platform (a group representing 40 leaders of UN humanitarian organisations, NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, the IOM and World Bank).

Reforming humanitarian coordination is vital to increase the scale, quality and predictability of global humanitarian capacity. Oxfam is determined to see the above reforms succeed, and will continue to engage in them grounded on the key principles outlined below.

3. Oxfam International's position on Humanitarian Coordination

- **Each State has the first responsibility to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies.** It has the primary role in the initiation, organisation, coordination and implementation of humanitarian assistance. Where the magnitude and duration of an emergency is beyond its capacity, **international cooperation to address the crisis and to strengthen national capacity can be of great importance.** Such cooperation should be provided in accordance with international and national laws.
- **Effective humanitarian action requires coordination of national and international responses.** National governments and civil society must be included, and any reforms must integrate with, and build on, existing national capacities.
- **Coordination of humanitarian assistance must use a common understanding of rights-based responses to humanitarian crises,** as outlined in the SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. These rights are articulated in international human rights law, humanitarian law, and refugee law, and should guide cooperative planning, monitoring and evaluation of responses.
- **Good international coordination requires:**
 - Close cooperation with government, local civil society institutions, and disaster and/or conflict affected communities, identifying capacities and needs;
 - Effective joint assessment of needs and a joint strategy to meet them; a division of labour so that all needs are met; good information sharing; good leadership on standards and accountability; adherence to best practice and codes of conduct; and an efficient use of resources.
 - Inclusiveness of several operational actors (UN and non-UN) with a lead agency given responsibility to actively ensure appropriate participation;
 - Clearly assigned responsibility, leadership to fill gaps (including acting as 'provider of last resort'), and accountability for the response delivered;
 - Commitment from sectors or clusters to work cooperatively with other groups / sectors to ensure coherence of response, and ensure that cross cutting issues (like protection, gender and the environment) are addressed; and
 - People with the right profile and skills to lead and facilitate these processes.
- **Good coordination recognises the complementarity of different agencies' approaches.** Coordination can be improved by developing common criteria for assessing needs and measuring impact, and by establishing clear arrangements among humanitarian organisations regarding the geographic and thematic division of roles and responsibilities in each context, based on the capacity and competencies of each organisation.
- **UN Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) should be appointed based on their demonstrated humanitarian experience and performance. Because of this, the HC post should be separated from the post of UN Resident Coordinator (RC),** unless the RC already has all the relevant skills; and is clearly accountable to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator for her/his humanitarian performance.
- **The pool of HCs and Cluster leads with the requisite skills must be rapidly expanded,** drawing from a variety of sources including humanitarian networks outside the UN. Enhanced training including knowledge of NGOs' roles, principles and standards is critical.
- **Coordination of humanitarian assistance must create bridges to the transition phase following conflicts and disasters.** Better coordination of the **exit** strategies of humanitarian organisations and the **entry** strategies of development agencies is critical.
- **Improved coordination on food security must make short-term emergency responses and efforts to tackle the underlying causes of hunger more complementary.** We need new inter-agency mechanisms to ensure that food aid, cash transfers, and livelihood support are

considered and utilised in humanitarian responses, according to needs and context.² (see Oxfam International's food aid policy in this series)

- While recognising the importance of military logistics at the early stages of some emergencies and the necessity of coordinating the delivery of material assistance, **humanitarian coordination must remain apart from the military and political operations of the UN.** (see OI's Policy note on UN Integrated Missions in this series).

4. What Oxfam International will do:

- **Oxfam will play an active role in efforts to improve coordination of emergency responses, and to enhance the complementarity and interoperability** between NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organisations.
- **Oxfam will engage with reformed coordination mechanisms, like the cluster approach,** primarily in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Shelter, Protection, and Early Recovery clusters, and also in the Logistics, and Nutrition clusters. This engagement will occur at the global, regional, and national level, including active engagement with the IASC Country Teams. Engagement will be judged against clear improvements over time in reducing suffering and saving lives. Oxfam will encourage other NGOs to actively engage in the humanitarian reform process.
- **Oxfam will critically analyse cluster leaders, capacities and expertise.** In the WASH sector, given our particular expertise, Oxfam will provide enhanced capacity to the cluster, including secondment of senior staff to Lead Agencies.³
- **Oxfam will actively develop global operational humanitarian capacity** in collaboration with other NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organisations, building common assessment, response, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms, based on agreed common standards and principles.⁴
- **Oxfam will assert its independence, from the UN and governments, being guided by humanitarian principles.** It will engage in collaborative mechanisms facilitated and led by NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organisations, sharing resources, information, and staff to common agreed ends, to improve rapid humanitarian responses.
- **Oxfam will continue to emphasise cross cutting issues,** in particular protection; gender; rights-based programming; working with governments and affected populations; the environment; and ensuring linkages to longer-term development.
- **Oxfam will continue to monitor UNHCR's efforts to expand its protection role to IDPs and support efforts to develop its capacity to respond to the protection and assistance needs of IDPs and refugees.**⁵
- **Oxfam will distinguish itself from, and remain outside, the direct management of Integrated Missions.** Oxfam's involvement in humanitarian reform including testing the Cluster approach, should not be seen as an endorsement of the UN's formulation of integrated missions, which combine military, political, economic and humanitarian activities to achieve peace.
- **Oxfam will endeavour to continue improving internal coordination mechanisms across Oxfam International,** to maximise its impact and set a good example among the Humanitarian community.

² In particular - more sophisticated assessment and analysis of needs that can better inform more appropriate responses; development, promotion and wider utilisation of alternatives to in-kind food aid; adapted donor policies that better ensure adequate, timely and flexible resources are available to support appropriate aid; and a coherent global food security architecture to guide global response.

³ Oxfam GB has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNICEF formalising their strategic partnership, and Oxfam has seconded senior WASH experts to UNICEF as the water, sanitation and hygiene cluster lead.

⁴ The common reference is the SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards, linked to the Red Cross & NGO Code of Conduct in Disaster Response.

⁵ Oxfam GB has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR formalising shared standby capacity, and outlining its strategic partnership.