

Coordination of Humanitarian Actors: Ideals and Application

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Let me begin with clarification that this is very much an opinion piece, based on my field experience over 20 years. It does not present any specific organization's point of view and I doubt very much if there is a truly synchronized view on humanitarian coordination across the broad spectrum of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). It is not based on fact, research or interview. It does represent a perspective that is discussed by my colleagues and our personal concerns with regards to the increasing amount of effort to pull together humanitarian responses which have significant results.

The opinion presented is that coordination does not **formally** occur during humanitarian response. Such attempts often become endless rounds of meetings and discussion with little impact on the ground. However, experience shows that it does frequently occur informally, particularly at field level. It can and does involve a wide range of actors. It can continue through many phases of response, transition and recovery. Forced coordination, as currently being pushed through the OCHA cluster system, is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, it is recommended that the disaster risk reduction and management agenda – that is, the pre-planning stage for disasters – is the place to create opportunities for coordination. It is an absolute imperative that such coordination occurs through the national state not international exclusivity and, in the case of failed states, through a non-political consortium of players who can represent the best interests of people.

I would like to use the following definition for Coordination as there seems to be a wide range of interpretations: **Coordinate: Common action, movement or condition to result in a state free of conflicts, inconsistencies or differences** – in itself a high aspiration.

Coordination must involve multiple inputs and a consultative approach. This is often outside the preference of control and command of those with power at any level. It implies a level of trust and transparency which ultimately results in a win-win or at least a reasonable compromise. However, coordination also requires an ultimate decision maker to review options and make choices which is why is often negatively influences impartiality and neutrality – key components of humanitarianism.

Another negating factor to humanitarian coordination is the sheer number of parties involved. And which limits the invitations. Within the Canadian context alone, CIDA partners with more than 750 organizations and businesses in 150 countries¹. There are more than 5,000 UN registered international NGOs and multiple geographical, sectoral and interest based consortiums which already attempt to coordinate them. Extrapolated globally by UN agencies, donors – government, foundations, private – national ministries, and civil societies, each with their own interest or need and coordination becomes a giant cat's cradle of string rather than neat lines we prefer. There are also those that hold significant national and international power such as belligerents, military and police forces who must be included in this dialogue. Not many other industries in the world would dare to advocate “coordination” of such a mass - or mess.

Despite shared commonalities surrounding belief in the rule of law, international human rights, poverty reduction and democratic responsibilities, all actors come with a wide range of motives,

¹ Strengthening Canada's Role in the World: Toward Greater Effectiveness of International Aid Dialogue with Canadian Partners CIDA May 2006

missions, and objectives which are unlikely to meld into a single, comprehensive solution to the problems people face. Academics, such as Hugo Slim, have raised the suggestion that:

“A little frankness around (multi-mandate NGOs) moral goals might make many relationships – with armed forces, with armed groups, with the people and with other agencies – clearer and possibly better”².

And many government actors and assorted implementation mechanisms, such as START, would also nod to Slim’s perspective that *“liberal counter-insurgency theorists believe firmly that peace will come primarily from good politics and effective development, and, if they are honest, so too do multi-mandate NGOs and UN agencies”*.³ So how far apart are we and is it NGO humanitarian identity that is of concern or that the result of such coordination will come at the price of our ideals.

For government actors, the end may justify the means and NGO actors may be useful allies in achieving peace, stability & reconstruction. Yet, humanitarian NGOs cannot overlook the means utilized nor the motives behind aid given in the name of political expediency and hesitate to support, contribute or align with what may very well be a here to day, gone tomorrow approach of political interests.

From the NGO perspective, we are obliged to coordinate with a wide spectrum of stakeholders – participants, donors, other complimentary organizations and national partners - in order to achieve long term results while upholding basic humanitarian principles. The only way to ensure we truly provide what people want and need, is through improved consultation and by creating an environment that encourages, empowers and gives voice to the communities we wish to assist. But this must be inclusive rather than elitist. Coordination cannot be only with international organization or only with one side or perspective in conflict. Seen through this lens, it is people’s right to assistance which governs a timely and appropriate response and which dictates the NGOs’ mandate of ‘putting the people first’ rather than the political or security agenda.

As mentioned earlier, coordination is constantly occurring – most often informally by like-minded individuals and most frequently at the operational level where it is a critical life and resource saving necessity. My experience is primarily field based and I have found excellent coordination – often in surprising circumstance and almost always an odd mixture of people, events, resources and constraints. One example, and which again points to individual perspective on good coordination, was the Rwandan refugee response in Tanzania. Another, the post-conflict support provided to East Timor. Where I have not seen coordination translated into practical impacts, as yet, is within more recent events including Tsunami, Darfur, and many unacknowledged disasters of the last few years.

The primary coordination arena is field, and by field I mean where people’s needs are right in front of your eyes. Unfortunately, donor organizations and, depending on security constraints, multi-laterals often are not present or represented and there is often a heavy power influence from warloads, belligerent and warring factions. Where trust and shared purpose are identified, there

² Slim, Hugo, With or Against? Humanitarian Agencies and Coalition Counter-Insurgency, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, July 2004

³ Ibid

are opportunities for shared information, assets and resources, often vital for ensuring aid effectiveness and for protecting both staff and materials from harm or loss.

National coordination, particularly with the advent of the cluster system, has become equivocal to “meetings” and information sharing rather than true commitment to shared values outcomes. Entire tiers of staff are required - by all actors - in order to attend all the events and to allow those that “do” to avoid much of this time consuming activity. During the recent Jogjakarta emergency response, these coordination meeting were often held in Jakarta where both government and UN agencies had resources but where civil society, many national NGOs and community participation was limited or non-existent or whose opinions were not voiced due to language constraints.

Meetings, workshops, conferences, exchanges, consultants, reports, reviews, assessments seem to spawn in the international context, requiring yet another and different type of engagement if you want to bring your opinion to the table. Coordination at this level often is more deal making and top down approaches. Host governments have minimal representation as can be seen in their limited inputs into OCHA’s cluster mechanisms. The invitation list has become exclusive and elitist, the cost extensive (\$57 Million for OCHA Cluster capacity alone) and leaves less room than ever before for southern actors to participate.

Finally, there is limited success in connecting these three staging areas and creating the trust necessary to move forward. With missing players at some levels, disregard for critical voices particularly of community and national governments at others, we must identify our common goals and use these to our best advantage.

I personally find a significant amount of commonality with mission statements, or at least with sufficient congruence that the Canadian public would assume there would be few misunderstandings between NGOs and government. The Canadian Government has declared that:

*“Consistent with Canadians’ compassion for the **less fortunate**, the Government will advance Canadian values and interests on the international stage by **providing much-needed assistance to the world’s poor**... the Government is committed to a more **effective use of Canadian aid dollars** and will work to ensure greater **accountability in the distribution and results of Canada’s international Assistance.**”⁴ (emphasis added).*

Taking this a step further, a bare-bone edit of the result criteria in **2007 Report to Parliament on Afghanistan**⁵, key phrases are not so dissimilar to those of humanitarian organizations.

- Does the will of the people govern?
- Is international support invited?
- Are we building capacity?
- Does this assistance make a difference? and
- Are human rights, including gender and women’s rights, respected?

I suggest that NGOs, UN and other agencies have similar criteria and missions to guide their steps.

⁴ The Budget Plan 2006 Focus on Priorities, Canada’s New Government, Turning a New Leaf, May 2006

⁵ Canada’s Mission in Afghanistan: Measuring Progress. Report to Parliament, February 2007

So why and where do these similarities diverge and create the tensions that exist? What are the obstacles that prevent synergies when we seem to have such similarities? Does it really make any difference to those we aim to assist? To the Canadian public?

As with most problems, the devil is in the details. Divergence occurs when setting actual objectives and achievement targets. START objectives for its Afghanistan mission vary across several texts and either state Canada aims to :

- *help stabilise the country;*
- *strengthen governance; and*
- *improve the lives of Afghans.*⁶

Or that:

“Our objectives are threefold:

- *to defend our national interests,*
- *ensure Canadian leadership in world affairs, and*
- *help Afghanistan rebuild into a free, democratic and peaceful country.*⁷”

It is only after priorities of stabilization, security, national and Canadian interests, that individual need is taken into account. Yet the individual is the cornerstone of any humanitarian intent and supports those other corners of impartiality, neutrality and humanitarian need.

The result is a number of challenges and in some cases, chasms, created between entities even though we want the same outcome of assisting the world’s poor. Even though Canada has not only signed on to but is committed to many positive initiatives such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship agreements and the Paris Declaration, there is still the flip side which includes worrying directions within START agencies which may not create the environment necessary to coordinate or even consult on humanitarian decisions and directions.

Firstly, government led coordination does not always put vulnerable clients above its own priorities and interests. Obviously, a state must first look after its own and the Canadian government does have the obligation to its citizens to first and foremost, protect their security and, in many cases, their economic concerns as well. It must also collaborate with other states, again to protect many national interests.

Secondly, there is a current tendency to see coordination as the cure-all for problems of humanitarian response. The OCHA Humanitarian Response Review catapulted coordination as the answer to many ills. Other reviews and evaluations recommend increased coordination yet do not include solutions to the “how” and appear to assume that coordination is a simple and easy process.

Although there have been good examples of coordination from conflict environments, it is suggested that it is within the disaster context that opportunities exist to build relationships which can then be applied to protracted conflict events. During natural disaster response, all actors should have the same approach to assistance. There are presumably fewer political or security constraints. After all, our response is only about the people and ensuring they have basic needs in the immediate and to build back better in the longer term. Towards this end, coordination makes sense to ensure less duplication of effort, less waste, better information and consistency to affected populations.

⁶ Year in Review: Mobilizing Canada’s Capacity for International Crisis Response September 2005 – September 2006 November 1, 2006

⁷http://geo.international.gc.ca/cip-pic/current_discussions/afghan-en.asp

Coordination efforts, often undertaken by the OCHA Humanitarian Coordinator, now include:

- Joint assessments;
- Sharing of information, including needs, activities, and constraints;
- Ensuring fair and even distribution of aid;
- Identifying gaps – vulnerabilities, cultural issues, protection –; and
- Finding practical solutions to address these needs.

Using common indicators and targets, such as SPHERE and the NGO/Red Cross Code of Conduct, we are able to articulate shared expectations and undertake measures of impact and accountability to communities.

However, even here we see different approaches depending on the actors involved. It is rare to see the same coordination meetings include donor governments who frequently conduct their own and separate assessments. The “DARTs” of various western nations respond with direct aid at the invitation of governments but not always in consultation with field coordination bodies such as OCHA. It is unclear whether these response activities utilize the same accountability and transparency standards as NGOs - for example provision of 15 litres of water per person per day. Do DARTs or STARTs attend coordination meetings and coordinate within clusters systems? To whom are they accountable – their governments? The national government? Communities? How do they measure up in relation to other actors? Does command and control have better results than consensus and coordination? No research, evaluation or review focuses on these questions or on alternatives mechanisms to disaster response.

As an example, although the Tsunami response was an extra-ordinary event, due to its high profile, significant evaluation and reflection has been undertaken on problems and successes. Interestingly, although 300 NGOs, and 17 militaries participated **together** during the response, joint reviews do not seem to exist. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) review⁸ is one of the few which makes a specific recommendation to improved civil-military disaster response. They note that few governments, militaries or NGOs even knew the IASC Oslo Guidelines on military asset use in disasters existed. Reviews such as TEC and the NGO Impact Initiative⁹, press NGOs for “*accountability to beneficiaries, enhancing efforts at local capacity building, professionalism, coordination and human rights and disaster recovery*”. They do not seem to make similar recommendations to military mechanisms – perhaps due to lack of power to call them to account.

If governments – including those with START type entities - want to engage more in coordination efforts, they too must take similar reviews to heart and request participation in accountability efforts that reflect their contribution to a coordinated response and indicate their learning towards improvement for future events.

Conflict environments are much more complex as political influences do not create an enabling environment. The Integrated or 3D model (now called “whole of government”) approaches are still best thinking not best practice and have yet to be implemented long enough to be proven effective or ineffective. Governments’ have taken to heart the integration of ‘soft power’ into their arsenals for winning wars and affecting societal transformation. Having thus understood the

⁸Bennett , J.W. Bertrand, C. Harkin, S. Samarasinghe and H. Wickramatillake Coordination of International Humanitarian Assistance in tsunami affected countries, July 2006 London Tsunami Evaluation Coalition,

⁹ NGO Impact Initiative An Assessment by the International Humanitarian NGO Community October 2006

power of attracting and persuading rather than relying only on force, they have been all too eager to use humanitarian agencies as quivers in their military bows¹⁰.

Canada's START objectives in Afghanistan, while a decidedly softer version of the United States, are nonetheless concerned with addressing humanitarian needs by assisting Canadian NGO's "whose efforts meet Canada's objectives"¹¹ which instantly constrains any organization applying the fourth humanitarian principle – **We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy**¹². By signing on to this code, NGOs have agreed to formulate their own policies and strategies that are not knowingly used for political, military or economic gain. Otherwise, we will see human rights abuse resulting from peace making policy as victims become defined as good or bad, geographical areas deemed appropriate for intervention based on affiliations. Rights to assistance guaranteed under the Geneva conventions will be eroded by a security centric approach which then dominates many of the areas where such tactics are implemented. Coordination, and its assumed power, makes it unlikely that a solid solution, that does not imply control or collaboration, can easily be found.

So we return to the opportunity of recent disaster events, particularly tsunami and the 2006 Pakistan/India earthquake, that have had an encouraging debate on civil-military dialogue. The TEC review made a specific recommendation which is sensible and practical:

“Civil-military coordination should be improved through more extensive promotion of guidelines, principles and procedures. Enhanced in-house and external training and advocacy, as well as joint exercises between humanitarian agencies and the military, would improve civil-military and military-military relations. Senior humanitarian actors – in particular the RC/HC office – should be made more aware of the civil-military resources available to them and the potential contribution they can make in addressing urgent needs, including the rapid deployment of civil-military experts.”¹³

This points to preparedness activities as a means to address many of the factors that detract from coordination occurring during an event – disaster or conflict. Yet, disaster risk reduction or management are not as yet seen as a priority area for most governments and actors other than on paper. Recent commitments to the Hyogo Framework already lag behind objectives, although slowly gaining momentum. Awareness is rising, for example, within the UK which has recently reflected on its search and rescue teams as an important means of “flagging” but “*should not be at the expense of long term assistance for disaster preparedness which will have much more success in reducing fatalities and injuries...*”¹⁴

Improved planning and coordination pre-event is now occurring through initiatives such as the International Disaster Response Law which the IFRC is developing in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. The ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response has also made significant headway into identifying standards and policy pre-event.

¹⁰ “I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us and such an important part of our combat team.” Secretary Colin L. Powell. Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations. October 26, 2001

¹¹ http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/view_news_e.asp?id=1703

¹² The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Humanitarian Response to Natural Disasters: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2005-06 January 07

Both of these initiatives are occurring through states and are inclusive of NGO and other actors. Creating these guidelines, regulations and laws, at least for disaster events, increases the requirement for **all** actors to comply.

We must also increase our understanding of each others capacities and limitations. It is of concern to see limited reference to non-state actors in Canadian Government documents on START¹⁵ and the 2007 progress report on the Canadian Afghanistan mission. In one case, the NGO/UN role in response is stated merely as a “vehicle for aid delivery”¹⁶ which excludes our role in governance, community and long-term development intent we bring.

Yet, my limited experience on return to Canada has been a fascination and appreciation of DFAIT and CIDA’s relationship with non-state actors. There is generally a good rapport and dialogue on some international issues. The personalities currently within the humanitarian and development agencies want to engage and are willing to hear criticism, argue and discuss. There is an interest if not acceptance of varying viewpoints and perspectives. Canada is one of only three governments that include NGO participation in its UNHCR Executive Committee delegation and seek input and different perspectives on working with multi-lateral agencies. Canada is one of the few that engage NGOs in the Good Humanitarian Donorship dialogue and review, including a willingness to consider report cards and critique on their advancement towards these goals and objectives. Government delegates attend and participate in NGO networks and forums such as PAGER. NGO panellists discuss perspectives at CIMIC military and peace keeper trainings. NGOs are encouraged to provide a Canadian perspective which includes that of the Canadian public and are invited, on occasion, to consult on policy papers. They are invited to present their view to Parliament, specific ministries and ministers, including Canadian Department of National Defence. This is a rare form of engagement and should be carefully cultivated as it creates the potential environment for further steps forward in the dialogue between state and non-state actors.

In conclusion, direct dialogue between NGOs and government entities such as START or SAT is still rare. Different objectives and priorities make alignment difficult with NGO overall humanitarian goals. Even the 3D Approach emphasizes our difference as two – diplomacy and defence – are well outside the NGO scope and, as has been pointed out, there is an unbalanced third leg – development, which is the NGO priority. However, there is hope through the analogy of the three legged race, rather than the three legged stool – you can only win through coordination, effort, struggling to right yourself when you fall and having a sense of balance.

Is coordination between START, NATO and NGOs required? It is suggested that no, not necessarily. Coordination should initiate between like-minded and even with our earlier stated missions, our objectives differ and do not create a common agenda. Ultimately, national governments are responsible for coordination of all actors – government, donor, NGO, UN. We, as invited supporters, must work within their parameters, retaining our focus on those in need.

¹⁵Year in Review: Mobilizing Canada’s Capacity for International Crisis Response September 2005 – September 2006 November 1, 2006

¹⁶ Natural Disasters: Canadian Coordination and Response Mechanisms Forum on “Partners in Reconstruction” Foreign Affairs Canada No Date