The Future of Humanitarian Coordination

Note following a HERE-convened consultation, 23 November 2021

This note provides a summary of, and further reflections on, HERE-Geneva's consultation with representatives from donor governments in late November 2021. The consultation meeting was a core part of and feeds into HERE's ongoing research project looking at the Future of Humanitarian Coordination.

Since HERE's creation in 2014, issues relating to humanitarian coordination have risen to the surface of many of our reviews and studies. The need to focus more closely on this topic has become increasingly apparent. HERE's research portfolio, along with its extensive institutional memory, has facilitated the formulation of working assumptions around the systemic obstacles to humanitarian coordination. With the intention of investigating these assumptions further, the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project has thus far consisted of an in-depth literature review, interviews with approximately 20 key stakeholders, and an expert roundtable discussion. The aim of the project is to provide actionable suggestions as to how humanitarian coordination could be improved.

The 23 November 2021 consultation was an opportunity for an informal exchange on the emerging findings of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project, as well as for HERE to gather perspectives on coordination challenges and ways forward. This summary note reflects the themes and viewpoints occasioned by the consultation, without attribution to specific participants.

Emerging findings

Used as statements to spark discussion during this roundtable discussion, the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project formulated four main obstacles to effective humanitarian coordination, or pressure points, which would need to be addressed before any improvement could take place. They were as follows:

First, it is unclear what 'effective coordination' looks like. While the overarching purpose of coordination in terms of its operational focus is generally clear (i.e., to identify gaps and prevent duplication in coverage), it is not clear how much strategic alignment on visions and key priorities can or should be achieved. Organisations appear to have different expectations in terms of desirable coordination outcomes, making for competing priorities. The functional connections between the different coordination mechanisms at the country, regional, and global levels are also unclear. Ultimately, this raises issues around accountability for results.

Second, form needs to better align with function. The relevance of a centralised humanitarian coordination architecture is increasingly being challenged by context-specific situations and ad hoc demands. In addition, the refugee coordination and cluster coordination systems continue to run in parallel and do not easily connect. The clusters have improved clarity on what is expected of agencies and contribute to enhanced predictability. They have, however, also led to siloed approaches, confusion around the role of OCHA versus the role of the clusters, and a lack of flexibility. To make sure that the humanitarian architecture is fit for purpose, we need to focus on translating commitments into actions. In previous attempts at humanitarian reform, too much expectation has
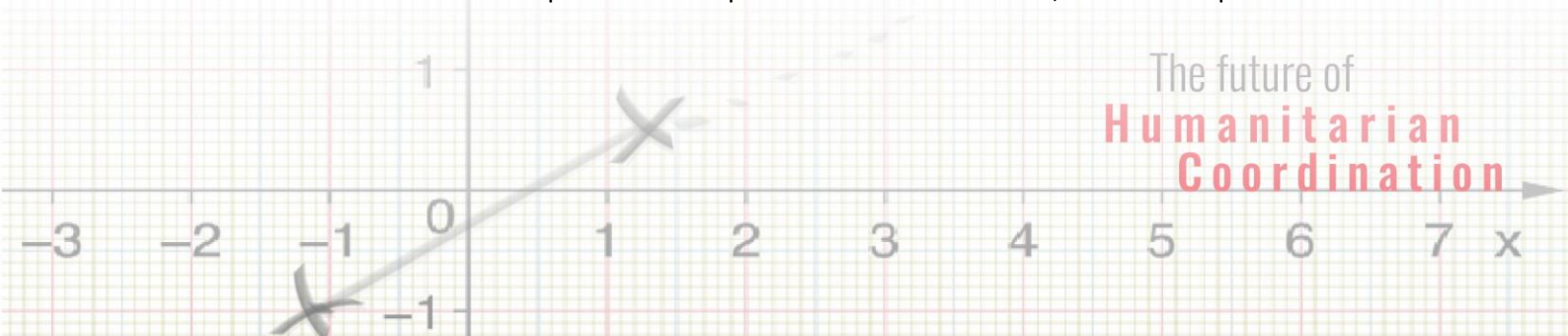
been placed on cosmetic changes and technocratic solutions. More needs to be done to address the systemic obstacles.

Third, current incentives do not facilitate coordination. Agencies have made multiple commitments to contribute to collective results, but many of these commitments have yet to translate into practice. For example, coordination positions held by individuals on behalf of their agencies are not mainstreamed within the agency in question. Staff are held to account only for achieving individual and agency-led objectives, rather than those that are realised for the benefit of the collective. Competition for funding reduces the incentive to cooperate, with the vast majority of funds provided through bilateral channels. The solution, however, seems not to diminish competition for funding, but rather to more rigorously enforce collective accountability by ensuring that each individual agency can explain how they have contributed to collective results.

Fourth, coordination is too technical, and comes at the expense of values. There is an imbalance between coordination and leadership, whereby coordination is driven by technical processes and leadership for that coordination is insufficiently recognised in terms of setting the agenda. As a result, there is also a disconnect between the working and political levels, with the word 'strategic' often being used for plans or activities that are part of daily business, instead of being visionary and breaking new ground.

Questions

Going beyond problem statements and analysis, the question becomes: *What possible trajectories could be developed in terms of solutions?* From this, three sub-questions require examination: What further incentives can be put in place to stimulate inter-agency coordination? What accountability mechanisms could be developed for collective action? What should be the scope of an upcoming review of humanitarian coordination, and of the clusters in particular?

1. What further incentives can be put in place to stimulate inter-agency coordination?

Inter-agency coordination and collective planning are two sides of the same coin. However, agreeing collectively on what plans deserve the highest priority has turned out to be complicated. No one has the authority to determine which plans are considered most critical. Donors vote with their wallets. Pooled funds have created some leverage but they do not necessarily change the system on their own and risk adding another layer of bureaucracy. One further step could be to find a balance between bilateral and pooled funding. And to ensure that decision-making and priority setting is done in close proximity to the area of operations. The latter could be realised through area-based coordination,[1] which would break the silos of the cluster approach and allow for more context specificity. Agencies should also be required to define their results as part of a collective endeavour.

2. What accountability mechanisms could be developed for collective action?

One major issue that has stood out in HERE's research is the lack of accountability of the respective agencies' country directors for agency commitments towards collective action made at the global level. At best, country directors have been given some instruction with regard to such commitments,

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[1] For more on area-based humanitarian coordination, read: Konyndyk, Saez, Worden (2020)
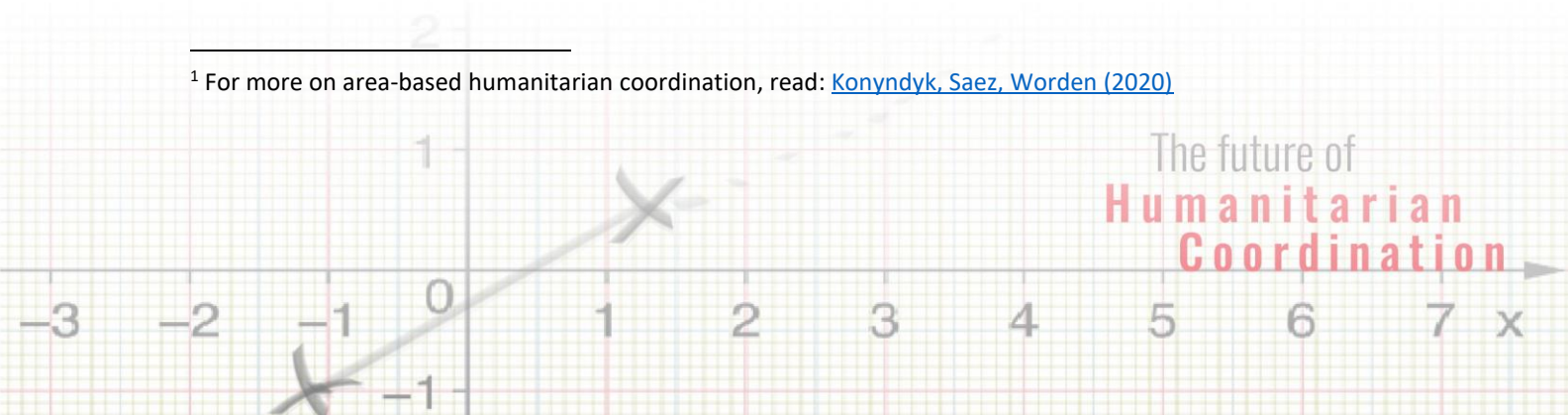
but they are part of a long list of institutional guidance. More needs to be done at the country level to hold country directors to account. It appears that in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) much energy is spent creating response plans, and not enough time is spent on assessing what previous plans have achieved. Scenarios in response plans are often too optimistic, instead of realistic. The importance of collective needs assessments and analysis has long been recognised and significant investments have been made, with the Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) the latest addition. There is no question that there is a considerable amount of data available. Instead, the issue is whether there is enough capacity to analyse the data and make that analysis operable. Further to this, while the front end of the response (the needs analysis) often receives a great deal of attention, the back end (the evaluation) receives little. Reviews and evaluations of collective action are the exceptions rather than the rule. In the past, several initiatives, particularly in the context of the Transformative Agenda, looked at reviewing collective action. Many of these steps have fallen by the wayside. While there are a number of forums where donor and agency representatives meet, a frank and honest debate on gaps and sub-standard performance is lacking. Only a few donors have representatives in-country who could raise specific questions with the agencies on their commitment to work collectively. Whether donors should be part of HCTs may be a subject of debate,[2] but they have a critical role to play at the country level in terms of promoting collective action by emphasising global commitments.

3. **What should be the scope of an upcoming review of humanitarian coordination, and of the clusters in particular?**

There has long been talk of a review of the cluster approach, which was last evaluated in 2010. Likewise, there have been calls to review the IASC and the wider humanitarian coordination architecture. Many of the coordination-related problems are well known, as evidenced by HERE's research. And some issues are in more urgent need of attention than others: such as inter-cluster coordination, agencies' institutional support to coordination, and the effectiveness of co-led coordination arrangements. Such a review would also need to be framed against the objections and aims of the cluster approach and not simply against existing guidelines. Those political obstacles that obstruct collective action should not be underestimated.

HERE's reflections and next steps

HERE's research and exchanges on the future of humanitarian coordination have highlighted a number of critical issues when it comes to the way forward.

- There is a need to further explore the area-based coordination model as a way to break the silo mentality. The importance of strengthening the leadership of those in coordination positions is critical in this regard, as decisions are likely to be taken close to the area of operations.

- There is a need to rethink and/or critically approach the use of the word "strategic". Assuming that there is a trend towards multi-year humanitarian response plans, these plans need to better articulate their vision and goals, which should be grounded in country realities, such as the political economy of aid.

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[2] This topic was debated during our first coordination consultation, held August 2021.

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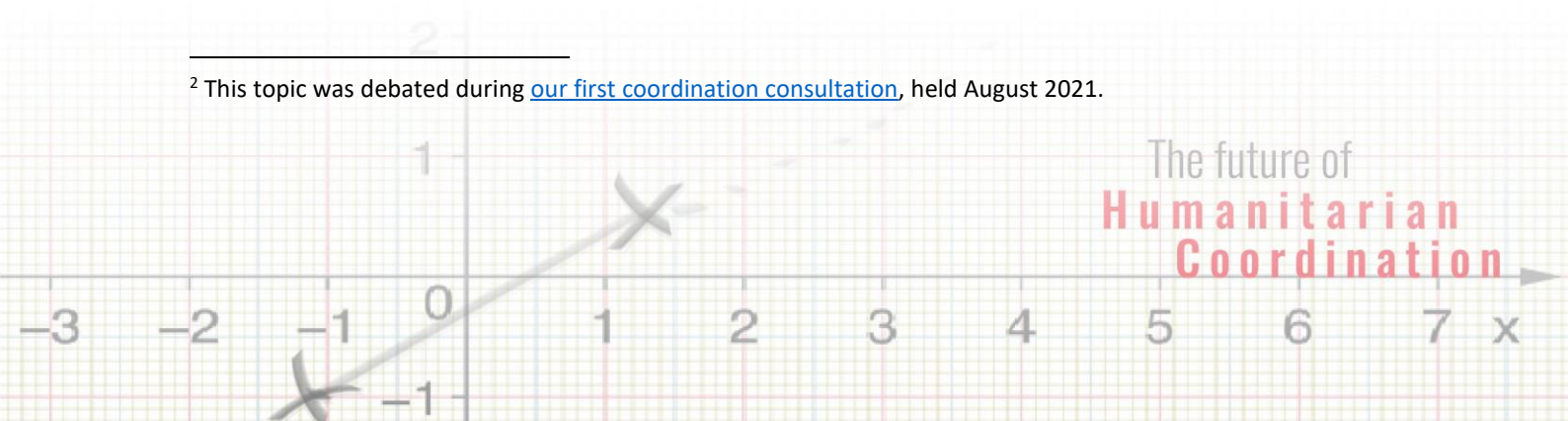
- There is a need to identify 'quick wins' in strengthening collective action. For example, agencies could be required to present their individual agency country plan in a coordination forum and to explain how this plan contributes to the collective humanitarian response plan.

- There is a need to clarify the role and location of humanitarian coordination arrangements in regional hubs (e.g., Amman, Bangkok, Dakar, Nairobi) as, traditionally, the system is structured at the global and country levels. However, many of the agency-specific accountability arrangements, such as the reporting lines of country directors, are managed at the regional level.

- There is a need to define "principled humanitarian coordination". The principles guiding humanitarian action require agencies to maintain a certain degree of autonomy and distance from the government (of the crisis-affected country), especially when the government is one of the parties to an armed conflict in that country. The role government authorities should play in humanitarian coordination is context-specific and often highly political. An issue to further examine is the role and position of the governments of crisis-affected countries in humanitarian coordination. They may prompt agencies to paint too rosy a picture of the situation.

- There is a need for donor governments to further reflect and develop incentives for collective action. Agencies should reward their staff in inter-agency coordination positions for what they do for the collective.

- Rather than a whole-of-system coordination review, it would be more efficient and feasible to focus on identifying a number of selected issues beforehand, such as those from the following list:

  - ❖ The relationship between humanitarian and refugee coordination arrangements;

  - ❖ The gap between global-level collective commitments and country-level individual agency behaviour;

  - ❖ The understanding of, and buy-in to, the co-leadership of coordination mechanisms;

  - ❖ The strategic nature of humanitarian response plans;

  - ❖ Any other of the issues mentioned in this note.