Overview of System-Related Humanitarian Coordination Recommendations and Commitments

NB: In Acrobat, hover with the mouse over the squares to see the text of the recommendation

HERE-Geneva
closing the gap between policy and humanitarian practice

Row labels:
- Clarify coordination roles
- Ensure accountability for coordination
- Show commitment to coordination
- Incentivise coordination/collective behaviour
- Fund coordination/coordinated outcomes
- Advocate for coordination (and vice versa)
- Focus coordination effort
- Harmonise/coordinate beyond (cluster) silos
- Ensure transparency for trust in coordination
- Communicate/share information for coordination
- Ensure capacity for coordination
- Contextualise coordination
- Involve the host state/authorities in coordination
- Involve local partners/civil society in coordination

Column labels (sources):
- Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda , 1996
- Humanitarian Coordination - Reindorp & Wiles, 2001
- External Review of the IASC, commissioned by OCHA, 2003
- Humanitarian Response Review, 2005
- Principles of Partnership, 2007
- Cluster approach evaluation, 2007
- Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report, 2010
- State of the Humanitarian System Report, 2012
- State of the Humanitarian System Report, 2015
- Grand Bargain, 2016
- ALNAP Improving Humanitarian Coordination, 2016
- Exploring Coordination in Humanitarian Clusters - Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 2016
- Principles and Good Practice Humanitarian Donorship, 2003, Amended 2018
- UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings, 2019
- H-L Panel on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future, 2021
- Grand Bargain 2.0, 2021
- Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead Agency on Internal Displacement, Shining a Light (CLARE II), Forthcoming 2022

Legend/sources included:

This overview sovers some main system-wide reviews/evaluations (listed in red) as well as sources of system-wide commitments (in blue). They have also been cross-checked for alignment with the most recent response-specific inter-agency evaluations (Ethiopia 2019, Mozambique 2020).

The overview has not extracted the recommendations/ commitments from the covered documents in full, but has focused mainly on those which pertain specifically to humanitarian coordination, or the attainment of coordinated outcomes. Some broader recommendations pertaining to the humanitarian response more generally have also been included where they have vehicled a spirit of joint/coordinated efforts.

The Future of Humanitarian Coordination Project

Mapping of Recommendations

December 2021

How to address some of the longstanding challenges standing in the way of effective humanitarian coordination? In order to provide actionable suggestions in this regard, it is important to take a step back and consider the wealth of recommendations that have already been made on the subject. Which recommendations tend to be repeated over time, and why do they go unanswered? Is it because they are unwelcome? Unfeasible? Or simply very complicated to implement?

This note accompanies the "Overview of System-Related Humanitarian Coordination Recommendations and Commitments". By providing a mapping of what has already been suggested in view of improving coordination-related aspects, it feeds into HERE's ongoing research project looking at the Future of Humanitarian Coordination. The brunt of the reviews, evaluations and analyses of international humanitarian coordination since the establishment of the Humanitarian Reform Process in 2005 understandably focuses on coordination by and within the cluster system. Consequently, many of the recommendations on coordination over the years apply primarily to the clusters; it may nonetheless be interesting to extrapolate and apply some of them generally.

Clarify coordination roles

The need to clarify coordination roles keeps coming up, again and again. Early recommendations aimed to establish the respective roles of OCHA, the ERC, HC, and IASC; but more recent calls for clarification indicate that the division of labour and what it implies in terms of accountabilities is not yet obvious. Recommendations from the last five years pertain primarily to membership of the clusters, with the IASC in charge of providing guidance and the HCTs asked to make space for national NGOs in a transparent manner (ALNAP 2016). Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2016) go beyond this scope and bring into question the UN coordination architecture itself: "The Cluster system appears to have been designed to provide a level of coordination that may be neither feasible nor desirable in humanitarian contexts. IASC may wish to further clarify the degree of coordination the Clusters are expected to achieve. Individual Clusters should also clarify their approach to coordination – broadly, is this 'bottom-up' (building up coordinated action from the discrete actions of members) or 'top-down' (expecting that members design their activities in the basis of an agreed common strategy)?".

A 2016 review of the then-existing OPRs and STAIT mission recommendations notes that despite attempts at clarifying the links between different actors within the cluster system, this was of limited efficiency; although it does not explicitly state that the cluster model is obsolete, the fact that attempts at clarification only appear to make matters worse should be acknowledged. The review further observes that mixed refugee-IDP situations, where the cluster coordination model directly competes with the

UNHCR coordination model, make for additional complications in terms of division of labour. UNHCR's 2019 analysis of its leadership and coordination role in refugee response settings reiterates this idea: it clearly states that it "needs to bring about a shift in the nature of its relationships [...] should further modernise its approach to leadership and coordination" and that it "will need to become more of a facilitator than an implementer". However, the exact modalities of this shift are not made more explicit in the available literature.

### Ensure accountability for coordination

Issues of accountability were analysed through a hierarchical lens twenty years ago: between the OCHA field coordination unit and HC, for instance (Reindorp and Wiles 2001), between cluster coordinators and country directors/representatives, or between global CLAs and ERC (Cluster Approach Evaluation 2007). While this lens remains, there has been a shift in what accountability means, and it is understood today primarily as accountability to affected populations. To ensure this, greater participation of affected populations is presented as essential: this ranges from, *a priori*, "context-sensitive communication strategies and appropriate technologies [...] creat[ing] complaints mechanisms [...] apply[ing] community-generated indicators and involv[ing] communities in monitoring the response" (Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 2010) to, *a posteriori*, disseminating information within communities on a regular basis and including surveys in evaluations destined for community feedback (IAHE Ethiopia; IAHE Mozambique). The question of accountability in its modern understanding thus appears to directly tie in with that of Information Management (IM).

Planning, programming, decision-making

As is the case regarding other issues, it is recommended that decision-making occur with the involvement of the entire group to guarantee better support. This can involve designating representatives of the group. Decision-making in regard to programming should be rooted in contextual analysis and/or needs assessments (based on appropriate data collection). Local/national actors and affected populations should be involved in decision-making and needs assessments where relevant. The abovementioned analysis should inform advocacy (IAHE Mozambique).

Show commitment to coordination

Recommendations frequently insist on the importance that those participating in coordination fully commit to it. It is suggested that this be done by investing in their own capacities to coordinate and dedicate own agency resources to the coordination endeavour (External Review of IASC, 2003; CLARE II, 2022); codify and carry out their tasks responsibly (Principles of Partnership 2007, Cluster Approach Evaluations 2007 and 2010). Later evaluations pick up on the fact that the commitment to coordination is not yet fully translated within individual agencies – not even cluster lead agencies – and that not only should positions with coordination responsibilities be further valued, but agencies should also better align individual priorities with collective ones.
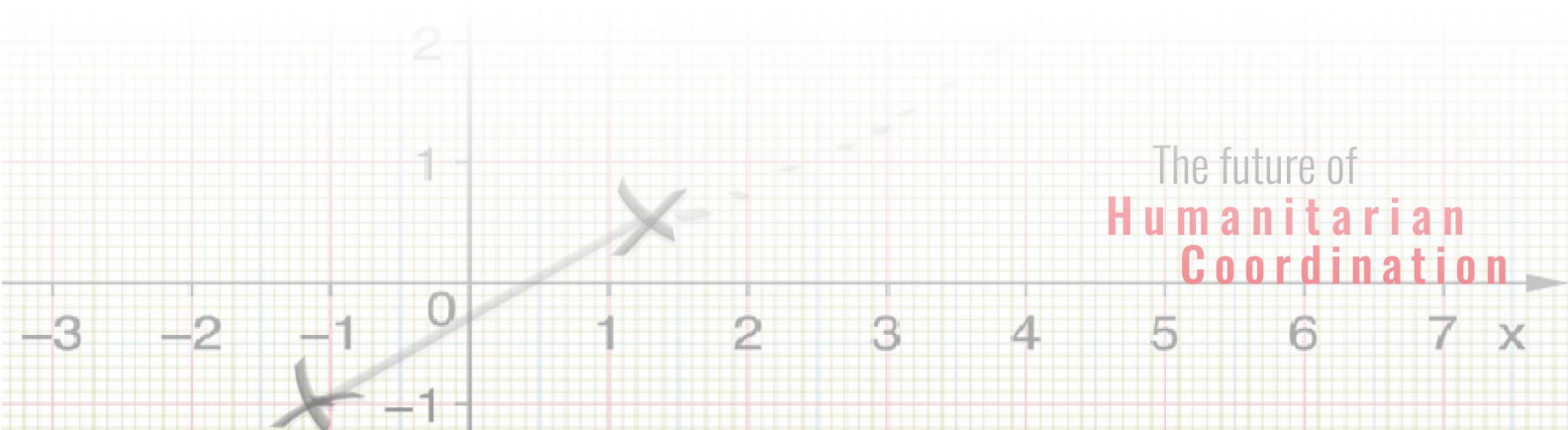
Fund coordination/coordinated outcomes

Recommendations that there be better coordination around the issue of funding and simultaneously that funding be used as a tool to improve coordination have not changed much over the past twenty years. The main recommendations that emerge are the following: specific funds should be allocated to cover coordination costs, including in the case of clusters which CLAs should fund their clusters from a specific budget line; more funding of multi-sector projects; including specific, separate funding for activities beyond the scope of mere humanitarian response (i.e., resilience preparedness, risk reduction); increased funding via the collective. The modalities of the latter vary depending on the analysis: early recommendations push for funding via the clusters, whereas the more recent takes push for funding via the HRP or country-based pool funds. Overall, it is recommended that national and local civil society be able to access funding in order to participate in coordination. It is all the more important that the funding pipeline to these actors be improved as they tend to have the best operational access and ability to respond the fastest.

Donors have a direct role to play, as they are the ones injecting funds. However, the extent of their role has been subject to evolutions. Some recommendations see donors leading the impulse for improved coordination, suggesting for example in the case of HCTs that donors be consulted in the HRP process and that donors 'confront and question the HCT if the HRP is of poor quality'. Others limit donors to a supporting role. It is interesting to note that only the SOHS 2012 makes reference to the commitments on Good Humanitarian Donorship, dated 2003. Much of the content of the recommendations on funding and resources is reflected in this document.

There is a general concern around the lack of humanitarian funding; while this predates Covid, the last two years have made this a more pressing concern in the eyes of many. Of all the recommendations analysed for the purpose of this exercise, only the 2015 SOHS goes beyond the standard suggestion that donors give more money. Then-UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres 'put forward the idea of funding humanitarian action through assessed contributions' from member states, with governments contributing 'fixed amounts each year, pegged to a percentage of GDP, to a significantly expanded CERF'. This recommendation has not been taken up or really reiterated since, though Mr. Guterres, now UNSG, did call for a 'large-scale, coordinated, comprehensive multilateral response that amounts to at least 10 per cent of GDP' in 2020 report entitled *Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19*.[1]

Focus the coordination effort

The importance of prioritisation comes out strongly, with Reindrop and Wiles already in 2001 emphasising the importance of giving a stronger remit to coordinators to facilitate prioritised, integrated strategies. Subsequent recommendations pick up on this, highlighting for example the need to "cull the existing agenda" (External review of the IASC, 2003), be "firm about prioritisation" (Cluster approach evaluation, 2007), ensure "a clear operational focus" (Cluster approach evaluation 2, 2010), "reconsider the HPC to make it lighter" (ALNAP, 2016).

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[1] https://www.undp.org/speeches/united-nations-statement-development-committee
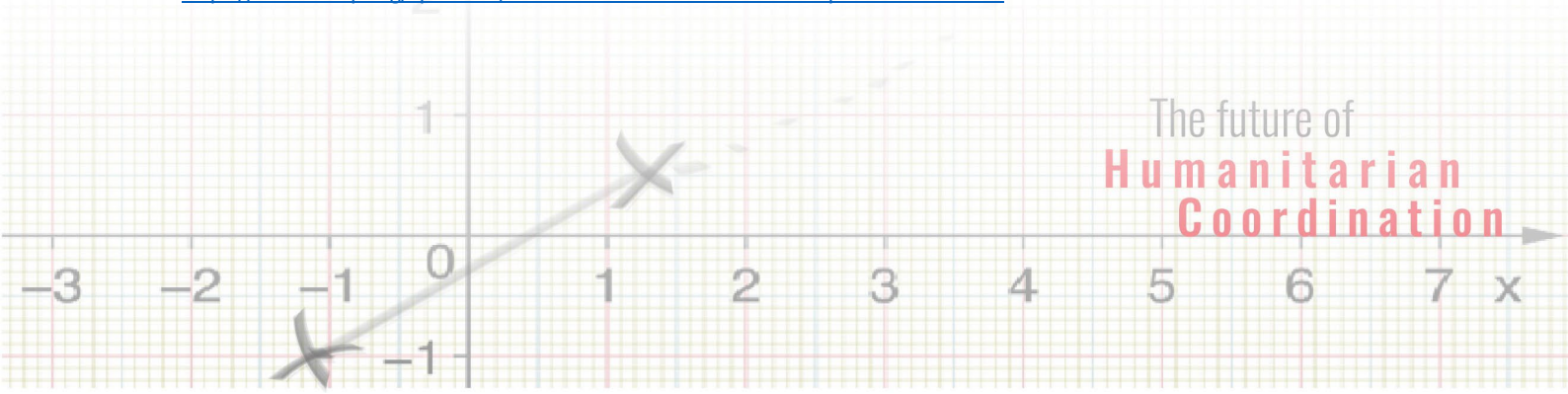
Information management and sharing

Recommendations pertaining to information management tend to focus on the technical elements, such as mainstreaming templates, common definitions and indicators or employing "dedicated IM specialists". It is not enough to collect information; it must also be analysed/used effectively, hence the need for sufficient staff with sufficient skillsets. This falls in line with the recurring interest in recent years on the why of IM over the what of it. ALNAP (2016) recommends "fit[ting] information management process and products more closely to operational needs", with a specific suggestion that OCHA "reflect on the operational utility of the current HPC products and timeframes". Lessons learnt (*inter alia* as a result of reviews) should be documented in order to be shared; where relevant, there should be reporting on progress. In the context of the IAHE Ethiopia, which is where this latter recommendation comes from, the responsibility for reporting befalls the HCT.

As to the external use and/or sharing of information, affected populations should be included in the dissemination.

Staffing and coordination capacity

Between 2015 and 2020, none of the evaluations or reviews of the coordination infrastructure made any mention of staff, which appears to suggest that the issue was resolved. The latest IAHE, however, dated 2020, mentions the need to "ensure that there is an adequate roster of cluster coordinators and information management staff", clearly illustrating that the concern remains after all. Past recommendations give an indication as to what skills cluster coordinators should have: "management skills, facilitation skills, decision-making skills, consensus-building capacities, communication and networking skills, as well as an understanding of the local context" (Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 2010). This goes beyond the remit of technical skills and makes it clear leadership skills should be an integral factor in appointing cluster coordinators.

Both Cluster Evaluations state the need for national (and possibly regional) coordination roles to be "full-time dedicated positions". This recommendation has not been formally re-issued since 2010, but the 2020 IAHE Mozambique recommendation quoted hereabove could be understood to include this.

Coordination beyond the international level

The need for improved coordination between different levels (international, regional, national, and sub-national) is recurring across analyses: this includes information management/sharing, but also decision-making processes.

Emphasis has continuously been put on including national authorities in coordination at the country level, which entails building the capacity of and strengthening national systems. This does not apply solely to the clusters (see 2021 High-Level Panel on IDPs). The 2012 SOHS reiterated the 2007 Cluster Review's recommendation that this include a financial element: it is something donors should fund as well as something the clusters should dedicate a budget line to, especially in areas with chronic emergencies.

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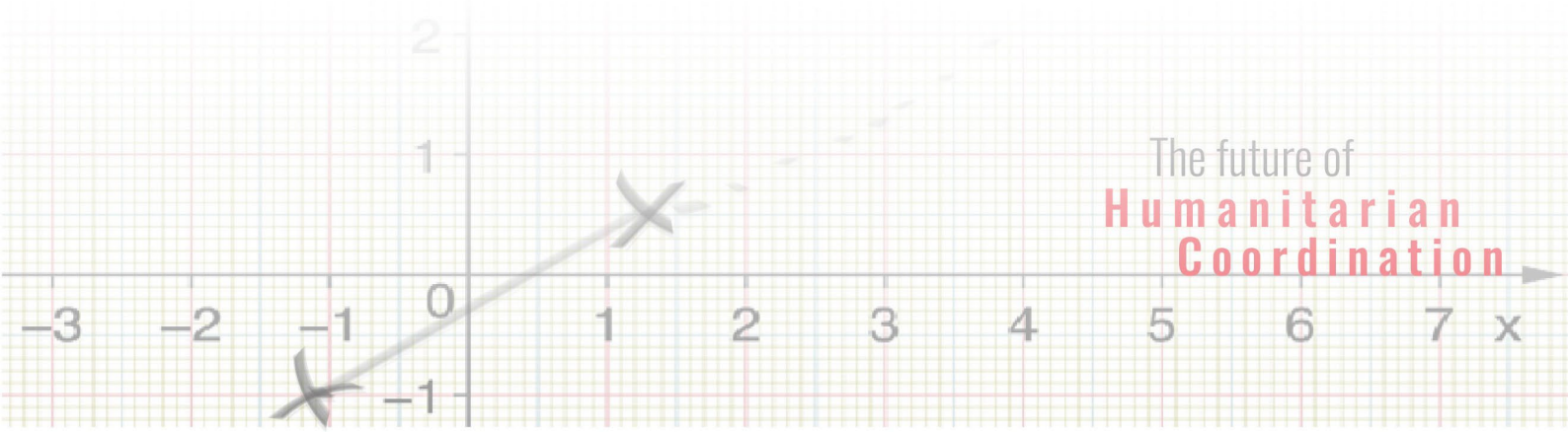
Furthermore, reviews fairly consistently recommend using pre-existing elements in-country as the foundation of the response, rather than come in with what amount to parallel structures. Knox-Clarke and Campbell (2016) go as far as to recommend coordination structures be scaled from the field upwards, in continuation of the 2010 Cluster Evaluation 2 recommendation that operational decisions be "taken as close to the relevant area of operation as possible". This provides a basis for the area-based coordination model a number of actors advocate for today, in stark contrast with the suggestion of the early 2000s that the IASC be replicated "at the field level in all instances".

Inclusion of national/local staff

Related to the previous point, the inclusion of national/local actors beyond national/local authorities is a key element of reviews across the board. This continued inclusion, generally including detailed, practical suggestions as to how to achieve it, points to a regrettable lack of effective implementation or progress.

There has been a shift over time from recommendations calling for the participation of national and local NGOs in the immediate aftermath of the Humanitarian Reform Process to their "meaningful, fair and transparent" participation (ALNAP 2016). Elements that should be taken into account include the location of meetings, the language in which they take place, access to internet/computers (all of which clusters should factor into their budget); providing multiple opportunities to engage. Recent documents take an even more holistic approach and consider that national authorities have a role to play in involving local actors (Mozambique IAHE).

Simplified/adapted processes favouring the inclusion of national and local NGOs should also be extended to resources, and the bar to access funding lowered (the Ethiopia IAHE specifically refers to the country-based pool fund). At present, it remains bogged down by paperwork and reporting constraints which disproportionately impact smaller NGOs.

Conclusion

The above recommendations are both an end and a means to improved coordination. What emerges from them is **the shift over time from the need for (mere) coordination to that of meaningful coordination**. Better trust between actors is key to of this process; however, effectively achieving it is complicated as **it requires more than a technical solution, which is what most of the recommendations over time have offered.**

These recommendations do not exist in a silo: they tend to feed off of one another, and there is repetition of their spirit if not of their letter in a way that is cross-cutting across issues. However, four issues emerge as the most pressing ones:

- The need for clarity in roles and accountabilities
- The need for contextualisation, and the inclusion of national/local actors (directly relating to the question of coordination beyond the international level)
- Information management and sharing (impacting issues of decision-making, programming, etc.)

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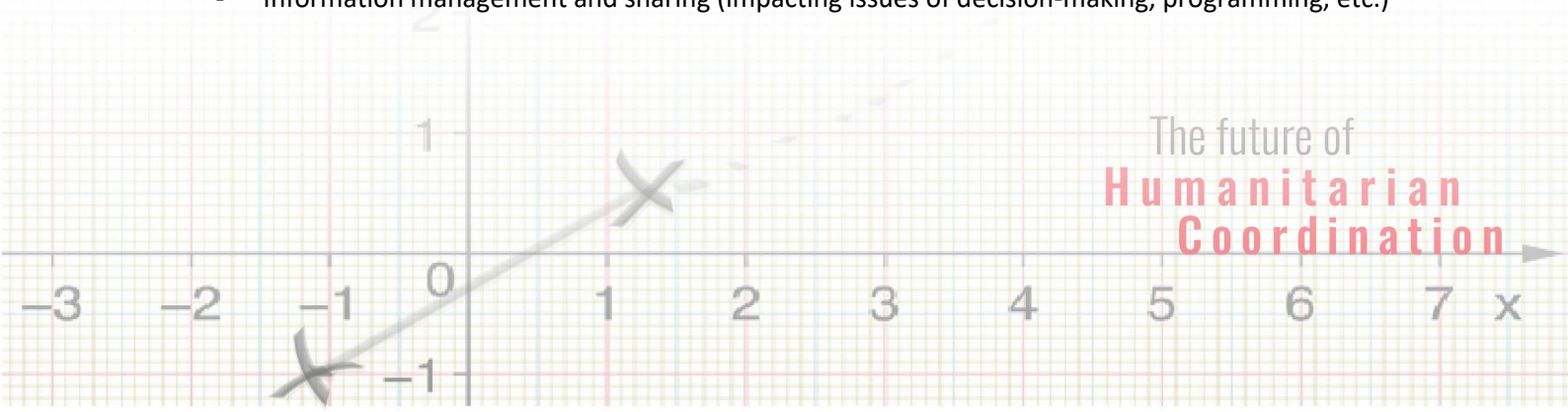
- Funding and resources (which underpin the entire infrastructure, and more than any other issue are both the why and the how of coordination).

That these recommendations are recurring to the extent assessed here is somewhat alarming, as it suggests that there has been very little progress over time in spite of the plethora of evolutions in two decades. However, it seems difficult to suggest that they be waved away entirely as a result. Other than doing away with the cluster system entirely (something touched upon by some authors on some questions, but never proposed as an option in its own right), perhaps what is needed is more radical implementation to ensure reform from within.