Humanitarian Coordination: a new vision or 'it is what it is'?

HERE-Geneva

Note from a HERE-convened Roundtable - Geneva, 12 May 2022

This note provides a summary of the roundtable discussion held in May 2022 among a group of senior humanitarian practitioners from UN and non-UN agencies, donor representatives, and independent experts. Starting from HERE's research looking at the state of UN-led humanitarian coordination and the perennial obstacles in the way of a more effective system, the meeting was an opportunity to move from analysis to solutions. Truly seeing how to ensure the kind of leadership and accountability that permits the implementation of long-standing essential commitments requires an honest debate. We as humanitarians have an obligation to use available resources in the best way we can, as needs are always greater than resources. It often starts with asking ourselves the right questions. The aim of the meeting was therefore to allow for an open and frank conversation of the type that would perhaps not happen in more institutional spaces. This note reflects those discussions without attributing statements or views to specific participants.

Background

The roundtable conversation was linked to HERE's research project looking into the Future of Humanitarian Coordination.[1] In its first phase, the research took a closer look at some of the longstanding challenges in the way of effective humanitarian coordination. First of all, there are issues of **structure**. The cluster approach was put in place in 2005 to ensure a predictable and accountable response to IDPs: are the clusters still fit for purpose, also in light of the localisation of aid agenda? Second, although UN agencies have made collective commitments, internal agency systems, reporting processes, and, perhaps most importantly, their mindset are focused on what they achieve individually: **accountability** for collective results remains elusive. And, thirdly, tools and processes continue to dominate coordination where it should be driven by **leadership and vision** towards the realisation of the commitments. The result is too many competing priorities and agendas,[2] raising the question of whether they are they still true priorities, or simply an ever-growing

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[1] The project has been generously supported by Sweden, and core funding from Switzerland and Norway.

[2] E.g. accountability to affected people; the centrality of protection; the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; localisation; gender; diversity and inclusion; prevention of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment, etc.

to-do list that allows, or even compels, a 'tick-box' approach. The first phase of the research concluded in April 2022 with a <u>roadmap putting forward actionable suggestions</u> for a form of humanitarian coordination that has a clear strategic vision, is value-driven, and fit for purpose.

Thematic summary of the discussion

Humanitarian coordination and collective commitments are intimately linked; not only because engaging in coordination is a collective commitment in and of itself, but also because coordination is crucial given the interdependence in humanitarian action. Assuming that the UN will continue to lead and coordinate humanitarian response in line with UNGA resolution 46/182 (1991), the conversation focused on if and how the system can become more effective in ensuring that collective commitments will be implemented. Three particular questions guided the discussion:

- Can something be done in the context of humanitarian coordination to address the gaps in the implementation of collective commitments, or should we accept that 'it is what it is'?
- How to ensure that individual agencies are held accountable for contributing to collective goals and action?
- What, if any, is the underpinning vision for the multiple (collective) commitments? Is it a shopping list or a priority list (with a real prioritisation in terms of what comes first)?

The 2005 reform provided for a framework for cooperation and much improvement in terms of predictability. Participants largely agreed that upending the existing cluster approach would provide more chaos than order, but emphasised that this does not mean that it should simply be left as "it is what it is": inter-agency coordination can always improve – in all situations and in all contexts. Discussing how the implementation of collective commitments can be improved, participants emphasised four requirements in particular.

1. Less process, more flexibility

Change is constantly taking place in the humanitarian community, but it is a slow-moving machinery. 'Light reviews' end up becoming lengthy processes as clearance for decisions is always sought at the highest level of decision-making, and lengthy reports document every step through the change-process. Global policy guidance becomes translated as specific technical guidance in the field, accompanied by detailed reporting tools and measures that suggest a degree of accountability. The improvements that have been seen in coordination mechanisms since the 2005 reform have also tended to push towards siloism and specialisation, where each sector and area of responsibility has worked on its particular standards and procedures, leading to greater fragmentation.

Participants felt that processes do not have to be as heavy as they are. Allowing for greater creativity and flexibility (and risk) would help better catalyse change. Through prototyping, for example, humanitarian actors could try something new, see what works and what does not, make changes, see again what works and what does not. At the moment, individuals and agencies are penalised for making mistakes rather than encouraged to try new things and advance by trial and error. A more flexible, iterative way of working would therefore not only require less process, but also more honesty and a greater decentralisation for decision-makers in the field. In spite of the recognition that this is the desired direction of travel, more bureaucracy and processes have been put in place.

2. More honesty around what can be and is done

Participants emphasised that the humanitarian community has to be honest about what it can do, but also about what it cannot achieve. Instead of adding even more issues to the agenda, it was suggested that coordination could gain from ensuring that basic issues are covered. For example, as HERE has found in Yemen, it is telling that humanitarian country teams rarely engage in collective exchanges on the operationalisation of the core principles in relation to negotiating access.

Participants also called for more honesty in terms of what humanitarian actors in the system are *truly willing* to do. Standards can be relatively easily set in coordination meetings, but it is then up to those who provide the services on the ground to ensure that they are adhered to. The advances in the areas of localisation and accountability to affected populations (AAP) are falling behind. Coincidentally, as with humanitarian principles, it seems that there is insufficient collective engagement and reflection on localisation and AAP in country-based coordination mechanisms. This suggests that gaps in the implementation of collective commitments can be attributed to a lack of leadership of those setting the agendas of coordination mechanisms. With regard to localisation and AAP, participants highlighted the irony whereby those who have to ensure that change happens are also the ones who have to give up power for the change to take place. The fact that devolving power is not in an institution's true interest is rarely honestly acknowledged. At the same time, money is power, and it is often clear in a coordination meeting where the balance of power falls.

3. Overcome fragmentation by focusing on quality

Discussing whether there is an underpinning vision to the multiple collective commitments, participants highlighted that a strategic approach is crucial. For any coordination mechanism to be fit for purpose, it is important to know both what that purpose is, and what core set of principles and vision it is being led by. Importantly, due consideration should also be made of how and where to best bring in local actors and people-centred approaches. Localisation is often looked at through a lens of risk and due diligence, but

should rather be considered in terms of opportunity, and contextualisation. A coordination mechanism in an area prone to cyclical hazard shocks would not need to look the same as one in a protracted conflict setting. Clearly, this has to be balanced with a possible tension with the need for predictability and standardisation in coordination.

Participants emphasised the evolution and instances of successful humanitarian coordination – including the establishment of the Consolidated Appeals Process, several collective advocacy initiatives, and the COVID-19 response – but it was acknowledged that it has been very piecemeal. Issues rise to the foreground as and when they are witnessed in the field, with no strategic overarching framework. At a time when the system is overloaded, we keep asking for more. The list of collective commitments is continually growing, and it is important to take on board that leaders cannot lead on everything at the same time. Without negating the importance of specialised agencies or single issues, the possibility of combining agendas has to be recognised. Some of the commitments have clear cross-over and could arguably be dealt with in parallel if bundled. This requires participants to exchange on their visions for humanitarian action.

It was suggested by participants that it is often around the question of how to match programmatic needs with coordination needs that we as a community lose out. Even if collective commitments are grouped or bundled, the question of how to prioritise them remains. The list of commitments has perhaps become 'a shopping list', but this does not mean that each item on the list is not important. Many of the commitments cover quality aspects and reflect the values underpinning humanitarian action. It was suggested in this regard that everything *is* indeed perhaps a priority, and that it is not necessarily an issue of having to choose between them. When we think about coverage, we should not only consider how many people in need are reached, but how many are reached *with good quality aid*. Arguably, the principle of impartiality points to ensuring that those most in need receive high quality assistance first, instead of giving everyone less quality assistance. It is not possible to 'go back to basics' if it would mean going back to the days of taking fewer cross-cutting commitments into consideration, and ultimately doing less well in terms of quality.

4. Political backing and trust

It was recognised by participants that the drive to constantly get better is well embedded in organisations and individuals, but that it is one thing to diagnose issues, and another to know what to do about them. In the end the humanitarian community tends to fall back on technical fixes, which only adds to the day-to-day workload. 'Coordination as a burden' is a narrative that has to be changed, and this requires greater leadership on specific agendas, but more importantly, it needs to be incentivised. Political backing, and someone truly pushing for change, is required to dare to take risks and move beyond technical fixes to true solutions.

Donors could help catalyse the mind shift needed. First, participants suggested that if agencies were to be funded and held to account on quality, rather than simply on how many people they reach, it would ultimately create change. Moreover, donors can help move the system in the right direction by accepting honest feedback on what works and what does not. Too often agencies fear falling out of donors' favour if they show their failures, and they end up avoiding speaking truth to power.

There was an overall sense among participants of a true willingness to have more strategic discussions and vision, but that day-to-day workloads make this difficult to realise. Participants also emphasised the role of OCHA here, expressing the hope that its new strategic plan will forward a clear vision on what humanitarian coordination looks like, what needs to be done to strengthen leadership, and what OCHA's role in it is. At the same time, the recognition was made that OCHA cannot pull coordination on its own: OCHA's leadership depends on what comes out of discussions – especially in the field – around values and principles, and for this the humanitarian community in general has to contribute. Perhaps what is lacking for effective coordination is the sense of a collective: what does it look like today, what should it look like to enable greater coordination, and what are the obstacles to it?

HERE Conclusion and next steps

The discussions at the meeting were helpful in validating and complementing HERE's work and the way forward. In particular, the issue of the collective we are now versus the collective we wish to be is an important one. Existing commitments to strong leadership and collective action are only as good as the change we are ready to enable. Being clear on the type of collective we need to be is an essential conversation that needs to happen within each coordination mechanism, and it should be grounded in reality. To some extent some of these conversations are indeed happening in some countries. Delegation of authority and creativity are significant factors in this regard. We have to recognise, however, that there is an inherent tension between predictability (processes) and taking risks (creativity). Honesty is needed not only in terms of what works and what does not but also in acknowledging the tensions humanitarian actors have to manage.

As the meeting highlighted, change can only happen incrementally. HERE has a role to play not only in bringing evidence as to what works but also in encouraging the honesty that is so sorely needed. We aim to work closely with donors, agencies, especially OCHA, and NGOs in continuing our work on the Future of Humanitarian Coordination. We have identified five questions that we believe need to be further unpacked to make humanitarian coordination more effective. These are: (1) How to ensure leadership and accountability for reaching collective commitments?; (2) How to make the most of inter-cluster coordination?; (3) What is the true potential of area-based coordination?; (4) How do we achieve clarity on strategic coordination?; and (5) What is the most effective role of donors?

As a take-away from the roundtable, HERE notes in particular that:

- In terms of leadership and accountability for reaching collective commitments, it is important to consider that it is a 'shopping list' with only important items on it. There is no possibility to make a direct order of 'priority among the priorities'. Where cross-over is possible, it is however important to bundle topics together, and a large number of them fall under the wider umbrella of quality. In this light, quality could provide a common lens through which to consider the strategic vision the collective.

- With regard to the issue of coordination structures and models – be it related to inter-cluster coordination, area-based coordination, and/or how to better consolidate the cluster approach and the refugee coordination model – flexibility, delegation of authority, and contextualisation are crucial, but they also have to be properly balanced against the equally important requirements of predictability and standardisation.

- When it comes to pinpointing a strategic vision for humanitarian coordination, asking ourselves the question of what kind of collective we want to be is a good starting point, and it should ideally be rooted at field level. It requires a clear definition of who the interlocutors in the collective are – not only within the humanitarian 'ecosystem', but also with development and peace actors – and how each can contribute in crises. There is currently a high focus on how individual agencies measure their own performances, but to incentivise the achievement of collective ambitions, it would be beneficial to also measure outcomes in a collective fashion. This line of thinking fits well with HERE's previous findings, and notably its project looking into the role of 'mandates' in how humanitarian organisations set priorities in situations of armed conflict. In 2020, the project concluded among other things that effective inter-agency coordination accommodates diversity while providing a framework to ensure the complementarity of the actors involved, and that comparative advantages are better leveraged when the development or strengthening of networks and consortia is accompanied by in-depth strategic thinking.

- The humanitarian community has an obligation to use the resources at its disposal in the best way possible, because needs are always greater than resources. If the strategic vision of the humanitarian community hinges on quality, there could be an important role to play for donors in terms of funding and holding agencies to account on criteria of quality.