The future of
Humanitarian
Coordination

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project brief
June 2021

Background

Thirty years after the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991), which set out much of the current international architecture, the coordination of humanitarian response continues to be a source of attention and debate. According to the current architecture, the coordination of international humanitarian responses in support of crisis-affected states takes place in accordance with two recognised models: the UNHCR-led refugee coordination model and the UN Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator (HC/RC)-led cluster approach. The latter (the cluster approach) has been evaluated twice, in 2007 and 2010, pointing to a number of gains and outstanding challenges. No further evaluations of the cluster approach have been conducted since. While the role of UNHCR in leading and coordinating refugee response has been reviewed, the refugee coordination model (RCM) has not specifically been evaluated. Without underestimating the progress made towards improving humanitarian coordination in the last decade, thoughts on the future of humanitarian coordination seem long overdue. The appointment of the new UN Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), the change in the chair of the OCHA Donor support group (ODSG), and ongoing reviews of cluster leadership offer an opportunity to benefit from lessons learnt and to chart a way forward.

Expected outcome

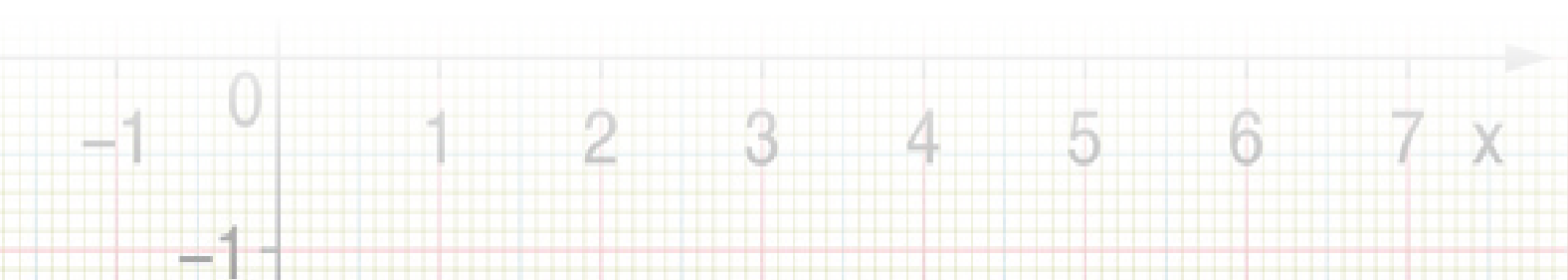Building on our previous and ongoing work,[1] this project aims to provide actionable

suggestions on how to address some of the longstanding challenges in the way of effective humanitarian coordination, i.e. to identify what needs revitalisation, reinvigoration, or renewal. The starting assumption about the future humanitarian landscape is that the UN will retain its primary role in coordinating humanitarian action for at least the next decade.

This project will also provide humanitarian policy makers with a review of the deeper outstanding challenges for meaningful humanitarian coordination. Starting from working hypotheses on what impedes coordination, major pressure points are identified to offer suggestions for both quick fixes and long-term solutions.

Working hypotheses

While it may seem simple on paper, humanitarian coordination is a complex undertaking. At the root of its complexity may be a variety of expectations on the purpose of coordination and the approach of those who lead coordination efforts. There is de facto no common understanding of what coordination is meant to achieve. This lack of strategic alignment is further compounded by a divergence between the current international humanitarian infrastructure and the latest global policy developments that see, among other things, a push for increased localisation of humanitarian responses and greater synergies between humanitarian, development, and peace goals. What does an inclusive humanitarian coordination system look like? Where are the limits? How should existing coordination mechanisms interface with one another?

Meanwhile, the list of issues that add to the complexity of humanitarian coordination is only growing. The perennial or systemic

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1   E.g. UNHCR's leadership and coordination role in refugee settings (2019); Unpacking humanitarianism (2020); and UNICEF's cluster leadership role and co-leadership (forthcoming 2021).

issues on the list remain just that, having conveniently been left by the wayside. These include lines of accountability; collective versus individual agency efforts; leadership approaches and styles; and the issue of incentives and 'coordination by the wallet.' Agency systems do not align with collective approaches, as they exclusively tend to reward individual agency behaviour. Moreover, a focus on the technical aspects of coordination (e.g. donor-driven tools) has taken over value-driven coordination, as they rarely include humanitarian principles as benchmarks. In addition to the refugee coordination model and the clusters, some recent crises have also seen ad hoc coordination arrangements: the Ebola epidemic of 2014–2016 in West Africa saw the creation of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), while the displacement created by the Venezuelan crisis triggered the establishment of the Response for Venezuelans (R4V) platform led by IOM and UNHCR. It appears that some new types of emergencies, including public health crises and regional (forced) migration crises, do not fit easily within one of the two recognised models. Finally, a new model referred to as 'area-based coordination' has been proposed by some.[2]

Project approach

The project is set to be implemented between June and December 2021. The timeline is important to help inform upcoming opportunities for policy changes both under the leadership of the newly appointed ERC and in dialogue with donor countries.

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2   E.g. Center for Global Development, Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area-Based Humanitarian Coordination Model (2020).

A comprehensive desk review will be used to test the existing working hypotheses and inform thinking around the way forward, while interviews with key-informants and virtual and in-person round table exchanges in various configurations will help test possible actionable solutions.

About HERE

Founded in 2014, the Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE-Geneva) is an independent organisation that examines the gaps between policy and humanitarian practice. At our own instigation or upon request, we carry out evaluations, reviews, and other research and foster dialogue. To date, we have worked with governments and other institutional donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international NGOs, foundations, and academic institutions. They come to us because of our reputation for rigorous and informed analysis and advice.

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