The Future of Humanitarian Coordination Project

Four pressure points for improvement
September 2021

Each humanitarian crisis comes with its own challenges, emphasising the importance of contextualisation and adaptiveness. Every response is different. What they all have in common however is the need for coordination. To reduce competition or duplication and ensure complementarity in view of reaching the people most in need, coordination is key. It should function as "the hidden force multiplier in emergency response".[1]

That said, and without underestimating the progress made in the last decades, it appears that truly effective coordination is still elusive. Building on its previous and ongoing work,[2] HERE is engaging in a project that aims to provide actionable suggestions on how to address some of the longstanding challenges standing in the way of effective humanitarian coordination. Assuming the UN will retain its primary role in coordinating humanitarian action for at least the next decade, what needs to be revitalised or renewed?

To be able to offer possible suggestions for both quick fixes and long-term solutions, **the starting point for the project has been to clarify – through a desk-based literature review and analysis, and a roundtable exchange with key informants – what it is that appears to impede coordination as it is currently framed.** As with any wide-ranging subject, conclusions with regard to the state of humanitarian coordination vary depending on the perspective of the author, or the scope of the subject matter. When **read in conjunction with HERE's own analysis on the topic however, it is possible to highlight four closely interconnected issues, or pressure points, as particularly relevant for consideration if any improvement is to happen.**

1. The purpose of humanitarian coordination is clear - and unclear

First, at the root of the complexity of humanitarian coordination may be a variety of expectations with regard to its purpose: what is coordination really meant to achieve, and for whom? At first glance, its purpose may appear rather clear: the key words in the definitions of coordination found in the literature are 'coherence' and 'effectiveness'. And the 2015 *Cluster Coordination Reference Module* (CCRM) simply states that "the purpose of coordination, is to meet the needs of affected people by means that are reliable, effective, inclusive, and respect humanitarian principles."[3] Upon closer inspection however, what may seem a straight-forward definition is based on concepts that are in themselves open to a variety of interpretations. Coherence of what? Inclusiveness with regard to whom? Effectiveness as measured how?

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[1] Steets et al., 'Coordination to Save Lives. History and Emerging Challenges', iii.

[2] UNHCR, 'UNHCR's Leadership and Coordination Role in Refugee Response Settings'; Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'; UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

[3] IASC, 'Guidance - Cluster Coordination at Country Level', 7.
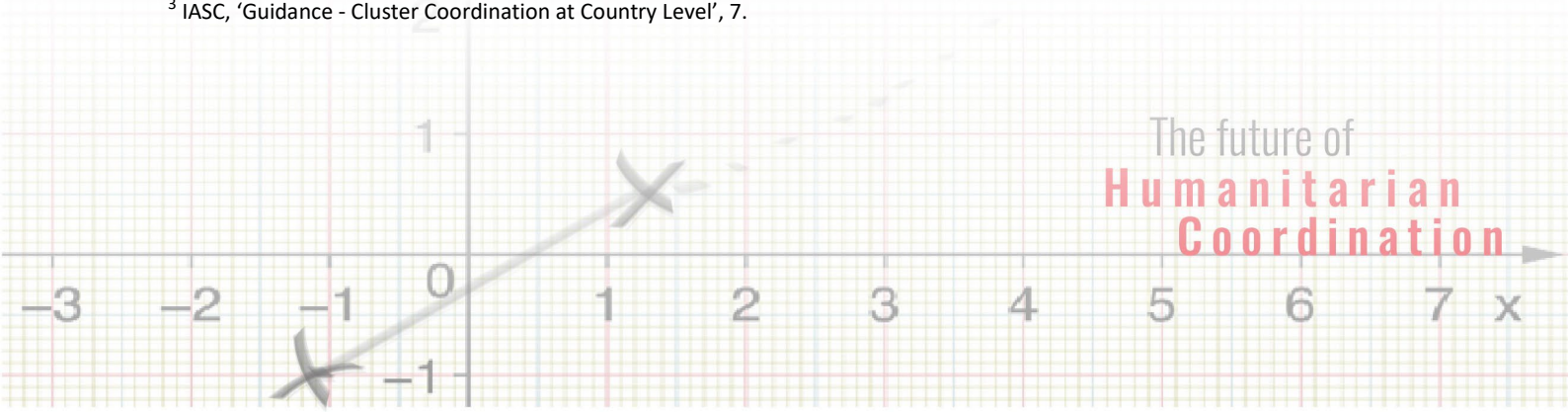
The answers to these questions are as many as there are stakeholders, and given the wide array of the latter that humanitarian coordination by nature involves, the confusion comes as no surprise.

On the one hand, there is confusion as to roles and responsibilities. In 2005, the Humanitarian Response Review triggered the establishment of the cluster system. While it suggested strengthened systems and mechanisms of coordination, it did not elaborate on how these different pieces connect, i.e. which exact role should be played by whom to achieve with what specific result. **The strategic role of the standards and policy functions are still not sufficiently elaborated in IASC cluster guidance.**[4] Consequently, the relative roles of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the Inter-Cluster Cluster Coordination Mechanism, Clusters, and sub-national coordination bodies are frequently muddled, leading to duplication of activities, or – worse – certain key activities falling between the cracks and left unfinished.[5]

On the other hand, and more crucially perhaps, there is confusion as to the exact purpose of coordination. The issue of the definition of coordination and its related concepts may perhaps appear as essentially semantic, but it has very practical implications. If different stakeholders apply different definitions, they also have different expectations of what functioning coordination looks like. Is it essentially question of sharing information and taking note of what other actors in the system are doing, or is it about the system *per se* working together? In other words, is it about "operational coordination" or "strategic coordination"?[6] IASC guidance seems to imply that it is not only a question of aligning disparate activities; the CCRM for example emphasises that "meetings will focus on strategy, planning and results, rather than exclusively on information-sharing or fund distribution",[7] and the very recent Guidance *Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms* states that "relevant coordination forums should use the guidance to spur discussion, identify priority actions and agree on indicators for monitoring progress."[8] At the same time however, evaluations have found that the coordination system at present is much less effective in terms

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Investigating the pressure point:

What can humanitarian coordination achieve v. What can it not achieve?

- Is it even realistic to expect agreement around priorities given the wide array of stakeholders?
- What are the core questions that require coordination as a tool?

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[4] UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

[5] Turner et al., 'Inter-Agency Real Time Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Nargis'; Bennett, 'Missing Pieces? Assessing the Impact of Humanitarian Reform in Pakistan'; Buijsse, 'Multi-Actor Response to the Internal Displacement of Iraqi Nationals: A Field Study on Coordination of the Humanitarian Emergency Response in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq'; Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 'Improving Humanitarian Coordination - Themes and Recommendations from the ALNAP Meeting "Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination", July 2016'.

[6] OCHA, 'Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes, 1996-1997: An Independent Assessment'.

[7] IASC, 'Guidance - Cluster Coordination at Country Level', 5.

[8] IASC, 'Guidance - Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms', 4.

The future of
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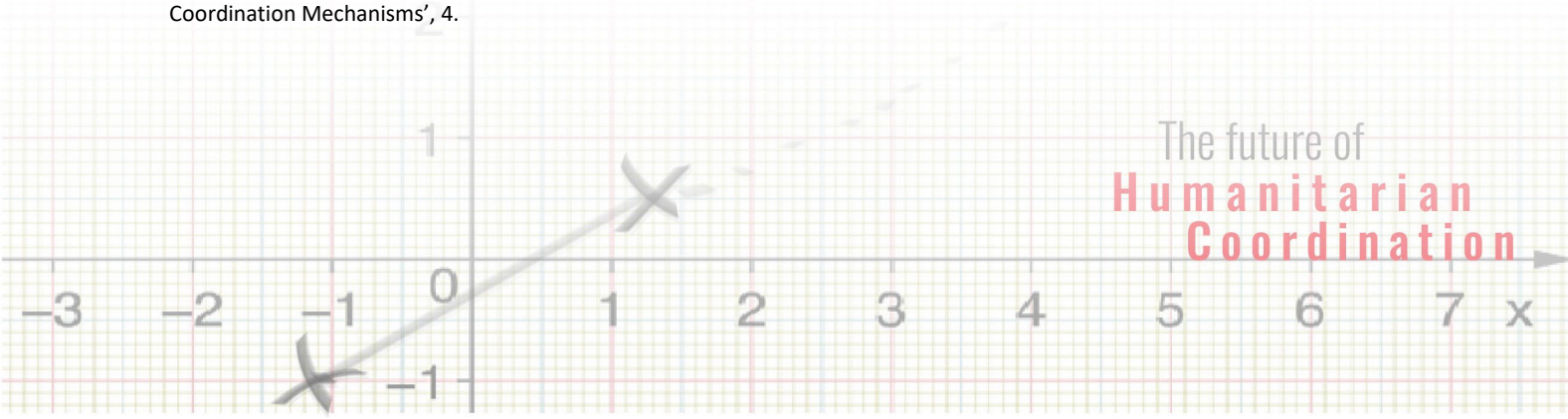
of strategic, system-wide coordination than it is in advancing every-day information-sharing.[9] Arguably, this is also the result of the **lack of a common understanding of the concepts underpinning humanitarian action: it is one thing to state that agencies will agree on priority actions, and undertake joint assessments or planning. It is another to ensure it happens when everyone defines needs differently and prioritises types of interventions from their own perspective**.

2. The coordination infrastructure is not in sync with global developments

Second, it appears that **the existing coordination infrastructure does not necessarily fit well with the current humanitarian landscape**. As highlighted in a recent Roundtable discussion, organised by HERE within the framework of this project, the world around us has changed much faster than our mechanisms and their ways of working. The current architecture puts forward two recognised models for the coordination of international humanitarian response: the UNHCR-led refugee coordination model and the UN Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator (HC/RC)-led cluster approach. Clearly, not all types of emergencies fit neatly within the frames of these two recognised models. A very recent and prominent example is the COVID-19 pandemic, which by nature transcended borders and was difficult to respond to coherently within the context of national clusters. The potential threat of climate change as a force multiplier of already existing emergencies should also be borne in mind.[10] Other recent crises have also given birth to *ad hoc* agreements,[11] and suggestions have been made for an area-based coordination model.[12]

While the system is grappling with how to tackle 'new' contexts and situations, there are also remaining questions as to how current mechanisms such as the Humanitarian Country team or the clusters ensure that the (host) Government is seen as leading the response. While a government should of course be the one responsible for what happens in its country, it is a well-known complication that a number of governments have their own views on what principled humanitarian action means. Actions of assertive governments challenge multilateralism based on the respect for rights, humanitarian assistance, and protection. This ultimately calls into question a system whereby a government is to sign off on an HRP containing a valid plan for principled humanitarian action.

There is also a disconnect between the political leadership and operational level within humanitarian agencies, with important repercussions in terms of priority-setting. HRPs and implementation plans are too often based on overly rosy scenarios predicting how situations will improve. Humanitarian organisations seem to be afraid to push back on host government or donor expectations, and the HRP becomes as much – if not more – a funding document as a truly strategic plan that takes all possible

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[9] UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'. See also Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 'Improving Humanitarian Coordination - Themes and Recommendations from the ALNAP Meeting "Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination", July 2016'.

[10] Ferris, Elizabeth, 'Humanitarian Silos: Climate Change-Induced Displacement'.

[11] 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.

[12] Konyndyk, Saez, and Worden, 'Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area-Based Humanitarian Coordination Model'.

The future of
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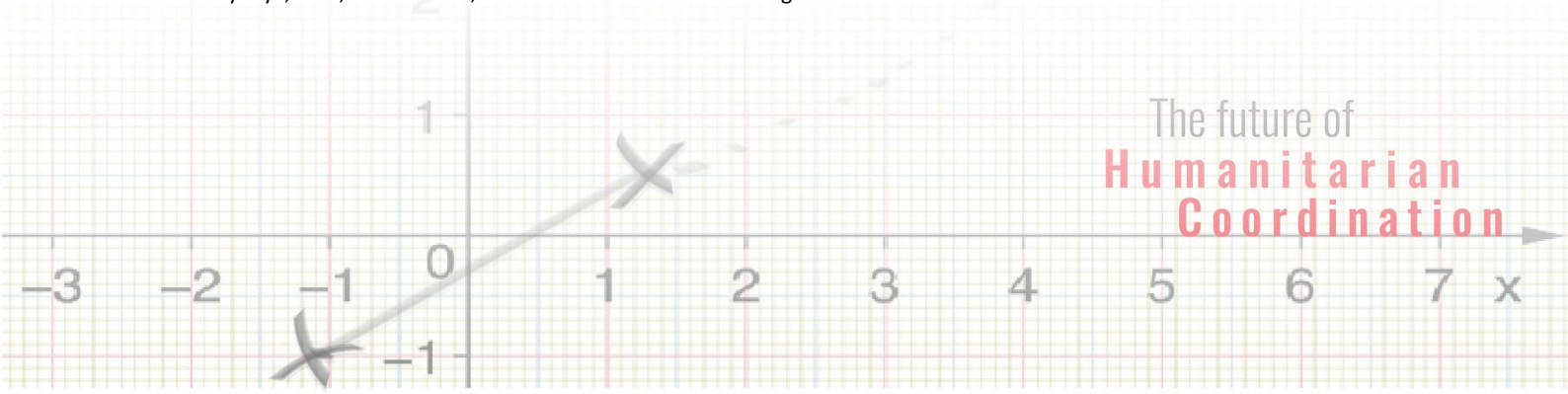
realities into account. Ultimately, this hampers the ability to coordinate an effective response from the outset.

Arguably, the current system was created for a time when emergencies were shorter.[13] Today we see an increased number of prolonged, complex crises that make the need for coordination both more important and more difficult – working in sector-specific silos makes less and less sense.[14] At the same time, recent policy commitments put the emphasis on the localisation of responses, and the linking of humanitarian and development efforts. This *de facto* adds stakeholders to the coordination equation, making it all the more complex to solve.

Academic literature has for many years looked at coordination in terms of three venues – it can take place in a hierarchical form, in line with the demands of the 'market', or in a network.[15] In a hierarchy, or a command type of coordination, there needs to be a clear agreement on responsibilities and objectives, following a central authority. A market-based type coordination flows organically from routine and happens by default. The network-based coordination is based on consensus and requires transparency and communication.[16] The significance of the argument is that there is a link between the venue of the coordination and the tools which are used to ensure it functions.

Applying this line of reflection to the current state of humanitarian coordination, we see that the infrastructure is essentially designed as a more hierarchical coordination model, with OCHA at the centre. The Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC) supports this directive model whereby there is one overarching

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Investigating the pressure point:

How to ensure that form follows function?

- How are the issues with regard to the architecture connected to the lack of clarity around the purpose/roles of coordination? What is the chicken and what is the egg?

Could the current architecture be revisited, or should it be revised?

- What elements can be kept? / What should the new architecture start with?

What is the most desirable model: more command/direction or a looser model based on coordinating autonomous activities? A hybrid?

- Is it true that coordination is voluntary? Should it be?
- How to ensure a looser model of coordination is not hijacked by agency interests?
- Are there possibilities for systems-thinking?

How to ensure that the coordination architecture is able to adapt to different country contexts (e.g. presence of government or civil society coordination mechanisms, regional contexts)?

How to ensure that humanitarian action is not structurally subordinated to political strategies?

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[13] Spiegel, 'The Humanitarian System Is Not Just Broke, but Broken: Recommendations for Future Humanitarian Action'.

[14] Chen, Christopher, 'Disaster Response: Break the Silos in Relief Work'.

[15] Thompson, *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks: The Coordination of Social Life*.

[16] Donini, 'The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda'. See also Charles, Lauras, and Tomasini, 'Collaboration Networks Involving Humanitarian Organisations – Particular Problems for a Particular Sector'.

The future of **Humanitarian Coordination**
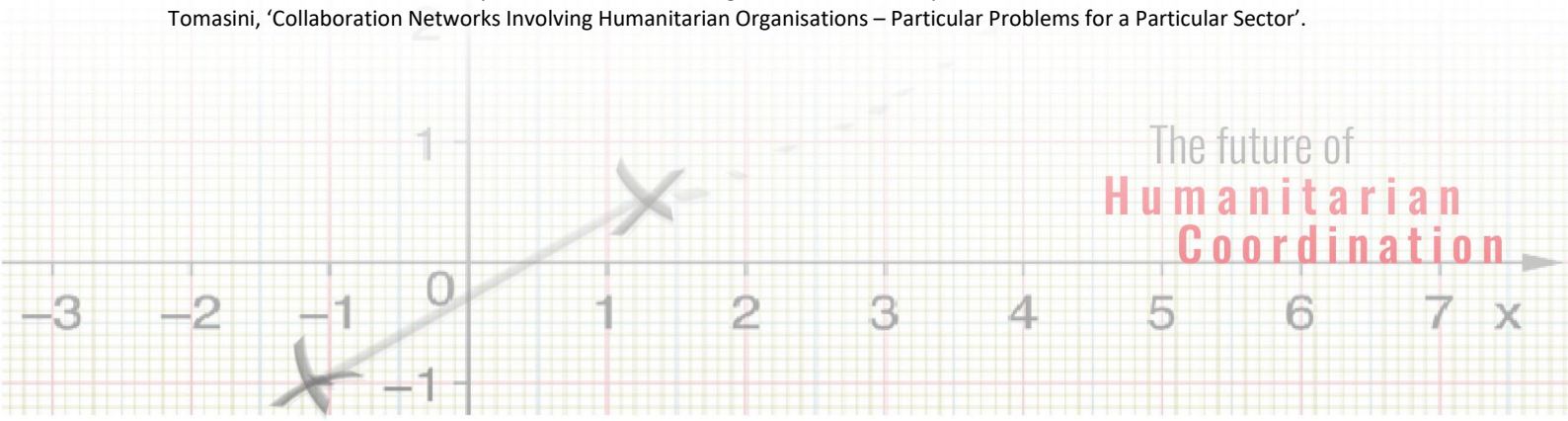
plan for humanitarian operations per country, with a coordination mechanism intended to regulate the activities of individual agencies.[17] At the same time, OCHA does not have the type of authority required to effectively coordinate in a hierarchical fashion. Coordination is essentially a voluntary act, and in practice, the humanitarian community today organises itself more as a consensus-based network. However, given the current state of humanitarian coordination, this network does not display the levels of transparency and communication required to reach clear consensus. The result is that the coordination falls somewhere in between the two; it is neither coordination by command, nor consensus, but it defaults to routine tasks, day-to-day meetings, and inter-personal relationships. This attempt to function through more than one model – it could even be argued that OCHA aims for all three simultaneously – in essence just adds to the level of confusion discussed above.

3. Agency incentives do not facilitate coordination

A third element that appears to stand in the way of functioning coordination is the fact that individual agency incentives are not geared to facilitate it. Organisations have their own strategies, budget cycles, and appraisal systems, and prefer to carry out their own needs assessments, planning, and monitoring. They may buy into collective processes and outcomes – and even be cluster leads – but still internally first reward that which is done for the individual agency, not the work that is carried out for the collective.[18]

Admittedly, the lack of commitment of individual stakeholders to the coordination processes should be considered in the light of the two aforementioned points. Where the purpose of coordination is unclear, or where the coordination mechanism does not allow for adequate representation, or the achievement of true outcomes, a loss of momentum and buy-in from stakeholders is natural. Seen in this light, there are numerous disincentives to coordination that have been discussed in the literature, such as the time it takes for coordination structures to achieve their goals; the desire of individual stakeholders to retain autonomy via-à-vis seemingly more powerful agencies;[19] differences in priorities and objectives of those taking part in the coordination structure;[20] concerns over public exposure;[21] an unwillingness to share critical information;[22] and – significantly – competition for funding.[23]

The latter point, i.e. the competition for funding, appears to be a key factor behind the reluctance of

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[17] Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 'Improving Humanitarian Coordination - Themes and Recommendations from the ALNAP Meeting "Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination", July 2016', 20–21.

[18] UNICEF, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Role as Cluster Lead (Co-Lead) Agency (CLARE II)'.

[19] Knox-Clarke, Paul and Campbell, Leah, 'Coordination in Theory, Coordination in Practice: The Case of the Clusters'; Stephenson, 'Making Humanitarian Relief Networks More Effective: Operational Coordination, Trust and Sense Making'.

[20] Blecken and Schulz, 'Horizontal Cooperation in Disaster Relief Logistics: Benefits and Impediments'.

[21] Balcik et al., 'Coordination in Humanitarian Relief Chains: Practices, Challenges and Opportunities'; Thévenaz and Resodihardjo, 'All The Best Laid Plans... Conditions Impeding Proper Emergency Response'.

[22] Charles, Lauras, and Tomasini, 'Collaboration Networks Involving Humanitarian Organisations – Particular Problems for a Particular Sector'; Comes, Van de Walle, and Van Wassenhove, 'The Coordination-Information Bubble in Humanitarian Response: Theoretical Foundations and Empirical Investigations'; Tapia et al., 'Coordinating Humanitarian Information: The Problem of Organizational and Technical Trajectories'; Saab, David J. et al., 'Building Global Bridges: Coordination Bodies for Improved Information Sharing Among Humanitarian Relief Agencies'.

[23] Knox-Clarke, Paul and Campbell, Leah, 'Coordination in Theory, Coordination in Practice: The Case of the Clusters'.

The future of
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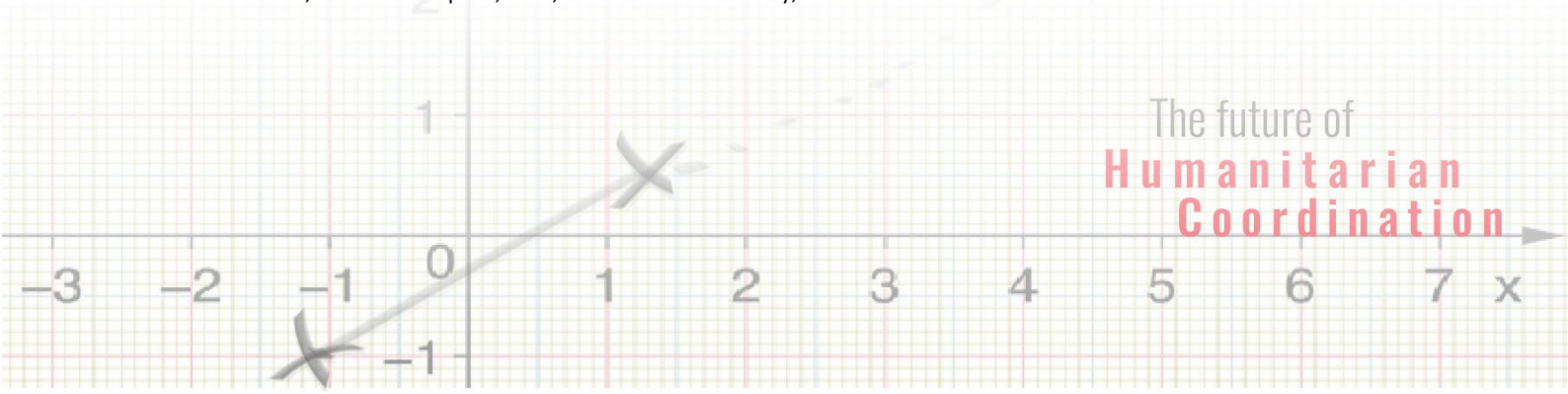
agencies to incentivise and reward collective action. Indeed, INGOs have for example been seen to defend their own specificity to donors, and to be "very reluctant to dilute it through collective action".[24] And as seen in previous work carried out by HERE, agencies are not only concerned about the money *per se*, but are also constantly striving to justify and guarantee their space.[25] More often than not, they enter a context asking the question "what is our added value here" rather than asking "do we have an added value here, and if not, who does." In this sense, humanitarian agencies have aptly been described as being trapped in the dilemma of wanting to do good for others but needing to do good for themselves – and appeal to donors – to be able to survive.[26] Donors arguably play an integral role in reversing the latter trend, for example by making funding dependent on full participation in the coordination mechanism.[27] At the same time, while donors could undoubtedly have the leverage over agencies to be drivers of coordination, the onus of incentivising coordination should not be placed solely on them. First, donors are as much a part of the humanitarian sphere as other actors, who also need to be incentivised to coordinate, be that amongst themselves or with other actors. Second, agencies should not be 'let off the hook' by implying that it is only funding that can direct how they can and cannot work.

Arguably, incentives for coordination can only be served through a big-picture, system perspective.[28] There has to be a common recognition that what is good for the collective is also good for the individual agency. Using a system perspective provides a significant challenge however: very rarely do individual agencies set out to improve their own performance in isolation; they require different actors at different levels to coordinate and consensually shift their ways of working. But as long as "no individual or agency [i]s being judged by their overall impact on future crises—i.e. on the system's ability to deliver—and since no individual or agency ha[s] the power to impose its management on the system, what [i]s the incentive for anyone to worry about it?"[29] Given how difficult it already is for one organisation to change its own systems and attitudes, it is understandable that each agency prefers to focus inwardly. However, while it is true that many, if not most, levers for change are outside of the control of the humanitarian actors themselves, there is one which they do control: their own contribution to the collective action, and their willingness to ensure the system becomes more than the sum of its parts.[30]

[24] Egger, 'Just Part-Time Lovers? Competition, Coercive Coordination, and Friendship among International INGOs'. See also Ramalingam and Barnett, 'The Humanitarian's Dilemma: Collective Action or Inaction in International Relief?'

[25] Montemurro and Wendt, 'Unpacking Humanitarianism'.

[26] Polman, 'What's Wrong With Humanitarian Aid? A Journalist's Journey'.

[27] Knox-Clarke, Paul and Campbell, Leah, 'Coordination in Theory, Coordination in Practice: The Case of the Clusters'; Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 'Improving Humanitarian Coordination - Themes and Recommendations from the ALNAP Meeting "Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination", July 2016'.

[28] Levine, 'System Failure? Why Humanitarian Assistance Can't Meet Its Objectives Without Systems Thinking—and Why It Finds It so Hard to Use It'; Barresi, 'Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Response: Visualization and Analysis of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Architectures for "The Cluster Approach"'.

[29] Ibid, p. 301. See also Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination'.

[30] ALNAP, 'The State of the Humanitarian System'.
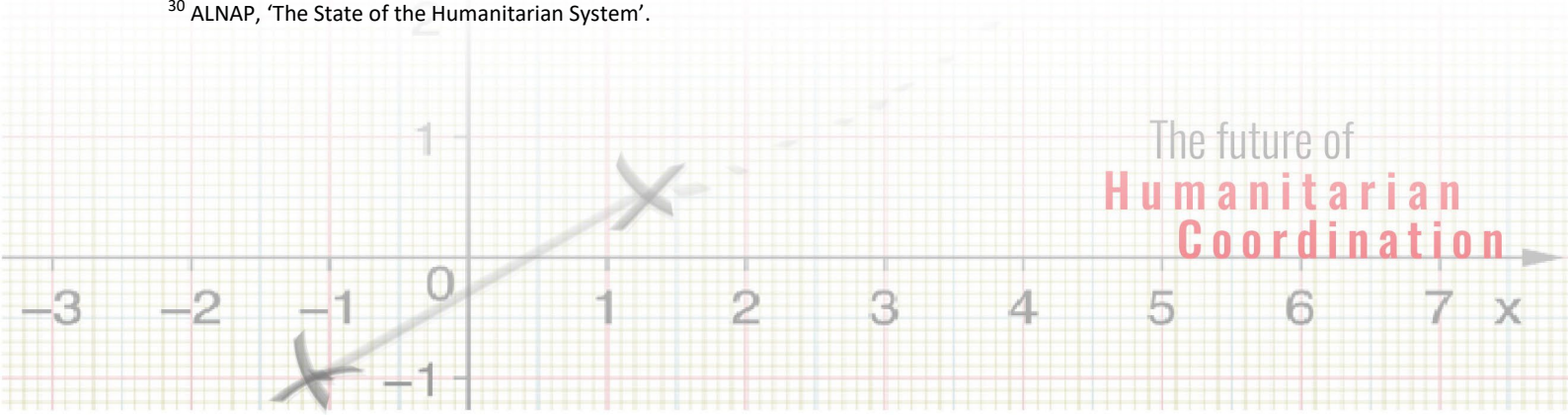
Investigating the pressure point:

How to ensure coordination is perceived as relevant and a worthwhile goal to which to devote resources?

- Is it a question of temporality, i.e. would a cost-benefit analysis of engaging in coordination show that it is worthwhile in the long run although it does not appear so in the short run?

How to reverse the trend whereby a competition for funding impedes coordination efforts?

What should individuals/agencies be 'rewarded' by the system for providing and how?

- Is it possible to make the 'system' respond/provide incentive or reward?

How can we impact internal HR systems? Where does this need to come from in the UN architecture?

4. Coordination is too technical

Last but not least: current humanitarian coordination is too technical and process-driven, at the expense of results. Or, to use a common metaphor: current humanitarian coordination does not see the forest, but focuses on the individual trees, down to their specific branches and leaves. This is not a new discovery. In 2012, the Transformative Agenda put forward a series of recommendations and actions to streamline coordination processes that were seen as overly process-driven, and as undermining rather than enabling delivery. In spite of these commitments, the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System reports, as well as a number of evaluations and papers have continued to point to the heaviness of the process of the system, as well as its complicated bureaucracy.

Given today's complex humanitarian world the strategic aspect is highly relevant, and arguably more so than the more technical aspects. Indeed, form should follow function. Nonetheless, while the current system allows for the collection of a wealth of information, with procedures and guidelines in place for very specific considerations, there appears to be little concern that this information and processes are in fact of operational use, i.e. that they actually allow organisations to cooperate more effectively in activities on the ground. In the words of Knox-Clarke/Campbell, this is the consequence of information being 'tools-led' rather than 'needs-led'.[31] As highlighted by the authors, even if a significant amount of time is employed by the coordination system to collect information on what needs are, very few updates include an analysis of the information collected, on how activities are in fact affecting needs, if the overall impact of a response is positive, and if not, what should be done differently. It is not enough to note how many NFI kits have been delivered or how many boreholes have been completed: there needs to be a reflection regarding what this ultimately leads to. To show work is being done, and to tick boxes, the system allows for the collection of simple process indicators, leaving out impact or outcome indicators that really matter but are more complex to measure. Technical innovation is portrayed as the key to success, rather than empowered leadership in terms of shaping and guiding towards a common vision.

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[31] Knox-Clarke and Campbell, 'Improving Humanitarian Coordination - Themes and Recommendations from the ALNAP Meeting "Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination", July 2016'.

The future of
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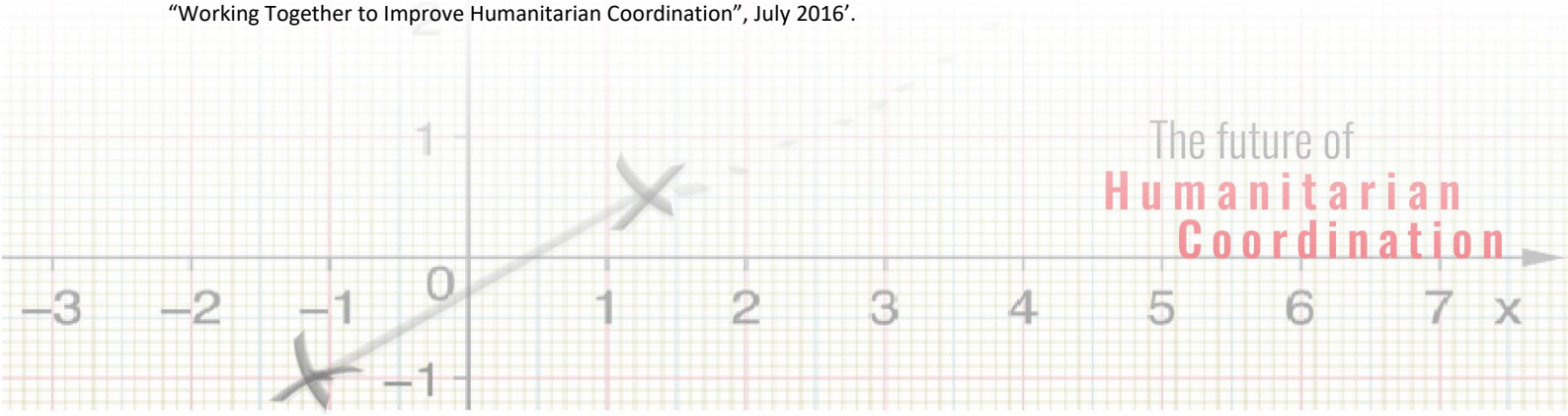
Significantly, coordination cannot function without a minimum of meetings, processes, common tools, and information-sharing. It is also important to recognise the challenge of striking a balance between the need to collect and share information relevant for a highly fragmented group of stakeholders, while ensuring that it does not become information-gathering for information-gathering's sake. Here, it appears important to come back to the values underpinning humanitarian action. Indeed, having common values – and proactively shaping and leveraging them – has been highlighted as a success factor for stakeholder engagement to allow for effective coordination.[32] On the contrary, bureaucracy and process reduces stakeholder commitment.[33]

What, then, would or should more value-driven coordination look like? What are the values it should be based on? Ironically, we have seen few examples where UN-led coordination mechanisms discuss what constitutes principled humanitarian action. Agencies and their collective plans resort to stating that they are committed to delivering principled action without clarifying what it means.[34] It would be highly relevant in the context of coordination to compare the variety in agencies' understanding or application of a principled approach. With the focus on the technical aspects of coordination, both through the cluster system, the demands of the HNO/HRP process, and donor-driven tools for monitoring and reporting, it appears that humanitarian principles are pushed to the back.

Because of the variety in views or expectations on what the end-goal of humanitarian coordination should be, agencies involved default to that which they can control: tick-the-box exercises and procedures. The challenge, then, will be to revisit the first three points mentioned above in order to 1) clarify what the common goal of the coordination endeavour is, 2) ensure that the structure in place does not trap stakeholders in silos, and can be adapted to fit the requirements of each context, and 3) that the common goal of the coordination endeavour is collectively understood and valued at the same level as the individual stakeholder interests. Perhaps then the tendency to solve coordination through technocratic tools will finally disappear.

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[32] Lupova-Henry and Dotti, 'Governance of Sustainable Innovation: Moving Beyond the Hierarchy-Market-Network Trichotomy? A Systematic Literature Review Using the "Who-How-What" Framework'.

[33] Barresi, 'Systems Thinking in Humanitarian Response: Visualization and Analysis of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Architectures for "The Cluster Approach"'; Levine, 'System Failure? Why Humanitarian Assistance Can't Meet Its Objectives Without Systems Thinking—and Why It Finds It so Hard to Use It'.

[34] E.g. Nigeria Human Response Plan 2021, Strategic Objective 2 (p. 26) reads: "Enhance timely, unhindered and equitable access to multi-sector assistance and protection interventions through principled humanitarian action." Nowhere in the text can a clarification be found on what makes the action principled.

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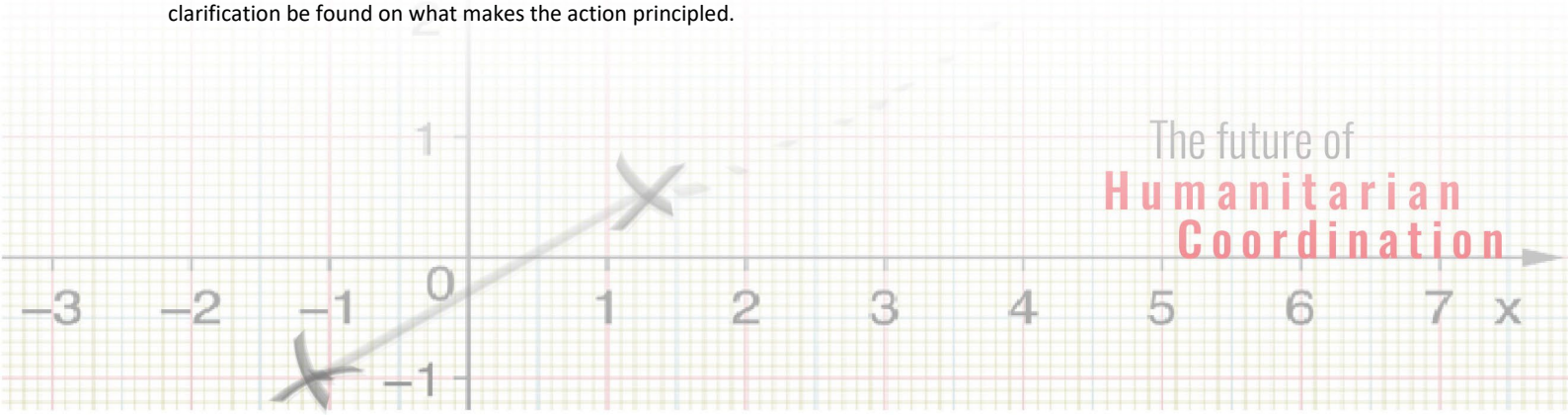
> *Investigating the pressure point:*
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> What would more value-driven coordination look like?
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> What 'technical' aspects of the current coordination structure are helpful, and why?

Next steps

In a next step of the Future of Humanitarian Coordination project, HERE will investigate the pressure points listed above through semi-structured interviews with a selection of key informants. Informants will include humanitarian practitioners and independent experts, including representatives from (I)NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies, and donor governments.

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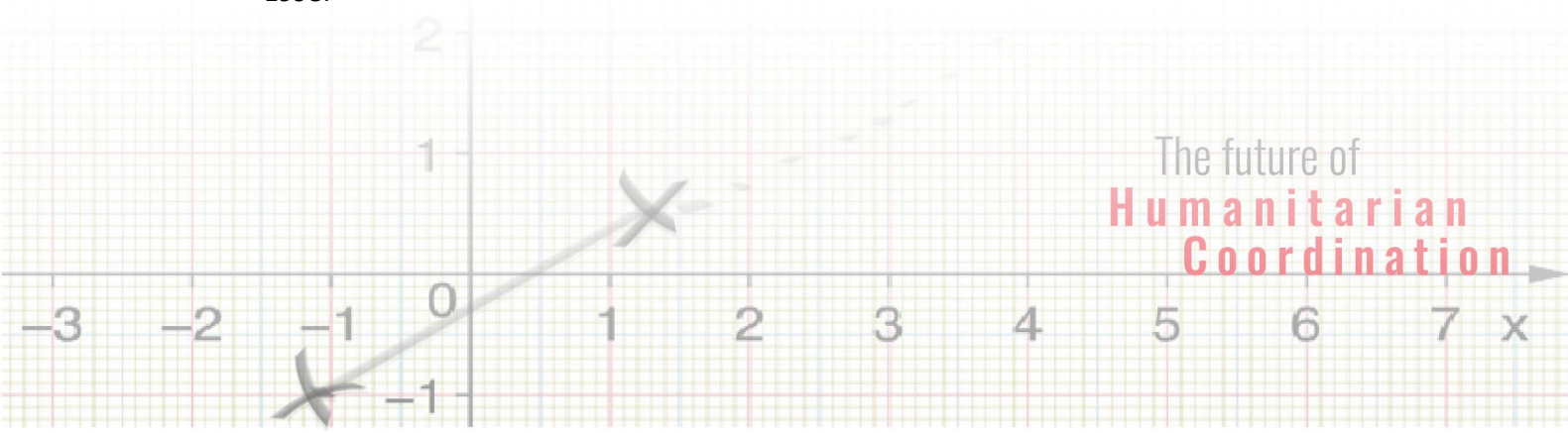
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