Oxfam International

OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Coordination

Overview: Oxfam International's position on Humanitarian Coordination

Oxfam International welcomes attempts by humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Organizations, and the United Nations (UN) to improve coordination of international humanitarian response, at global, regional and field levels. There is a vital need for the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance to be strengthened, to improve humanitarian responses; to reduce death and suffering; ensure the security of displaced populations; and end the destructive cycles of vulnerability and risk which characterize emergencies.

All possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of calamity and conflict. Those affected have the right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance. Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Other actors should coordinate with them. When the relevant authorities are unable and/or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, they are obliged to allow humanitarian organizations to provide humanitarian assistance and protection.[1] Such cooperation should be provided in accordance with international law and national laws.

To improve the practical implementation of humanitarian programmes, good coordination requires: cooperation with Government, civil society, and beneficiaries; effective joint assessment of needs and elaboration of a joint strategy; a division of labour among humanitarian actors so that all needs are met; removal of gaps; good information sharing; good leadership on standards and accountability; adherence to best practice and codes of conduct; and an efficient use of resources.

Coordination of humanitarian assistance:

* is enhanced by recognizing the complementarity of different agencies' modes of action;

* must use a common understanding of rights-based responses to humanitarian crises;

* must be based on quality of programming and be accountable to beneficiaries;

* must create bridges to the transition phase following conflicts and disasters;

* must ensure that the particular needs of women and children are addressed at all stages of response; and

* must remain apart from the military and political operations of the UN.

1. Coordination

Humanitarian coordination is based on the belief that a coherent *cooperative response* to an emergency by those actors engaged in humanitarian response will maximize the benefits and minimize potential pitfalls of that response. All activities that involve more than one actor require some way of dividing activities among the different actors, and some way of managing the interdependencies between the different activities. These different kinds of interdependencies can be managed by a variety of coordination mechanisms, such as: *standardization*, where predetermined

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[1] SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response 2004, Introduction.

rules govern the performance of each activity; *direct supervision*, where one actor manages interdependencies on a case-by-case basis, and *mutual adjustment*, where each actor makes on-going adjustments to manage the interdependencies. Oxfam is engaged in the debate on how to better organize humanitarian coordination. However, coordination is not an end in itself, but rather a tool to achieve the goal of saving lives and reducing suffering. This must be achieved by delivering the right assistance, to the right place, and at the right time - **enabling those affected by conflict and disasters to achieve their rights to protection and assistance.**

2. Background

Over the last two decades, the landscape of humanitarian response has changed dramatically. The humanitarian system has quickly evolved from a system of relatively few actors to one of many actors, with varying capabilities, skills and priorities. Emergencies can be characterized by competition, not collaboration, as agencies vie for scarce donor (public and government) resources. A range of actors, including local and international military forces and business, driven by different motivations to those of humanitarian organisations, are now seeking to engage in the provision of assistance in emergencies. Donors often hinder coordination, emphasizing different, and sometimes contradictory, approaches to humanitarian response. Existing coordination mechanisms often ignore, or contradict the wishes of, beneficiaries, local communities and government response agencies and groups.

The humanitarian system has yet to employ coordination mechanisms and resources to optimum effect, or to consistently work with the national and local authorities. Responses to humanitarian crises are still characterised by setbacks in mobilizing the right people, with the right skills, at the right time. International humanitarian organisations continue to import staff, technology and supplies when local sources might be more efficient and appropriate. In responding to large-scale disasters, international responders have sometimes been slow to coordinate with government and local actors, though in many cases these have proven to be the most important players.

The international humanitarian 'system' includes a large number of UN, International, and NGO organisations. The UN humanitarian system is composed of six key actors – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) – each established by separate treaties, with its own governance mechanism. The first attempt to establish a comprehensive framework to organise this system was the creation of the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) in 1971, to mobilise, direct and coordinate relief. UNDRO was not a success, and two decades later, prompted also by dissatisfaction with other ad hoc coordination arrangements and experiences in the Gulf War of 1991, the post of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) were created. Following lobbying from NGOs like Oxfam, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) was created, headed by the ERC, and also designated Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. In 1997, the IASC approved creation of Humanitarian Coordinators at country level charged with leading the UN's humanitarian responses. The DHA was replaced by a new office with a more streamlined mandate focused on coordination, advocacy and policy development - the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

Large emergencies are also characterized by the mobilization of local and international civil society organizations. These range in size, capacities and quality of response. The largest global humanitarian non-governmental humanitarian organizations are represented by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), which includes Oxfam International,[2] Care International, Caritas Internationalis, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Save the Children Fund Alliance, Lutheran World Federation, Medecins Sans Frontieres International, and the World Council of Churches. At the international level, Oxfam has advocated for humanitarian reform through its

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[2] **The major implementing Oxfams** (Great Britain, the Netherlands, United States, Australia, and Spain) coordinate Oxfam International's response through the Humanitarian Consortium Management Group (HCMG). These humanitarian assistance actions are linked to advocacy responses of the Oxfam International's **Humanitarian Advocacy and Campaign Team (HACT)** which links the thirteen Oxfams.

membership of the SCHR, which is then represented with other NGO consortia, the International Red Cross Movement, and the United Nations (UN) humanitarian agencies, on the Inter Agency Steering Committee (IASC).

In 2004, because of a widespread perception that the initial response to Darfur had been slow and ineffective, the UN Emergency Response Coordinator (ERC) commissioned a review of international humanitarian response - the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR). The review highlighted inconsistencies and gaps in the ability to respond at a global level, and resulted in:
- Identifying gaps in sectoral responses, introducing the **'cluster approach'** creating lead sector agencies.[3]
- A process to strengthen the recruitment, training and retention of the UN **Humanitarian Coordinators**, including from outside the UN system.
- A new humanitarian **Central Emergency Response Fund** (CERF) to make sure money is available when disaster hits. (see OI's humanitarian funding Policy in this series, and November 2005 Briefing Paper on the CERF, and forthcoming follow-up Paper on the CERF in early 2007

The cluster approach allows enhanced 'interoperability' and an increased commitment to complementarity across the NGO, the International Red Cross Movement,[4] International Organization,[5] and UN networks. It attempts to ensure that accountability is explicitly allocated. 'Lead Agencies' have been appointed to facilitate and coordinate concentrated humanitarian efforts in a

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[3] **Global cluster leads** have been established in nine areas of humanitarian activity i) Logistics, chaired by WFP; ii) Emergency Telecommunications, chaired by UNOCHA as process owner, with the UNICEF as the common data communications service provider and WFP as the common security telecommunications service provider; iii) Emergency Shelter, chaired by UNHCR for conflict-generated IDPs and IFRC to act as convener in Natural Disasters * .iv) Health, chaired by WHO; v) Nutrition, chaired by UNICEF; vi) Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene, chaired by UNICEF; vii) Early Recovery, chaired by UNDP; viii) Camp Coordination and Camp Management, chaired by UNHCR for conflict-generated IDPs and by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for natural disasters; ix) Protection, chaired by UNHCR for conflict-generated IDPs.** Sectors where no significant gaps have been detected are not included among the nine clusters at global level. These are: food, led by WFP; refugees, led by UNHCR; education, led by UNICEF***; and agriculture, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In these, sector coordination will continue as before.
* IFRC has committed to being a 'convener' rather than a 'cluster lead'. In an MOU between IFRC and OCHA it was agreed that IFRC would not accept accountability obligations beyond those defined in its Constitutions and own policies and that its responsibilities would leave no room for open-ended or unlimited obligations. It has therefore not committed to being 'provider of last resort' nor is it accountable to any part of the UN system.
** UNHCR is the lead of the global Protection Cluster. However, at the country level in disaster situations or in complex emergencies without significant displacement, the three core protection-mandated agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR) will consult closely and, under the overall leadership of the HC/RC, agree which of the three will assume the role of Lead for protection.
*** UNICEF has proposed to lead the Education sector in collaboration with the SCF Alliance following the cluster approach.

See Inter-agency Standing Committee, , 66th Working Group Meeting, Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, 15-17 November, 2006, New York.

[4] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has stated that its position on the cluster approach is the following: "Among the components of the Movement, the ICRC is not taking part in the cluster approach. Nevertheless, coordination between the ICRC and the UN will continue to the extent necessary to achieve efficient operational complementarity and a strengthened response for people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence."

[5] International Organization for Migration.

'cluster' around these gaps.[6] Although not expected to independently overcome response gaps, final accountability is nonetheless inherent in these leadership responsibilities – if humanitarian response fails to adequately meet needs, the Lead Agency is explicitly expected to redouble its efforts to deliver as the 'agency of last resort'. The cluster approach is primarily a mechanism to 'super-resource' surge capacity to lead coordination groups, in rapid onset emergencies.

In December 2005, the IASC Principals agreed to implement the cluster approach in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and Uganda. In addition, the cluster approach was to be applied in all new major disasters. The cluster approach has recently been implemented in Somalia, Pakistan (earthquake), Indonesia (Jogjakarta earthquake), and Lebanon (conflict).[7] Current crises as they emerge are using the cluster approach.

The cluster approach suffered in its inception, failing to engage in an inclusive dialogue with NGOs; focusing on the role of UN agencies; lacking clarity on terminology and intent; and failing to make links to field experience and understanding. Although the initial process was flawed, the intent and substance of the approach is sound. The aim in the future is to develop cooperative coordination mechanisms around key sectors and cross cutting themes, recognizing the interdependency of agencies, and managing leadership and responsibility. Important to the evolution of a new humanitarian coordination compact, is input and ownership from field offices of the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, International Organizations, and NGOs at country and regional levels. Oxfam has been active in critically engaging in the cluster approach across a range of sectors. Success will be judged against reduction of death and suffering, by improved humanitarian responses.

NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organizations, are also exploring efforts to further enhance coordination at the international and country level, in particular to engage local and regional NGOs, through the establishment of Humanitarian Community Partnership teams and the elaboration of 'partnership principles'.[8] At the global level a new global humanitarian platform, is being jointly planned to provide a forum for strategic dialogue on urgent humanitarian issues, such as accountability, capacity-building, security, and transitions.

Oxfam has been active in advocating for reform of humanitarian response and coordination including measures to collectively increase the scale, quality and predictability of global capacity for humanitarian response. Oxfam is determined to see these reforms succeed, however engagement in the process of reform will be grounded on series of **key principles** which Oxfam will advocate for. These are outlined below.

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[6] **Global clusters** are responsible for drawing international capacity together to ensure effective advocacy, adequate technical support, system-wide preparedness, and enhanced surge capacity. National clusters are responsible for identifying response gaps within the given crisis context and re-focusing response efforts to better address these gaps.

[7] **Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ethiopia are currently applying** to activate the cluster approach (July 2006)

[8] These **Humanitarian Community Partnership** teams will seek ways of strengthening collaborative work at the field level (including joint training) and strengthening NGO consortia. It was agreed that this approach should be piloted in up to three countries over the coming year.

3. Oxfam International's position on Humanitarian Coordination

- **Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory**. The affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.[9]

- The magnitude and duration of many emergencies may be beyond the response capacity of many affected countries. **International cooperation to address emergency situations and to strengthen the response capacity of affected countries is thus of great importance.** Such cooperation should be provided in accordance with international law and national laws.

- **Effective humanitarian response requires effective coordination of national and international responses.** States hold the primary responsibility to meet the basic needs of their people, it is critical that national actors (government and civil society) be included in humanitarian response occurring within their territory.[10] Any model aiming to enhance humanitarian response capacity must **integrate** with, and build on, existing national capacities although in some cases, such capacity/will is limited. Where significant government and civil society capacity exists, effective responses depend on creating genuine partnership between international and national efforts.

- **Coordination of humanitarian assistance must use a common understanding of rights-based responses to humanitarian crises**, as outlined in the SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and, in particular, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. These rights are articulated in international human rights law, humanitarian law, and refugee law. These should guide cooperative planning, monitoring and evaluation of responses.

- **Good coordination of international humanitarian assistance requires:**
  - Close cooperation with Government, local civil society institutions, and disaster and/or conflict affected communities, identifying capacities and needs.
  - Effective joint assessment of needs and elaboration of a joint strategy; a division of labour among humanitarian actors so that all needs are met; removal of gaps; good information sharing; good leadership on standards and accountability; adherence to best practice and codes of conduct; and an efficient use of resources.
  - Assigned leadership, trust, shared information, and cooperation by groups of agencies working in the same sector of humanitarian assistance.
  - Inclusiveness of several operational actors (UN and non-UN) with a lead coordination agency given responsibility to convince and actively ensure appropriate participation;
  - Clearly assigned responsibility to assess capacities in the sector, identify gaps, and decide how to fill them;
  - Lead coordination agency to fulfil their responsibilities do all possible to fill remaining gaps i.e. be the provider of last resort;
  - Commitment from sectors or clusters to work cooperatively with other groups / sectors to ensure coherence of response, and ensure that cross cutting issues (like protection, gender and the environment) are addressed; and
  - Ensure that people with the right profile and skills are provided to lead and facilitate.

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[9] Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations, UN Doc A/RES/46/182, GA 78th plenary meeting, 19 December 1991.

[10] How this translates in practice will be determined by the particular context and the capacity/will of the state as well as national NGOs and civil society groups.

- **Coordination of humanitarian action is enhanced by recognizing the complementarity of different agencies modes of action.** Coordination can be improved: by developing common criteria for assessing needs and measuring impact, and by establishing clear arrangements among humanitarian organizations regarding the geographic and thematic division of roles and responsibilities in a given context, based on the capacity and competencies of each organization.

- **Coordination of humanitarian assistance must be based on quality programming and should ensure accountability to beneficiaries.**[11] Coordination of quality assistance must be based on the SPHERE principles, standards and indicators. These should form the common reference for coordination (see OI humanitarian quality policy in this series).

- **Coordination of humanitarian assistance must create bridges to the transition phase following conflicts and disasters.** Better coordination of the **exit** strategies of humanitarian organizations and the **entry** strategies of development agencies is critical.[12]

- **Humanitarian reform** must not only focus on UN reform. Serious reform will ultimately lead to more effective and more reliable humanitarian response where it counts most in the field, for the people affected by disaster or conflict. It must engage international and local non-governmental actors. Engagement of civil society is a prerequisite to humanitarian reform.

- **The particular needs of women and children must be addressed at all stages of response**. Cross-cluster coordination is required as are the continued links between sectors and clusters. Protection must be seen as the role of all humanitarian agencies, as a cross cutting issue.

- **There is a need for a improved coordination of food security cluster in order to improve response and ensure coherence between actors and interventions which aim to ensure people are able to access their minimum food needs in emergencies and to ensure complementarity with longer-term food security strategies.** Currently, emergency food security responses are dominated by food aid. There is a need to promote inter-agency mechanisms which ensure that a range of interventions (food aid, cash transfers, and livelihood support) are considered and utilised in humanitarian responses, according to needs and context.[13] (see OI's 'Causing Hunger' Briefing Paper, 2006, and the food aid policy in this series)

- **Oxfam welcomes the expanded role of UNHCR as the lead agency in protection for conflict-related emergencies, in addition to its mandated role with refugees**. It must move to consistently apply this approach to all situations involving internally displaced people (IDPs). This must not, however, detract from effective implementation of its ongoing core mandated role of providing international protection for refugees.

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[11] In the context of IDPs, these are further articulated in the UN's IDP Guiding Principles. Grave offenses and denial of these rights, are also international crimes in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

[12] Oxfam also supports the creation of the UN Peace-Building Commission, established to help ensure sustained international support for countries emerging from conflicts, allowing communities who have suffered the scourge of war to recover in dignity. (see OI's Peacebuilding Commission Policy in this series).

[13] In particular - more sophisticated assessment and analysis of needs that can better inform more appropriate responses; development, promotion and wider utilization of alternatives to in-kind food aid; adapted donor policies that better ensure adequate, timely and flexible resources are available to support appropriate aid; and a coherent global food security architecture to guide global response.

- **UN Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) should be appointed based on their demonstrated humanitarian experience and performance for the post. Because of this, the HC post should be separated from the post of UN Resident Coordinator (RC),** unless the RC already has all the relevant skills; and is clearly accountable to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator for her/his humanitarian performance.

- **The pool of HCs and Cluster leads with the requisite skills must be rapidly expanded** through drawing from a variety of sources including humanitarian networks outside the UN. Enhanced training including knowledge of NGOs' roles, principles and standards is critical.

- While recognizing the importance of military logistics capacity at the early stages of some emergencies and the necessity of coordinating the delivery material assistance, **humanitarian coordination must remain apart from the military and political operations of the UN**. It must ensure 'humanitarian space' for assistance to be provided impartially and independently. (see OI's UN Integrated Missions Policy in this series).

4. What Oxfam International will do:

- **Oxfam is willing to play an active role in efforts to improve coordination of emergency responses, and to enhance the complementarity and interoperability** between NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organizations.

- **Oxfam will encourage other non-governmental humanitarian actors to actively engage in the humanitarian reform process.**

- **Oxfam will engage with reformed coordination mechanisms, like the cluster approach,** primarily in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Shelter, Protection, and Early Recovery clusters, and also in the Logistics, and Nutrition clusters. This engagement will occur at the global, regional, and national level, including active engagement with the IASC Country Teams. Engagement will be judged against clear improvements over time in reducing suffering and saving lives.

- **Oxfam will actively develop global operational humanitarian capacity** in collaboration with other NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organizations, building common assessment, response, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms, based agreed common standards and principles.[14]

- **Oxfam will assert its independence, from the UN and governments, being guided by humanitarian principles in its response.** It will engage in collaborative mechanisms facilitated and led by the NGOs, the UN, the International Red Cross Movement, and International Organizations, sharing resources, information, and staff to common agreed ends, to improve rapid humanitarian responses.

- **Oxfam will continue to emphasize cross cutting issues,** in particular protection; gender; rights-based programming; working with governments and affected populations; the environment; and ensuring linkages to longer-term development

- **Oxfam will critically analyse cluster leaders, capacities and expertise.** In the WASH sector, given our particular expertise, Oxfam will provide enhanced capacity to the cluster, including secondment of senior staff to Lead Agencies.[15]

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[14] The common reference is the SPHERE principles and standards, linked to the Red Cross & NGO Code of Conduct in Disaster Response.

[15] Oxfam has seconded a senior WASH expert to UNICEF - the water, sanitation and hygiene cluster lead. Oxfam GB has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNICEF formalizing this strategic partnership.

- **Oxfam will continue to monitor UNHCR's efforts to expand its protection role to IDPs and support efforts to develop its capacity to respond to the protection and assistance needs of IDPs and refugees.**[16]

- **Oxfam will distinguish itself from, and remain outside, the direct management of Integrated Missions.** Oxfam's involvement in humanitarian reform including testing the Cluster approach, should not be seen as an endorsement of the UN's formulation of integrated missions, which combine military, political, economic and humanitarian activities to achieve peace.

- **Oxfam will endeavour to continue improving internal coordination mechanisms across Oxfam International,** to maximise its impact and set a good example among the Humanitarian community.

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[16] Oxfam GB has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR formalizing shared standby capacity, and outlining its strategic partnership.