

4: THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COORDINATION MODELS

4.1 Do the UN Models Matter?

For UN agencies, the question of who coordinates is a major preoccupation in any discussion on humanitarian coordination. Yet this discussion – confined as it is to a highly partisan debate which revolves around conflicting assertions of the merits of three different ‘models’ of UN arrangements – obscures more than it reveals.

Firstly, the debate obviates any discussion about the roles or relationship with warring parties, local communities of host governments – whether weak, malign or absent. Yet such roles and relationships pose central coordination challenges for the UN and humanitarians in the first place. There may not be a legitimate governing authority that has the concern or capability to care for populations, or that can be effectively held accountable for this, leaving humanitarian agencies subject to no authority in-country. On the other hand, these actors may be the pivotal players in coordination.

Secondly, the team was struck by the fact that, in tribute to the adhocery of the system, even cursory inspection of the UN’s ‘models’ reveals that there is much that changes from one setting to another. This begs the question whether the models as described are the key determinant of coordination outcomes.

Other critical variables that may determine the outcome of the coordination arrangements include the range of actors involved (UN, NGOs, donors), the physical location and space between those being coordinated, reporting lines, frequency of coordination activities, and the nature of the activities themselves.⁵⁷ The different role(s) played by the coordination support services and functions, such as those provided by OCHA, may be a key determinant of the impact of coordination. In the case of the combined Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, the presence of a UNDP senior deputy to take on management responsibility for the UNDP programme may also be a critical factor. Given that coordination in complex emergencies is a full-time function and coordinators are required to travel in-country and further afield, whoever is required to deputise for the coordinator may have an impact.⁵⁸ Finally, donor willingness to fund the costs of adequately resourced coordination is another factor that is of fundamental importance in determining coordination outcomes.

The brief discussion below presents the study’s findings on the advantages and disadvantages of the three models of humanitarian coordination as specified by the IASC. It draws on the debate around the links between coordination and operationality discussed briefly in Section 3, as well as the ingredients of successful coordination outlined above to make conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of each arrangement.

4.2 The Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator: the ‘Combined Model’

Today in 14 countries where there are complex emergencies the UN Country Team is led by the Resident Coordinator – usually the Resident Representative (RR) of UNDP – who is also the Humanitarian Coordinator.

The attractiveness of this model, particularly to parts of the UN Secretariat, appears to stem from its ability to provide a sense of uniformity to coordination arrangements globally. According to interviewees, at the field level the model has made sense in settings such as Somalia and Afghanistan, both of which are dogged by chronic political conflict and characterised by the lack of clear distinction between humanitarian, rehabilitation and developmental action.⁵⁹ A perceived strength of the combined model is its ability to alleviate ‘the gap’ between relief and development. UNDP’s willingness to bear the costs of coordination is viewed as another major point in its favour.

⁵⁷ John Telford, pers. com. On the role of host governments, see Duffield, Jones & Lautze (1998), and Sommers, M. (2000) *The Dynamics of Coordination* (Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University: Providence, Rhode Island) Occasional Paper 40.

⁵⁸ Rotating the deputy role within the UN Country Team has been one way of team-building. By contrast, in Kosovo, a long-running dispute over whether the Humanitarian Coordinator should name the head of the OCHA field office as his deputy was a source of frustration to all staff involved.

⁵⁹ However, for a counter view on how the developmental focus of the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator shaped the humanitarian response, see Bradbury, M. & Coulton, V. (2000) Somalia Inter-Agency Flood Response Operation Phase 1, November-December. An Evaluation (UNICEF Somalia: Nairobi).

Yet the IASC's work on post-conflict reintegration shows that this coordination model alone will not guarantee closure of 'the gap' between relief, rehabilitation and development action. This suggests that other factors – such as the analysis, vision, strategy and teamwork of coordination structures – are more important.

A widely felt disadvantage of this model centres on the difficulties for a UNDP Resident Coordinator who is mandated to work closely with the government of the country in carrying out the robust diplomacy integral to the role of Humanitarian Coordinator – for example, on the rights of refugees or IDPs.⁶⁰ On the other hand, some people noted this tension is true for all UN agencies that have obligations towards governments. Another disadvantage is the preoccupation some incumbents have with UNDP and developmental matters to the exclusion of humanitarian priorities.

The fiercest criticism of this model, however, was that Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators who have the competence and experience to effectively coordinate humanitarian action are in the minority. Many interviewees expressed frustration that though the IASC and the UNDP Administrator have both declared their willingness to replace Resident Coordinators who lack the experience or skills to also be Humanitarian Coordinators, this seldom happens. On the rare occasion when there is inter-agency agreement to replace a Resident Coordinator the evidence suggests that action is thwarted by the dearth of available candidates.

There are efforts being made to enlarge the pool of potential Resident Coordinators and to assess them against a range of competencies that are judged necessary for humanitarian coordination. This can only be welcomed. However, the study team noted concerns about the process by which these competencies had been agreed and concluded that there needs to be greater transparency and debate on the required competencies among IASC members. The key question is whether this process will bring about results quickly enough for the beneficiaries of tomorrow's complex emergencies.

4.3 The Humanitarian Coordinator Separate From the Resident Coordinator

The separation of the tasks of Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator into two posts occurs relatively infrequently. The separation of roles occurs when the Resident Coordinator lacks the experience or capacity to undertake the role of Humanitarian Coordinator, when there is no Resident Coordinator, when the emergency requires a regional approach, or when the scale of the emergency warrants it. It is often seen as a temporary option. Examples include regional coordinators in the Horn of Africa in 1999, in the Great Lakes in 1998, in the DRC in 1996, and the current humanitarian coordinators in Kosovo, East Timor and Moscow.

According to the research for this study, the great advantage of this model is the value of having someone specifically experienced, competent and focused on humanitarian coordination, including someone with skills in leadership, management and advocacy that have been specifically honed in response to the particular challenges of humanitarian emergencies.

Lautze, Jones and Duffield (1998) conclude that humanitarian coordination structures should emulate the governance structures of the country/crisis and thus that a separate Humanitarian Coordinator should be appointed where territory is divided between warring parties. Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC are all examples of this. However, all three cases highlight the risk that perspectives among coordination staff polarise on either side of borders or frontlines if there is insufficient flow of information and people across the boundaries. The debate over the value of a separate Humanitarian Coordinator has resumed once more in the DRC as the country continues to be divided among several warring parties with whom humanitarian actors must negotiate and interact. NGOs in particular are advocates for a separate Humanitarian Coordinator both for the reason of the country's divided governance and the scale of the task.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See Sommers (2000) *op.cit*; also Van Brabant, K. (1997) *The Coordination of Humanitarian Action: the case of Sri Lanka* (ODI: London) Relief and Rehabilitation Network Paper 23

⁶¹ See SCHR (2001) 'The Democratic Republic of Congo: A Forgotten Emergency' Briefing Note, February

The sole disadvantage associated with this model is the confusion that arises when the precise roles of the Humanitarian Coordinators and Resident Coordinators have not been clear. The fact that reality rarely conforms to the neat distinctions of the 'relief-to-development continuum', and the increasing emphasis that humanitarians should consider and regularly review the potential applicability of the 'developmental issues' of sustainability and capacity building from the outset of any response, suggests that dividing the humanitarian and developmental roles is a recipe for confusion. It presents the possibility of entrenching false distinctions between relief and development in intellectual and operational terms, thus creating another layer or interface for coordination.

This disadvantage is a significant one. However, the study team was struck by the strength of the widespread view among interviewees that humanitarian coordination separate from the role of the Resident Coordinator should be the norm, in contrast to the documents of the IASC that suggest the separate Humanitarian Coordinator should be the exception.

4.4 The Lead Agency Model

A recurring theme in past studies of lead agencies is the lack of clarity surrounding how lead agencies are designated and what their coordination responsibilities are.⁶² This is partly a reflection of the fast moving events that lead to what Cunliffe and Pugh (1996) describe as the '*resort to reliance*' to the most established agency on the ground.⁶³ For example, UNHCR was lead agency in the Former Yugoslavia for roughly a year before it specified its own role.⁶⁴ Currently in North Korea and Kosovo there is debate about whether the coordination structures in place are lead agencies or not. In the DRC, a coordinator from an operational agency was also unclear whether he was in a lead agency model. Lead agency examples include UNHCR's role in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in 1999/2000 as part of the UNMIK Humanitarian Pillar I, UNICEF's role in south Sudan until 1999, and WFP's current role in North Korea, among others.

However, interviewees criticised '*the temptations of imperialism*' inherent in the lead agency model, referring to the lead agency tendency to define the humanitarian problem '*in its own image*' so that it conformed to the lead agency's mandate. It was argued that in several instances lead agencies had insufficient capacity or interest to coordinate effectively, but instead a vested interest in their own operations.⁶⁵

Yet the fact that one of the criteria for lead agency designation is that the assistance required is closely related to its mandate suggests that this is an understandable tendency. In response to rapid onset emergencies, such as the refugee outflows from Kosovo in 1999, a lead agency is likely to be pre-occupied with establishing its own response rather than undertaking system-wide coordination. Similarly, the fact that lead agencies are so designated because they are on the ground points to what is often the reality: that other agencies are not there. The lead agency fills the vacuum created by others' absence, forced by circumstance – often including pressure from donors – to take on activities outside its mandate.⁶⁶

One interviewee noted that the predominance of the programme weakens normal accountabilities and enables the agency to pursue a path separate to that of the ERC and the rest of the system. '*UNICEF became lead agency in Sudan as a result of UNICEF's then chief being sent "to negotiate something" in 1989. The sheer scale of the UNICEF programme led to leadership taking on a life of its own – in the same way that in Bosnia, UNHCR, with its 850 internationals contributed a separate power structure and felt able to flout normal accountabilities.*'

⁶² For example, Suhrke et al (2000) op. cit., and Cunliffe & Pugh (1996) The UNHCR As Lead Agency in the Former Yugoslavia, The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance.

⁶³ See Cunliffe & Pugh (1996) op.cit.

⁶⁴ Although UNHCR was requested by Perez de Cuellar on 25 October 1991 to provide assistance to displaced people in the disintegrating Yugoslav federation, his routine letter did not specify lead agency status. By May 1992 in his report, the Secretary-General talked of a 'lead agency' but without detail of what this entailed.

⁶⁵ For example, see Telford (2000) op.cit.

⁶⁶ See Minear et al (1994) op. cit.

The most damning criticism, however, in interviews, case studies and past studies concerns the tendency of the lead agency to interpret coordination as control, or 'to ensure it is done' as 'do it yourself'. Even once other agencies had arrived, this tendency to interpret coordination as 'doing' led to ineffective delegation and a consequent failure to tap into the expertise of others.⁶⁷ By interpreting the role in this way, lead agencies were accused of causing a spiralling circle of negative consequences, skewing the definition of the problem, succumbing to mandate creep, showing little interest in others' operations, and seeking to direct others.

One lead agency case that escaped any criticism was WFP's lead agency experience in North Korea. Interviewees argued that the predominance of WFP's work in the overall humanitarian effort increased WFP's 'stakes' in the overall response. The Humanitarian Coordinator coming from WFP was widely praised for his effectiveness, which was attributed to his clear-thinking, inclusive style and humility.

4.5 Conclusion: So Who Should Coordinate?

The preoccupation with criteria for choosing models presupposes that there are mechanisms that can use them and that lack of clarity is the issue. Yet the impression is that criteria get lost amid the demands of inter-agency politics, particularly those of the major UN operational agencies, and that selection of coordination arrangements is only weakly connected to lessons from past performance or the demands on the context (see discussion of the IASC in Section 5).

Even if clarity were the issue, this study cannot offer definitive evidence comparing the impact of different models and arrangements on the humanitarian response and the lives of beneficiaries. As noted above, the variables are far more multiple than the UN discussions admit. However, on the basis of the discussion above, the study team came to a number of conclusions:

1. Section 3 set out some of the **essential ingredients in successful coordination**. These **provide clear criteria for any coordination structure to fulfil**: that humanitarian coordination is recognised as a full-time task requiring particular skills and competencies, and that it must be resourced, performed and respected as such. The coordination role requires skilled support teams, clear lines of accountability for coordination, carried out by players with no vested institutional interest who performs a service for the whole humanitarian community.
2. The model debate focuses largely on the 'top' of the coordination structure – that is, how it gets led – and **pays little attention to specifying what and how coordination services and functions are provided**.⁶⁸ This has led to unhelpful tensions around OCHA's role, reporting lines, the extent of its presence at sub-office level and the question of who deputises for Humanitarian Coordinators. (It also heightened the team's impression that the Secretariat and the major UN operational agencies risk prioritising the desire for simplicity over a concern with the detail of coordination on the ground.) **The IASC should focus more on coordination teams and structures, not solely on responsibilities at the top**. Clear specifications with regard to these structures, their functions, the required personnel competencies and the reporting relationships should form part of all decisions on coordination options considered by the UN and the rest of the IASC.
3. If the Secretary-General and the IASC's decisions continue to favour appointing a combined **Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator**, the disadvantages of this will have to be mitigated by having a pool of high-calibre candidates who possess competencies that are agreed to be applicable for both roles, a rigorous system of performance monitoring by the ERC to ensure that those in place are playing their role effectively, and a decisive and professional approach to remove or replace Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators when they are found wanting. UNDP's current efforts to ensure that the UNDP programme is run by a competent deputy to allow the Resident Coordinator to focus on coordination are also essential to the success of this option.

⁶⁷ See Cunliffe & Pugh (1996) op. cit.; also Minear et al (1994) op. cit.

⁶⁸ This was not true of the inter-agency mission sent to the DRC in November 2000 that did make recommendations that OCHA be strengthened to provide more systematised support to the provincial coordinators at the sub-office level.

4. **Secondments** have provided a valuable pool of candidates for Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator positions in the past and have had the added benefit of tapping into the skills, resources and credibility of the seconding agency.⁶⁹ Secondments can also contribute to greater system-wide affiliation rather than narrow agency loyalty. In addition, they spread the costs of coordination. The challenge remains to persuade agencies to second their people in the first place. One suggestion to overcome this was that coordinators should be paid from a common trust fund managed by the ERC. This has the added advantage of buttressing the requirement that the seconded Humanitarian Coordinator derives authority from, and reports and is accountable to, the ERC, rather than the seconding agency.
5. The logic of the **lead agency model** is undeniable when one agency is overwhelmingly present. It makes pragmatic sense to harness its infrastructure for the benefit of the system. In the abstract, the lead agency could be considered the closest to a management model, combining elements of control, capacity, authority, and clarity about who is in charge. Yet in practice, evidence suggests that it has **mostly not been possible for an operational agency to coordinate in the interests of overall humanitarian response**. In the reality of a decentralised system, lead agencies have insufficient control to compel others to coordinate, and in practice have undertaken insufficient consensus-building efforts to persuade others to coordinate.
6. If one seeks to **mitigate the disadvantages of the lead agency model, the model ceases to be a lead agency model at all**. This is because, in essence, the lead agency model revolves around the lead agency country director or representative exercising the functions of Humanitarian Coordinator. To ensure that there are no vested institutional interests, at the very least the Coordinator should be relieved of responsibilities for day-to-day operations if a lead agency is to be successful in terms of performing system-wide coordination. Thus a 'lead agency model' that would be likely to avoid past pitfalls is essentially no different from the model where the Humanitarian Coordinator comes from an operational agency. Furthermore, if there were effective personnel rosters and rapid response support teams that could provide coordinators and support structures in the earliest days of an emergency, the use of the problematic option of carving coordination capacity out of the lead agency infrastructure would no longer be necessary.
7. Notwithstanding the one disadvantage of the separate function model, the team concluded that there is a **strong case in favour of the Humanitarian Coordinator being separate from the Resident Coordinator**. This is not least due to concern at the slow pace at which the pool of competent Resident Coordinator candidates is being enlarged. It also stems from a recognition of the scale of the challenges faced by humanitarian coordination such as the importance of leadership in overcoming the obstacles to coordination within the UN, and the importance of advocacy and negotiating access in settings where governance is weak or absent – all of which suggest that a separate Humanitarian Coordinator charged with full-time coordination would be best placed to coordinate. Where a Resident Coordinator is in place, clear strategies and strong collaboration should mitigate the intellectual and operational confusions.
8. The team therefore concluded that in order to fulfil the criteria established above, **the IASC should review its assumption that the combined Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator should be the default option and instead favour separate Humanitarian Coordinators**, particularly in cases of large-scale rapid onset emergencies where territorial control is divided among belligerents and where the demands of negotiating access and undertaking advocacy are high. This should also be the case in peace operations where the Resident Coordinator is the DSRSG (elaborated below). Secondments from operational agencies to OCHA that report to the ERC should be actively sought.

⁶⁹ In Angola, Ramiro Manuel da Silva was able to call on the logistics capabilities of his organisation that contributed to him being an effective coordinator. In Burundi, one aspect of Kathleen Kravero Kristofferson's credibility was her UNICEF background.