

Enhancing Collaboration during Humanitarian Response: An Interim Report from Stakeholders Survey

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Abbreviations:

IASC = Interagency Standing Committee
NGO = non-governmental organization

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Abstract

The effectiveness of humanitarian response efforts has long been hampered by a lack of coordination among responding organizations. The need for increased coordination and collaboration, as well as the need to better understand experiences with coordination, were recognized by participants of a multilateral Working Group convened to examine the challenges of coordination in humanitarian health responses. This preliminary study is an interim report of an ongoing survey designed by the Working Group to describe the experiences of coordination and collaboration in greater detail, including factors that promote or discourage coordination and lessons learned, and to determine whether there is support for a new consortium dedicated to coordination.

To date, 30 key informants have participated in 25-minute structured interviews that were recorded and analyzed for major themes. Participants represented 21 different agencies and organizations: nine non-governmental organizations, eight academic institutions, two donor organizations, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.

Common themes that emerged included the role of donors in promoting coordination, the need to build an evidence base, the frequent occurrence of field-level coordination, and the need to build new partnerships. Currently, there is no consensus that a new consortium would be helpful.

Addressing the underlying structural and professional factors that currently discourage coordination may be a more effective method for enhancing coordination during humanitarian responses.

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Introduction

Coordination during disaster response has been characterized as the efficient allocation of appropriate resources to more effectively achieve desired common goals, or more succinctly, as joint efforts designed to reduce duplication in efforts and reduce gaps in services.^{1–4} A *consortium* is a group of agencies that have joined together into a voluntary association to develop and implement coordinated activities. During the initial response to a disaster or complex emergency, efforts to assess and provide for the needs of the affected population can be hindered not only by damaged infrastructure and breakdowns in social order caused by the events themselves, but also by the sudden and generally unplanned and chaotic influx of large numbers of responding organizations.^{5–8} Coordination during ongoing recovery and reconstruction stages, may be even more challenging than during initial relief phases.^{2,9,10}

The benefits that have been demonstrated by joint action at all levels of humanitarian relief (field, headquarters, United Nations) and by all actors (implementing, governmental, donors, technical) have been substantial. The collaborative work of the Sphere Project, WASH, the CORE group, and SMART all were named as significant contributors to recent improvements in the type of professional standards necessary to increase coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency during response efforts.

Survey Questions

1. What are some of the problems in general that hinder your ability to do high quality professional work during an emergency disaster situation?
 - a. At the field level?
 - b. At the agency level?
 2. What are some general areas or specific activities where agencies could collaborate together?
 - a. What are incentives for an organization to work together?
 - b. What are disincentives for an organization to work together?
 3. Could you describe previous collaborative efforts between agencies that have had an impact in the work that you or your agency does?
 - a. What were some of the successful elements of the program?
 4. Would it be helpful to have an organization that would delegate responsibilities between agencies during an emergency or disaster?
 5. If the donor community would do 1 or 2 things, what could they do that would really help you or improve your ability to deliver your service?
 - a. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of donor leadership?
- Demographics:
6. Give a brief description or timeline of the relevant work experiences you've had and agencies you've worked for.

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Figure 1—Survey questions to key informants on coordination of humanitarian relief

However, while there is general agreement among experts in humanitarian relief and development that coordination among agencies and collaborative activities must be improved, there is little agreement on what methods and at which level specific steps can be taken to achieve optimal coordination.⁸ In part, this reflects the lack of an evidence base about what works in the field, or even a consensus of opinion on the specific needs for a given disaster and for the appropriate response. The degree to which coordination may be improving over time also is uncertain. For example, poor coordination among responding organizations has been described as the “main problem” hindering relief efforts after the 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia, though the overall degree of coordination is credited as an improvement over previous large-scale relief efforts.^{2,7}

In September 2006, as part of the multilateral Humanitarian Health Conference convened by Dartmouth Medical School and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative to focus on specific challenges in humanitarian relief, representatives from numerous agencies formed a Working Group to review the evidence base associated with coordination, as well as the needs and possibilities for enhancing coordination. Additionally, the Working Group explored the advantages and disadvantages of creating a new consortium of health-related humanitarian agencies that would develop ongoing mechanisms for collaborative action. Upon deliberation, the Group concluded that although improved mechanisms for collaboration among agencies is a high priority, the development of a coordination-specific consortium raises a number of concerns, particularly in the context of a number of recent initiatives, including the topical UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster Working Groups that have similar mandates. Instead, the group recommended that a survey of agencies working in humanitarian response to disasters be conducted to describe experiences with coordination and collaboration and the lessons learned about the critical factors that encourage and discourage agencies to work together. This paper provides an update and preliminary results on the survey in process. It is the hope of the

authors to encourage a more informed discussion about joint action in humanitarian response.

Methods

During the development of the initial quantitative survey tool, it became apparent that while there is agreement on the theoretical construct and goals of coordination, there is a lack of consensus as to what is meant by coordination and what it could look like in practice. There are multiple levels involved in humanitarian work, including multi-national agencies, donors, individual agency headquarters, geographical regions, and field sites. The potential for coordinated activities may occur at each level and also between the various levels—in essence, along horizontal and vertical dimensions. The lack of clarity surrounding case definitions or interventions, and the interchangeable use of terminology has the potential to generate un-interpretable data unless it is clarified. Recognizing this lack of standardization, a qualitative approach was taken to help clarify terminology and generate hypotheses about the underlying nature and causes of uncoordinated humanitarian response efforts. In addition, the Working Group sought to explore examples of “successful” collaborative efforts and establish if there are consistent themes or elements.

Selection of survey participants as key informants started with members of the Working Group; additional informants were identified through peer recommendation as interviews proceeded. Participants were chosen based on their experience in disaster response and were chosen to represent headquarters- and field-level workers in private, governmental, and multinational organizations, and academic institutions. Interviews were conducted and recorded by one interviewer (SP). The recorded responses to the survey questions were reviewed to identify major themes and were analyzed for differences or similarities of perceptions based on the various levels and types of organizations. The survey plan is to continue interviews as long as new themes and ideas of significance are emerging. It is estimated that a total number of 60 participants may be needed to establish redundancy and to gather a sufficient breadth of experience.

Results and Discussion

From April to June 2007, 30 key informants representing 21 different agencies and organizations were interviewed. Interviews were conducted using a structured, 25-minute phone interview (Figure 1). To date, all persons contacted have agreed to participate. Among the participants, most have worked for at least three different types of agencies during their careers. Of the 21 agencies represented, nine were non-governmental organizations (NGOs), eight were academic institutions, two were donors, and two were technical specialty agencies (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization).

Informants generally expressed resistance to the idea of creating a new consortium solely for the purpose of enhancing inter-agency coordination. There was consensus that adding another organizational structure to current processes likely would hinder, not enhance, efforts to increase the level of efficiency, coordination, and effectiveness of response efforts. Changes in the structures for coordination present significant challenges to participating agencies who must find their new place within the reorganized environment. Instead of starting something new, respondents agreed that it would be more productive to actively support an agency or structure already in existence, such as the IASC cluster system. Though the cluster system generally was viewed as an innovative, theoretical concept that has been difficult to put into practice, the general consensus was that it deserved more time and support to mature into a fully functional coordination structure.

Support for the existing coordination initiatives and efforts was one of several emergent themes supporting a general consensus that structural, systematic, and cultural forces that currently discourage coordination should be addressed, instead of simply adding a new player to the environment. While a consortium was not viewed as a solution, there was some agreement among respondents about major themes that warrant further inquiry. These include:

1. *The centrality of donors in coordination of humanitarian relief*—The importance of donor agencies in disasters is amplified by the lack of any governmental or organizational entity with the legitimacy, funding, or authority to coordinate humanitarian responses and maintain accountability. In this organizational vacuum, donors become the major force, determining where, what, and how many agencies work and what work is given priority. Donors are described as central to all of the worst problems hindering collaboration and most of the promising potential solutions for improved coordination. Competition for donor funding has various negative impacts on the appropriateness and effectiveness of humanitarian response. In an effort to gain a competitive advantage, agencies may withhold information about needs assessments, security, lessons learned, and successful strategies. In this early phase of the survey, some intriguing, proposed solutions include the use by donors of coordination counsels for specific events that would provide funding based on proposals to fulfill actual unmet needs. Another proposed approach is to fully engage donors in the need for better evidence about effective health interventions. One suggestion was to develop protocols for operations research that would allow donors to fund multiple agencies to perform similar services in distinct sectors or geographical regions, and then compare the effectiveness of the intervention and the delivery methods. Joint assessment and outcome measures would be predetermined. This approach could help develop an evidence base of effective practice, improve honest discussion about program results, and introduce competition based on measured outcomes. For agencies that “lose” in this model by having poorer outcomes, adoption of the more effective practices could be a stipulation for future funding. Thus, “failure” would not threaten an organization’s future viability.
2. *The need to build an evidence base for interventions in humanitarian response and to set up mechanisms that assure that the information is used when available, by supporting field-level data collection and analysis*—Participants stressed the need to build local capacity, to further develop academic linkages, and to promote partnerships between research institutions, NGOs, donors, and UN agencies. Finally, the Working Group concluded that timely data collection, analysis, and dissemination, and an assurance that humanitarian assistance programs be evidence-based and of the highest technical quality, were important elements of accountability that to date have been under-emphasized. Collaborative action is the most sensible way to meet this goal.¹¹
3. *Successful and effective collaboration more often was described as occurring in the field*—The emphasis of most discussions about coordination focuses on headquarters activities and more recently, on multi-national agencies. When asked about successful collaboration, participants in this survey were more likely to describe field-level interactions involving other agencies or communities than larger, headquarters-based efforts. While there have been ongoing struggles with attempts to devise and implement effective, formal strategies for coordination, there was a consensus that on an informal level, coordination and collaboration occur frequently at the field-implementation level. This has positive implications for efforts to enhance the professionalism of responders, since nurturing a culture of coordination on the implementation level has the potential to matriculate upward into the headquarters level and the donor community. Coinciding with the strong agreement about field-based coordination was a concern that the time involved in good collaborative activities at the field is substantial and must be supported with financial resources, technical support, and staff time.
4. *New partnerships*—With the scale of disasters such as the Tsunami and the problems with access to populations, discussions about coordination increasingly have raised questions about the role of the military. The access to resources such as helicopters, boats and other means of transportation, and communications systems often are under military control. The implications of working with military partners and the

experiences during the Tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan, suggest that more discussion about this is needed at all levels. Collaborative efforts to tackle the acquisition of high-cost, logistical solutions, such as boats and helicopters, should be explored. Clarification of the role of the military in response must be undertaken, and, if necessary, coordination efforts with the military. Various agencies have developed organizational policies regarding their participation with the military. Most are willing to work together during crises created by natural hazards, while retaining their own independence when working in war-zones or conflict regions.

The themes presented herein represent a small sample of the rich information collected through interviews with stakeholders in the humanitarian response field. To better

understand these themes, the survey remains ongoing and full analysis of qualitative data will proceed.

Conclusions

Creating a new agency to enhance coordination is not viewed as an effective or desirable method for increasing coordination of disaster relief organizations. The resources and effort involved and the need to re-organize the structural and political landscape of organizations before introducing a new organizational agency requires clearly defined goals and a level of common understanding not currently present. Instead, addressing the underlying causes of uncoordinated responses is viewed as a more effective and sustainable solution. More research is needed to better define these underlying causes. This ongoing survey currently addresses this knowledge gap.

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