

Humanitarian coordination in Indonesia: an NGO viewpoint

by Carsten Völz

Although the humanitarian community is aware of the value of coordination, field experience in Indonesia in the first few months after the tsunami provides some salutary lessons.

The UN made significant efforts to coordinate activities but the approach – which seemed based on the assumption that if enough resources are allocated to the field, coordination will necessarily happen – did not lead to effective coordination. At some levels there was too much coordination. With more than a dozen UN agencies in Banda Aceh competing for their turf, coordination went into overdrive, with 72 coordination meetings per week in Banda Aceh alone. Most NGOs did not have the resources to attend even a small fraction of these meetings which as a consequence were attended by between only 10-40 agencies – a small sample of the 400 international NGOs present. Many coordination meetings did not have clearly formulated objectives and failed to clarify the roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority of participants. It was often not clear if the purpose of meetings was to share information, build consensus or make operational or policy decisions. Senior staff often spent more time on coordination than implementation.

The multitude of meetings reflects the trend towards increased humanitarian specialisation and our inability to focus on our core business. Significant time was invested in discussing policies and approaches towards reconstruction and income generation while many disaster-affected settlements in Aceh still lacked access to basic sanitation two months after the disaster. The humanitarian community was too fragmented and left some critical issues unattended for too long.

There were too many layers of coordination. Similar UN-led coordination groups were working on the same issues in Jakarta, Medan, Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, with little communication between them. The result was

multiple guidelines and standards developed in isolation. Several UN agencies did both coordination and implementation, with the result that they sometimes seemed more focused on their own agendas in meetings with the Indonesian government rather than representing the shared interests of the humanitarian community. The UN established a Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC)¹ with a mandate to gather and disseminate information to enable humanitarian agencies to make informed programming decisions. The centre, however, was only fully operational after several weeks and, although it provided useful support after the first few difficult weeks, it had insufficient resources to fulfil all requirements. This was also true of the other two humanitarian common services established – the Joint Logistics Centre and the Humanitarian Air Service.

The role of the military

The fact that the Indonesian military coordinated the use of military assets provided by foreign governments contravenes accepted humanitarian good practice which requires that military contributions to humanitarian responses should be under civilian coordination. NGOs were often excluded from use of the assets for assessment and starting response operations. While NGOs were able to use airlift capacity to bring in cargo from other parts of Indonesia to Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, the use of ships and helicopters to access communities on the ravaged and inaccessible west coast of Sumatra was very restricted. In the critical first two weeks it was easier for journalists to travel on helicopters than NGO staff. The military operating in these areas did not systematically collect information about affected populations. What little information was collected was not made available to NGOs.

Only after continued complaints did this situation improve slightly. What could not be changed was the fact that humanitarian action was under the control of a party to the conflict in Aceh with serious implications for the perceived neutrality of the humanitarian community. More could have been done at the highest level to ensure a clear distinction between the roles of humanitarian actors and the Indonesian military.

Internal coordination between large INGOs

The quality of inter-agency coordination and collaboration was mixed. Initial squabbling over programming territory was unpleasant but short-lived. Several agencies had initially tried to ‘secure’ more territory than they could possibly take care of and other agencies accordingly felt pushed aside. To prevent such wrangling and to improve collaboration, the heads of most of the larger agencies decided to hold weekly informal meetings. This led to immediate improvements as, once key players had agreed what they would do and where, agencies could turn to exchanging information and logistical support.

CARE representatives in Aceh felt this informal collaboration did not go far enough and suggested a more formalised coordination structure. CARE and the Norwegian Refugee Council invited the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)² to facilitate creation of a formal NGO coordination mechanism. CARE, World Vision International OXFAM GB and Catholic Relief Services also held a two-day After Action Review to consolidate learning activities in Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand.³

Large versus small INGOs

The massive size of the humanitarian community in Aceh is apparent from the fact that the contacts directory compiled by the Humanitarian Information Centre has 203 pages.⁴ In addition to the registered INGOs (who employed around 5,000 inter-



Indonesian military with relief supplies, Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

national staff at the height of the response) there were many smaller international initiatives which bypassed the registration process, 120 previously-established Acehese NGOs and many small Indonesian volunteer groups which arrived from other regions of the country.

Coordination mechanisms established by the international community did not reach out to local agencies, especially those working in remote locations. Meetings were all held in English, without translation into the language of the host country. Unable to understand what was going on, many local NGOs soon stopped attending. The predominance of English is illustrated by the experience of CARE national staff who prepared a database of IDP sites for use by HIC. As the content was in Bahasa Indonesia it took two weeks for HIC to process the data during which time and resources were wasted as other agencies sent staff to interview IDPs and collect information which was already known.

The Indonesian government, some UN agencies and even a few large INGOs questioned the presence of small agencies and initiatives, portraying them as under-qualified and under-resourced. While a disaster of this scale attracts some questionable actors – such as the proselytising religious organisations found on the HIC directory – many small agencies contributed significantly to the overall response, filling gaps that larger agencies could not address. They would have been an even more valuable support had they been included within effective coordination mechanisms. CARE and other large INGOs tried to reach working agreements with smaller players on the

local level. This worked reasonably well, where mandates permitted, in avoiding duplication and leading to modification of questionable programme approaches. There have been cases in the past (e.g. Kosovo) where the UN assigned Areas of Responsibility to key INGOs mandated to coordinate other agencies. This successful approach should have been used in Aceh.

Pressing coordination issues

Most would agree that coordination is important but there are differing perceptions of what is meant by coordination. It may, in its most minimalist form, comprise voluntary measures to avoid duplication or it may be a more profound attempt to harmonise responses. The latter can present significant problems for NGOs like CARE in instances where the coordinating body is perceived to be non-neutral – be it the UN or a ‘coalition of the willing’, for example – and where harmonisation efforts may constrain an NGO’s requirement to act impartially. There may also be significant difficulties where the coordinating body has joint responsibility for operations and coordination. In these circumstances there may be vested interests and lack of objective focus.

Coordination structures can appear to be sound but may flounder in practice if the coordinating body is not sufficiently – and appropriately – resourced and staffed. Where those coordinating are newly-arrived and/or inexperienced and where information-sharing structures are incomplete, it is difficult to create a conducive environment for participation, collaboration and cooperation.

Forward planning

The international humanitarian community needs to be more proactive in forward planning, especially in areas such as:

- determining information requirements
- communicating standardised assessment forms
- contextualising the SPHERE minimum standards in disaster response⁵
- delineating clear linkages between coordination structures at national, provincial, local and sectoral levels
- recognising competencies in advance and planning collaboratively for division of labour and resource allocation
- recognising the critical roles of national governments and the military and clarifying their roles and responsibilities
- pre-established INGO coordination structures with coherent systems for collaboration, representation and advocacy
- outreach to local and national civil society organisations
- capacity mapping in high risk regions.

Notwithstanding the criticisms made, the overall tsunami response has been effective and it is encouraging that it has triggered institutional learning. With better forward planning and a greater will to learn the lessons of the post-tsunami response, the international community may find itself better prepared and better equipped to coordinate effectively when the next disaster occurs.

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1. www.humanitarianinfo.org/sumatra
2. www.icva.ch
3. www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/reference/docs/Care_Evaluation.pdf. These INGOs – with Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps – also work together under the Emergency Capacity Building project which aims to: improve effectiveness in sourcing, developing and retaining quality staff; enhance agency accountability; improve impact measurement; increase capacity for risk reduction and emergency preparedness; and enhance ICT capacity.
4. www.humanitarianinfo.org/sumatra/products/contacts/index.asp
5. www.sphereproject.org