

# HPG Briefing

Number 7 • December 2002

HUMANITARIAN POLICY GROUP

Nicola Reindorp  
Anna Schmidt

## About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is Europe's leading team of independent policy researchers dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice in response to conflict, instability and disasters.

## In brief

- This HPG Briefing Paper explores the changing involvement of donor governments in the coordination of humanitarian operations.
- It argues that, while donors have professed increased interest in coordination, their actions still undermine it. Coordination among donors remains weak.
- Ad hoc coordination mechanisms involving donors have done little to improve humanitarian relief.
- Such initiatives have not led to greater 'connectedness' between humanitarian and political responses to emergencies, nor have they exerted a strong influence on the volume and type of funding. Yet donors' involvement in security assessments has compromised the independence of humanitarian actors.



Overseas Development Institute

111 Westminster Bridge Road  
London SE1 7JD

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

ODI email: [odi@odi.org.uk](mailto:odi@odi.org.uk)

HPG email: [hpgadmin@odi.org.uk](mailto:hpgadmin@odi.org.uk)

Website: [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)

## Coordinating humanitarian action: the changing role of official donors

### Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been significant changes in the way official donors finance and organise their response to humanitarian crises. These changes have been dubbed the 'bilateralisation' of humanitarian response – a catchy, but often misleading, label. This Briefing Paper reports on one aspect of a larger study of these trends: how donors' roles in the coordination of humanitarian response are changing, both at field level and globally.

As levels of humanitarian aid have increased and the number of agencies providing it has multiplied, so donors have become more involved in the coordination of humanitarian action. They are doing this at a global level, establishing new mechanisms to influence humanitarian organisations, and in relation to specific humanitarian operations. This shift has been partly driven by the proliferation of agencies providing humanitarian assistance, particularly in high-profile crises. In this crowded environment, donors have shown increased interest in funding NGOs, and funding to UN agencies has been subject to greater earmarking, reducing multilaterals' room for independent manoeuvre. The involvement of military actors or assets in the provision of humanitarian assistance is an added facet, as is the drive for humanitarian action to be coherent with other policy responses to crises and complex political emergencies. These factors – the increased profile of humanitarian action, the proliferation of actors, the shifting fortunes of bilateral and multilateral agencies and the push for coherence – are all aspects of the changing face of humanitarian coordination.

### Coordination in theory and practice

In theory, the most basic aim of coordination is to reduce the duplication of programmes and to harmonise the often-conflicting strategies of the actors involved by defining common principles for action. Coordination may range from simple information-sharing and 'getting

#### Box 1: 'Friends of' groups: how friendly are they?

One important way in which donors are seeking to enhance coordination with international organisations has been through so-called 'Friends of' groups. These groups, which establish new forms of regularised interaction among donors to a particular organisation, often spring from a frustration with more formal governance mechanisms. Organisations that have these groups include OCHA, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) within the UN, and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC).

The key characteristics of these groups are their informality and their small size; the group for UNHCR, for instance, comprises the top seven donors. Their main effect appears to be to increase the information available to donor organisations and enhance their engagement in the workings of these organisations. Yet their specific purpose, rules of conduct, composition and mechanisms of accountability often remain unclear, and it is not obvious that their existence has led to the development of joint strategies for organisational support. Nor have donors used them to address problems of UN inter-agency relations.

to know you' meetings to joint policy-making and programme planning according to shared strategies.

In practice, coordination has not come easily, least of all among donors. In the developmental sphere, governments have always needed strong incentives or pressure to coordinate with one another; their performance has always been patchy; and they have always relied on multilateral organisations, notably the UN and the international financial institutions, to carry through coordination on their behalf. These difficulties are largely shared in the humanitarian domain, with the additional complication that, whereas in development aid a recipient government is typically at the heart of coordination structures, emergency aid is frequently delivered in the absence of any legitimate or capable government with authority across a national territory. Even where such authorities exist, questions of legitimacy and acceptability may encourage humanitarian agencies and coordinators to work around them.

### Coordination structures: challenges and complications

Since the early 1970s, the UN has been tasked with the coordination of international humanitarian responses. However, successive bodies, from the ill-fated Disaster Relief Coordinator in the 1970s to today's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs (OCHA), have faced major challenges in establishing effective and meaningful coordination among the diverse agencies involved in humanitarian action. OCHA's mandate includes coordination, advocacy and policy development; today it has an extensive field presence, with offices in over 30 countries. OCHA has, however, struggled: its means are insufficient, its authority is weak and unclear and its support from donor governments uncertain. Inter-agency relations remain difficult. While donors have made some efforts to strengthen UN coordination activities, their actions often undermine this. While for some donors the UN's coordination monopoly is an article of faith, for others belief in the organisation's ability to reform is slim, and their support for its position as the main coordination mechanism is not automatic.

As the role of other actors expands, so the UN's position as the pre-eminent coordinator of humanitarian action may increasingly come under threat. ECHO's attempts to raise the profile of European aid have complicated relations with other organisations, not least the UN. The European Commission in particular appears to be seeking a more active role in coordination, and in some instances seems poised to challenge the UN's position as 'coordinator by default'. This is most strongly felt in the field, where ECHO is asserting itself through its deployment of field staff, closely scrutinises how its funds are spent and has introduced new and stringent standards for reporting and proposal writing.

#### Box 2: Coordination in the field: the Afghan Support Group

This section analyses the coordination mechanisms established by donors in Afghanistan, principally the Afghan Support Group (ASG). Additional coordination arrangements have emerged with the US-led campaign in the country, but these are outside the scope of this research, which was completed by the end of 2001.

Donors to Afghanistan formed the ASG following a UN-convened conference in Turkmenistan in 1997. The primary outcome of the meeting was a proposal for Principled Common Programming (PCP), an attempt by the aid community in Afghanistan to develop a joint programme guided by agreed principles and goals. A number of other coordination mechanisms also emerged. These included the Strategic Framework, a strategy and associated coordination architecture which sought to 'reduce the disconnects' between the UN's political and assistance projects; the Afghanistan Programming Body, the overall coordinating body for PCP; and Regional Coordination Bodies. Other ad hoc structures were set up in the field or in Islamabad. The key NGO coordination bodies were all based in Peshawar, before moving back to Afghanistan with the change in regime at the end of 2001.

##### *The impact on donor behaviour*

The available evidence suggests that these various coordination bodies had little real impact on donor behaviour in Afghanistan. Strong national interests meant that the habit of cooperation ran extremely shallow, and donors repeatedly failed to agree on a shared policy. In the few instances where donors coordinated among themselves to produce a collective shift in policy, this resulted from informal discussions and groupings, rather than from the larger, formal structures.

Similarly, coordination structures appeared to have little impact on the level and type of funding donors provided. Until September 2001, funding for core humanitarian activities in Afghanistan appears to have been reasonably consistent; in effect, donors funded the same organisations for the same kinds of activities year after year. Although interviewees stressed that information-sharing on funding decisions was the basis for their engagement in coordination structures, none could point to an example of donors collectively exploring funding 'gaps' and adjusting their priorities accordingly. Nor did funding patterns reflect areas of concern as expressed in the ASG. Thus, despite declarations of concern at the human rights situation in Afghanistan, investment in rights-centred activities was limited.

##### *The impact on 'humanitarian space'*

In Afghanistan until late September 2001, the Taliban's policies arguably represented the most significant constraint to 'principled' humanitarian action. Yet at the same time, the elaboration of coordination structures appears to have done little to promote among donors the principled delivery of aid. Thus, donor governments including the UK and the US argued that poor security prevented the effective delivery of aid and ceased funding to NGOs fielding expatriates in Afghanistan. Throughout this period, guarantees of security for humanitarian personnel became central to discussions between the UN and the Taliban, while donors imposed conditions on aid as part of a wider effort to isolate the regime.

ECHO itself has no overall policy in relation to its coordination role, and there are no systematic procedures to facilitate coordination. This means that ECHO's function in field-level coordination is undefined and largely ad hoc. This gives individual personnel significant scope to interpret their coordination role, leading to accusations of micro-management and unwarranted intervention in other agencies' activities. Nor is it clear what ECHO's role should be regarding coordination within the European Commission or in relation to member states' humanitarian programmes. This is despite evaluations of the EC's humanitarian aid that consistently point to poor coordination in these areas. For example, existing structures such as the Humanitarian Aid Committee, which brings together ECHO and the EU's member states, have so far failed to exert meaningful influence over the development of Europe-wide humanitarian policy.

The proliferation of NGOs poses additional challenges to effective coordination within the humanitarian system. NGOs have been responsible for some of the most impressive examples of coordination, for example the Oxfam-led consortium for Cambodia in 1979-81 and the Emergency Relief Desk for Eritrea and Tigray in 1981-91, and have been instrumental in developing shared standards of action, as in Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, the NGO sector overall is notoriously complex, diverse, competitive and independent-minded. While selected donors

have funded NGO coordination structures, coordination is not typically a consistent or explicit part of donors' requirements of NGOs.

### Donor coordination: the weakest link?

Levels of interaction among donors are relatively high, and rising. There is, however, little evidence of truly productive coordination. While some of the reasons for this are general, some are donor-specific. The UK has no stated policy on humanitarian coordination, even though there is an implicit mandate for it in the 1997 White Paper on Development. The Department for International Development (DFID) is increasingly lobbying other donors and convening ad hoc meetings to share and disseminate its views on policy. DFID is among the larger aid departments, and so has the capacity to develop detailed policy in ways that smaller donors cannot. Denmark's Danida, for example, has a comparatively small bureaucracy and limited numbers of ground staff directly concerned with humanitarian aid. As a small donor, Danida readily admits to being influenced by the policies and strategies of its larger counterparts.

The US, the world's predominant donor of humanitarian assistance, faces perhaps the greatest coordination challenge. Its potential role in coordination is significant, not least in the field, where the US aid bureaucracy has a well-established and

### Box 3: Coordination in the field: the Somalia Aid Coordination Body

The SACB was conceived by donors at a UN meeting on Somalia in December 1993, and established in February 1994. The aim was to create an alternative to the UN framework, to include donors, UN agencies and programmes, NGOs and multilateral and regional institutions and organisations. Its Executive Committee was comparatively small, involving the US, the UK and Italy, and occasionally France and Sweden, as well as representatives of the UN Development Office for Somalia, UNICEF, WFP and the UN Political Office for Somalia. Its structures have since changed, proliferated and consolidated. Today, the SACB includes over 100 partner agencies, working through committees meeting mostly in Nairobi. These range from the most formal, the monthly meeting of the SACB Executive Committee, to small, sectorally-based working groups seeking to harmonise policy on issues such as cholera or the salaries of local staff. The SACB has no representation or permanent presence in Somalia itself.

#### *The impact on donor behaviour*

The SACB appears to have exerted a stronger influence on donors' behaviour than its counterpart mechanisms in Afghanistan, not least because powerful national interests were absent. Yet while the SACB fostered a strong sense of collegiality and cooperation among individual personnel, overall it did not enable donors to devise shared strategies to guide their aid. Some interviewees suggested that, by combining donors with UN agencies and NGOs, the SACB appears to have had the perverse effect of constraining the dialogue between donors themselves.

As for funding patterns, the picture is again unclear, not least because the SACB itself has only recently begun to gather data on resource flows. While interviewees made a number of links between the SACB and funding levels, it was difficult to relate these to available figures. Some interviewees suggested that the SACB had helped to mobilise resources because its joint alerts and statements had more credibility than would have been the case had they been issued by individual agencies. Otherwise, it was difficult to identify a clear case where the SACB had a significant impact on the funding behaviour of a major donor.

#### *The impact on 'humanitarian space'*

The SACB's commitment to unconditional emergency aid was open to question from the outset, since the US zoning policy effectively linked resource flows with security. Security questions dominated discussions in the SACB's Executive Committee, and the body's success in establishing collective responses in this area has been hailed as one of its greatest achievements. Responses to security incidents ranged from collective denouncements by the SACB to the imposition of bans on assistance by SACB members to a particular area. However, deciding when conditions had changed such that a ban could be lifted became increasingly contentious, and donors were ready to change their assessments of the security situation in order to ensure that, for political reasons, aid reached certain parts of the country. The lack of a robust and impartial mechanism for gathering and analysing intelligence, combined with the lack of consultation with operational agencies, was seen by agencies to compromise the legitimacy of donors' applying de facto conditionality on humanitarian aid.

significant presence. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) maintains large regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, whose staff members travel to emergency areas throughout their region, and the Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) has 23 Refugee Coordinators in posts around the world. However, coordination with other actors at a global level is hampered by the US government's internal coordination challenges. At the end of 1999, for instance, State Department humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan came from Political-Military Affairs (for demining); International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (for counter-narcotics activities); International Organisations (to support OCHA); Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; and the President's Interagency Council on Women. The bifurcated structure for humanitarian funding of USAID and the BPRM dilutes each agency's capacity to influence decision-making among other donors.

## Conclusions

Most donors continue to look to the UN for humanitarian coordination. Yet the effectiveness of the UN's coordination bodies is dependent on the level of political and material support they receive from donors, as well as the cooperation of other humanitarian actors. Donor governments' new-found interest in coordination in the humanitarian sphere has not led to increased support for UN coordination. Instead, donors have taken on more diverse roles, both in relation to UN agencies and in field operations. This has not necessarily been matched by a concomitant responsibility for outcomes. New donor-led coordination bodies and activities tend to be informal, and their impact is thus difficult to trace. This not only poses problems for accountability, but in the long term will also impede learning and attempts to identify best practice.

Most operational agencies welcome the involvement of donors at field level. It is clear, however, that donors have largely failed to act in an optimum way. In both Afghanistan and Somalia, under-strategised attempts at conditionality and politicised security assessments influenced the shape and distribution of humanitarian aid. Donors have not undertaken systematic advocacy in support of humanitarian access, and have failed to mobilise foreign policy assets to develop the necessary political strategies to address the causes of the complex conflicts in these countries.

In the two cases studied for this research – Afghanistan and Somalia – what is striking about the coordination structures in these two countries is also what makes them exceptional: in both of these 'failed states', the interest of donor governments in establishing coordination structures was in the first instance driven by the acute dilemma presented by the absence of a legitimate or competent interlocutor. Yet rather than signalling a proxy engagement, these structures were a manifestation of disengagement – a policy vacuum filled only by untested assertions about the incentive and disincentive powers of aid. In neither case was it clear how the coordination structures related to the political and diplomatic aspects of the response. Instead, their strikingly elaborate nature and the intensity of coordination

activities obscured the absence of coordinated policy and the underlying obstacles to coordinated strategies, and even distracted from the programme responses that the whole coordination edifice was intended to improve.

Donors' coordination efforts stem from a lack of confidence in the UN's capacity to do this job efficiently and well. Yet concerns about the UN's performance do not seem adequate to encourage systematic efforts to tackle the weaknesses of UN agencies. Meanwhile, the European Commission appears to be interested in taking a more active role, potentially in competition with the UN. While the recent communication between the EC and the UN provides a much stronger basis for coordination and collaboration, in some settings, ECHO appears poised to challenge the UN's monopoly.

Donors are in the strongest position to demand coordination from others and ensure coordination between themselves. Yet despite an increasingly formalised commitment to inter-donor coordination, they do not appear to have enhanced humanitarian coordination significantly either at field level or globally. Coordination is clearly difficult given that governments are dealing with the divergent demands of domestic constituencies. There is a wealth of theoretical and experimental work that reveals why coordination among donors can be difficult. The absence of explicit strategies for humanitarian coordination on the part of donors makes for a poor start. So too does the absence of any global strategy, similar to that which exists in relation to development coordination in the shape of the DAC, and through country-based mechanisms such as Consultative Groups and Round Tables. Thus, while there have been small steps towards establishing more policy-based approaches to humanitarian action, as yet the systems required to make this concrete in a coherent strategy remain elusive.

## Related resources

Joanna Macrae, *The Changing Role of Donors in Humanitarian Action: A Review of Trends and Issues*, HPG Briefing Paper 5, December 2002.  
Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie, *Coordination Structures in Afghanistan*, HPG Background Paper, December 2002.

Nicola Reindorp was formerly a Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute. Anna Schmidt is a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley.

This Briefing Paper is drawn from Joanna Macrae et al., *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action*, HPG Report 12 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2002). These reports are available from [www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications.html), or on request from the ODI.

Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300 Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399 Email: [odi@odi.org.uk](mailto:odi@odi.org.uk) Website: [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)