Chapter 7.

NGO Coordination

Coordination is an extremely important part of international relief activities and operational efficiency. A common military misperception regarding NGOs, is that they do not coordinate, plan, or cooperate. In fact, NGOs spend much of their time doing exactly that.

NGOs depend heavily on the NGO community in any given disaster, because individual NGOs often have limited resources and need to piggy-back transportation, communication, and security elements of their programming with other NGOs. Coordination also limits parallel programming and maximizes limited funding.

Because most international NGOs that respond to international emergencies are funded by the same UN and government donor agencies, donors will often mandate or require each of its implementing partners to cooperate and coordinate their activities. As well, many NGOs operating within the same programmatic sector or within the same region, find themselves coordinating activities, transportation, security protocols, and advocacy efforts.

As discussed in chapter 4, some NGOs will coordinate with military units. By communicating and sharing information about various regions, hotspots, or dangers that may exist within a military's AOR, NGOs can understand more fully where they can deliver humanitarian assistance. NGOs also seek geographical data, satellite imagery, airlift support, logistical support, landmine removal services, and other forms of assistance from militaries if there is a DOD mandate to do so.

NGO to NGO Coordination

Coordination within the NGO sector can be found globally. In almost every humanitarian disaster, NGOs will seek to immediately establish some form of coordination mechanism, often in the form of an NGO council, an association, cluster meetings, a weekly meeting, e-mail listserv, or website. Because NGOs are often the first to respond to a humanitarian disaster, this body may be the only way of coordinating the international community has during the initial stages of a disaster. As disaster response efforts progress during a disaster, this coordinating body, which may start as an informal group, often serves later as the contact point for military, government, and donor agencies to the NGO community in general.

Executive Summary

- NGOs coordinate and are part of a community of organizations.
- NGO association value lies in their providing a common forum for discussion and debate, coordinating a common voice and advocacy efforts, and hosting professional and technical standards.
- The International NGO Council, InterAction, and VOICE are the leading global NGO consortiums-associations.
- NGOs coordinate during both regional and national emergencies, and often share resources, information, and capabilities.
- NGOs also coordinate with the UN and both national and local governments.
- NGOs and military will interface in disasters, though what happens programmatically varies.
Most NGOs participate in at least some form of coordination during a disaster. This does not mean that NGOs give up autonomy or share programming advantages: NGOs remain independent and guard their privacy and programmatic specialties, regions, proposals, funding sources and ideas closely. In using a common language, these private organizations can benefit from pooling resources (transport cost sharing, logistics services, safety and security, communications infrastructure, and the like), sharing experiences, setting standards, and organizing campaigns in responding to a humanitarian disaster. Many smaller and medium-sized NGOs, and even large NGOs with expansive programming and capacity, find it necessary to participate and contribute to coordinating bodies that share information and services. By participating in coordination meetings, smaller NGOs with limited manpower can often piggy-back with larger NGOs for assets, information, safety, transportation, and other services. Larger NGOs often seek the skills or technical expertise that highly specialized smaller NGOs often have.

Coordinating efforts are partly a manifestation of NGO communities that exist internationally. Internationally operating NGOs are part of a community that often shares knowledge, advocacy efforts, positions, opinions, resources, and labor pools. Some NGOs partake in community efforts more than others, but most find some form of camaraderie with other NGOs as well as reasons to communicate or share resources and information. Many NGOs responding to disasters today face similar challenges and resource restraints, and it is not uncommon for NGOs in the field to share housing, warehousing, equipment, and sometimes staff.

In sum, NGOs coordinate with other NGOs to
- increase logistical and service capacity,
- share and obtain new information pertinent to a humanitarian operation,
- increase the weight of NGO community suggestions and appeals,
- reduce operational costs,
- increase security, and
- enhance efficiency and transparency.

Figure 7.1 shows, simplistically, how an NGO can increase both its message and, for example here, its logistical capacity. If NGO A decides to work alone within a disaster and conduct its programming in refugee camp design and management, it will depend entirely on its own resources. Without any organization willing to share equipment, expertise, staff, or information, this NGO will be relatively isolated in its programming, most likely aloof to any major regional changes in condition, new practices, or developments in refugee care, and other similar programs other NGOs are conducting. If an NGO chooses not to coordinate at the initial onset of a disaster, it could waste valuable time in

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119 Some NGOs exist to provide personnel or some other service to other NGOs. Air Serv and VITA, as mentioned, both provide other NGOs with technical services. This is not necessarily staff sharing, but is a form of coordination and collaboration during an disaster. Both Air Serv and VITA are funded by donors with the mandate to provide other relief and development organizations with specific services.

120 This variable chosen for its simplistic characteristic. If an NGO has no trucks and does not coordinate, it has no opportunity to obtain the services of a truck when it may need one. If an NGO has no trucks and DOES coordinate, it may have the chance to use another NGO’s truck should there be need and an agreement.
conducting assessments that others may have already conducted, or attempt to design or propose programs that have already been designed or proposed.

If NGO B coordinates with other NGOs in the region of concern, it can join in a consolidated appeal to donors and governments involved in the disaster. When speaking together with other NGOs, NGO B is increasing its capacity to advocate for the programs it thinks are most valuable during the disaster. Using the logistical capacity variable to express benefits for working together, it can be seen that when NGO B joins other NGOs, it has at its disposal shared convoy and cargo space, warehouses, information that may flow other NGOs working in various surrounding regions, communication equipment, and the like. When more NGOs work together, per-NGO operation costs are reduced and more (efficient) services can be delivered. The graph on the right of figure 7.1 shows an increase in both advocacy strength and logistical capacity.\footnote{The term \textit{advocacy} is popular among NGOs. Although traditionally used by those organizations advocating for populations or individuals suffering from human rights abuses, abject poverty or political oppression, advocacy now is used in the context of consolidating NGO messages, demands or desires when communicating with donor agencies and government entities. NGO associations, like InterAction (explained in more depth below), tout that advocacy is a major program benefit for members. By advocating for funding, standards, safety, working conditions, and respect, the U.S. NGO consortium is benefiting its members. Single NGOs do not have the access, resources, or the luxury to lobby, advocate, or consolidate strong messages from many organizations.}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure71}
\caption{Increasing NGO Message and Capacity}
\end{figure}

\section*{NGO to Donor or Government Agency Coordination}

In addition to coordinating within the NGO community, NGOs coordinate with lead UN agencies, government agencies, and other international organizations. Although an NGO may be required to work closely with the organization that is funding its programming, information sharing between the NGO community and the national government and UN agencies is also valuable to all organizations involved. Every organization depends on information during a disaster, and because
no one organization (NGO, IO, or otherwise) can obtain or manage all pertinent information in every sector; NGOs, donors, IOs, and the UN tend to provide and receive information in formal or informal relationships with each other. The UN, IOs, and government agencies all have access to large levels of information, normally dealing with funding, political settings, large-scale refugee movements, repatriation patterns, and region-wide public health concerns. NGOs, on the other hand, have specific on-the-ground data, understand refugee-IDP sentiments, can detect community or subregional instability, health dangers or outbreaks, and know the lay of the land when implementing relief or development activities.

The preferred mechanism of coordination for NGOs in a disaster is the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, whose mission is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors. OCHA was established by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 46/182) to strengthen the United Nations’ response to complex emergencies and natural disasters and to improve the overall effectiveness of the UN’s humanitarian operations in the field. It supports and facilitates the work of UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and works closely with host governments, supporting them in their lead role for organizing humanitarian response in emergency situations.

In a disaster, OCHA focuses on humanitarian coordination, related policy issues, advocacy, information outlets, and funding.

- At the country level, OCHA may appoint a humanitarian coordinator (HC) with the overall responsibility for ensuring that response efforts are well organized and coherent. This coordinator works with government, international organizations, NGOs, and affected communities. They preside in an established OCHA office set up to support the HC.
- On policy issues related to humanitarian action, OCHA will support the development of a common policy position among humanitarian agencies and at the international level through the United Nations.
- In advocacy on humanitarian issues, OCHA serves as the speaker on specific areas concerning the protection of civilians, prevention of displacement, disaster preparedness and the efficiency of humanitarian response. Each year OCHA determines its advocacy priorities

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123 Ibid.
which can include (but may not be limited to), internal displacement, climate change, and gender-based violence.

- OCHA is the lead for information outlets for humanitarian actors. The following outlets are the most comprehensive and up-to-date networks for all humanitarian information.
  - The Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) provides news and information through text and radio services (see www.irinnews.org).
  - ReliefWeb is the global hub for time-critical humanitarian information on complex emergencies and natural disasters, and its maps and reports are some of the most valuable, well-organized information this site has (see www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm).
  - OCHA Online provides an overview of key issues and challenges facing the humanitarian community and hosts OCHA's advocacy materials (see http://ochaonline.un.org).

- As to funding for humanitarian action, OCHA is active in improving the way in which the international humanitarian system seeks and manages funding. Through its participation in the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative OCHA aims to contribute to improving the quality and quantity of humanitarian funding. The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), The Consolidated Appeals and The Financial Tracking Service (FTS) are all managed by OCHA.

Figure 7.2 presents generally the types of information that both the NGO and the UN-donor-military communities have. Because the difference in the type of information obtained during a disaster by NGOs and UN-donor-military entities is substantial, the market of information valuable to each party is correspondingly large.

**Figure 7.2 Information Types**
The U.S. military will want to participate in a coordinating mechanism—formal or informal—to obtain ground-level information and potentially valuable subregional population movement numbers, health problems, and ground-level themes otherwise not available. Information about funding sources, political and economic events, donor priorities, macro-scale intelligence, and other normally inaccessible information. In the cases of conflict-mediated disasters, information on unexploded munitions, landmine data, troop movements, border crossing changes, checkpoints, and other specific military information that may make NGO response unsafe, change the political landscape in displacement camps, or change displacement flows is all important to NGOs in effectively meeting the needs of displaced persons.

By working together, all entities can walk away from coordination meetings with more information than they contributed.

With regard to advocacy, the NGO community within its working groups and cluster meetings will participate in an information exchange forum and then advocate decisions, demands, or ideas on behalf of the group with regard to the needs of the displaced or at-risk persons. Without undermining each member NGO’s autonomy, the association makes each voice stronger, and bolsters the NGO community presence when dealing with other large bureaucratic entities, such as the UN, militaries, and government agencies. Figure 6 shows how NGOs often work together in a common forum or coordinating mechanism that then serves as a direct advocate or contact point for other entities within a disaster setting.

### NGO-Military Interface

Since 2001, new and revised DOD instructions and guidance have changed how the military interacts with NGOs and how NGOs interface or interact with foreign militaries. This subject is dealt with in-depth chapter 18 of this guidebook.

### NGO Coordination at Home

Much of the coordination within the NGO community is handled in major capitals in western countries. Although most of an NGO’s staff is deployed in disaster or development programs around the globe, experts, policymakers, academics, and NGO leaders are working with each other to strengthen performance, awareness, and funding levels for humanitarian affairs. More simply, NGOs come together to think; to advertise and to lobby; share lessons learned, experiences, challenges, and reports; and to create standards.

Two coordinating bodies especially important outside an immediate disaster setting are InterAction and VOICE. Both organizations serve as consortiums of international NGOs and provide a range of services to their members. A third, the International Council of Volunteer Associations, overlaps with InterAction and VOICE but is more broad than either.
• InterAction (www.interaction.org) is a consortium of 170-plus U.S.-based NGOs and NPOs that operate internationally. Some of the largest and the smallest NGOs in the world are members of InterAction, with annual operating budgets ranging from less than $1 million to more than $400 million. From specific child-rights advocacy NGOs to the larger disaster response NGOs, InterAction is the central place where many of the leading NGOs in the United States congregate and visit for information, access, and assistance. Specifically, member organizations list programming activities in disaster relief, and others list programs in refugee and migration sectors. InterAction hosts forums, an annual conference, and working committees; coordinates closely with the U.S. government, U.S. military, and the UN; and provides a large body of technical resource for member NGOs. Located in Washington, DC, it spends a considerable amount of energy lobbying specific government agencies for more attention, funding, and support for international assistance programming. InterAction is a large supporter and contributor to the Sphere Project. It also has an extensive resource collection on civil military relations that offers downloadable guidelines and policy briefs possibly helpful to the military who find themselves in the same area as humanitarian aid workers (see www.interaction.org/civmil).

• VOICE (www.ngovoice.org), or Volunteer Organizations in Cooperation in Emergencies, the European counterpart of InterAction, is based in Brussels, Belgium, and is Europe’s central NGO coordination point and thought and activity center. Its website provides listings of all members, their websites, and countries of operation. VOICE publishes a widely read journal, The Humanitarian Review (published every two months), that normally finds its way to the hands of many relief workers, disaster specialists, policymakers, and think-tank employees. Many of VOICE’s members are also members of InterAction, normally as national chapter organizations or parts of the same umbrella organization.

• ICVA (www.icva.ch), the International Council of Volunteer Associations, is a European-based and internationally targeted association established in 1962 that provides many of the same services InterAction and VOICE do, but with a wider and more varied membership list. Member organizations are involved in human rights and legal issues, advocacy, refugee and migration work, education, democracy and governance issues, and other sectors not covered in this manual.

Both InterAction and VOICE provide their member NGOs with an extensive array of services. These two bodies differ from regional NGO associations because they conduct business as an organization with independent missions, objectives and activities that may not be directly from a member NGO. InterAction and VOICE are organizations in and of themselves that exist to serve their members, but that also carry on activities aimed at promoting the organization and those objectives set forth upon foundation.

Why the fuss about these organizations? They represent member NGOs and serve as pools of thinking and resource for the NGO community, but also as stark proponents of specific efforts that normally include increasing government foreign aid budgets and levels of awareness for specific emergencies. InterAction and VOICE are lobby organizations in Washington, DC, and European capitals, and are
now integral parts of how western governments craft their foreign assistance budgets and priorities. As well, they serve as conduits of information to the public, often sponsoring advertisements or awareness campaigns nationally to promote proper donation contributions or support for their member NGOs internationally.