

Non-Governmental Organizations and Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance

by Peter Macalister-Smith

Humanitarian assistance in armed conflict and other disasters can involve a great variety of institutions and participants all operating simultaneously, including national civil defence organizations, military units, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Coordination of humanitarian assistance is therefore inevitably a complex and delicate matter, all the more so because the concept of coordination, like that of disaster preparedness generally, is relevant to both donor and recipient parties.

The success of coordination can do much to remove the confusion which may accompany humanitarian assistance operations, although to a certain extent some such confusion is by definition inherent in all disaster situations where relief actions are required. Since it is not questioned that the overall effectiveness of humanitarian assistance operations can be improved by coordination designed to take into account the contribution of the many different organizations and forms of relief administration involved, an important problem of humanitarian action at the global level is to define and to achieve the most appropriate national and international coordination mechanisms.

Non-governmental organizations

As far as NGOs are concerned, the subject of coordination of humanitarian assistance includes both coordination *inter se*, or within the non-governmental sector, and wider coordination in which non-governmental actions are coordinated with those of the other organizations and actors involved, including governments, in what might be described as the global humanitarian system.

The many NGOs active in humanitarian affairs undoubtedly constitute an important part of the global humanitarian network. It is well known that NGOs are among the best-informed groups. They can function by bringing problems to light, by mobilizing contributions and by taking direct action. NGOs work in all types of humanitarian situations, and in some respects they are less circumscribed by constraints than official bodies. However, the NGO sector is not homogeneous, but consists of organizations representing many different interests. The wide diversity of humanitarian NGOs enables resources to be provided rapidly in case of need from a variety of sources, but this very diversity also introduces a further degree of confusion into humanitarian operations.

Some humanitarian NGOs such as the church groups are themselves federations representing their members in a centrally organized process in which coordination functions are already in-built. More generally, cooperation and coordination between NGOs themselves, and between NGOs and the other organizations and actors involved in the humanitarian field, has always been extensive and it remains so today. Such cooperation and coordination is based on a long tradition of shared experiences; it is an essential feature of everyday working activities, and it continues to be developed to include not only planning but also operational aspects of humanitarian action.

Notwithstanding the considerable competition in humanitarian matters, the major international humanitarian NGOs have increasingly attempted to work out among themselves methods of cooperation and coordination applicable to the various phases of humanitarian action. This is being achieved gradually and without creating a "super-organization". At the same time, it is appropriate and important to consider the place of NGOs in coordination of humanitarian assistance in the wider sense, in which the other organizations and actors are involved.

National responsibilities

Important responsibilities for coordination of humanitarian assistance are exercised at the national level, within the framework of which NGOs must always operate. Indeed, it seems that an improved international system can be based only on the development of successful solutions at the national level, although of course national and international efforts should be complementary and mutually reinforcing. Any success in achieving better coordination between the international agencies involved can easily be destroyed by the failure or the shortcomings of a national coordination office in a particular disaster situation. Here, the problems of local coordination in the field are a special subject for attention.

National relief coordination includes on the one hand the general aspect of coordination procedures between the country concerned and the external or foreign level, and on the other hand the specific aspect of coordination functions in the course of a given relief operation. In both cases it is necessary to take into account not only bilateral and multilateral activity but also the existence of official and private actors. Although the national authorities concerned should provide the principal coordinating mechanisms, in practice a variety of governmental, Red Cross and Red Crescent, and private or non-governmental approaches and arrangements are often to be found coexisting. In some countries, the non-governmental agencies active in relief have set up their own coordination mechanisms, with or without the involvement of the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society.

In countries where sufficient attention has been given to pre-disaster planning, the necessary coordination functions are likely to be adequately performed. The national plan setting out emergency relief procedures should envisage coordination through a central responsible office. The functions of a coordinating office established by the authorities have been given much attention by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. A particular duty of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is to ensure that a national plan exists and that it includes the necessary elements relating to coordination.

Red Cross and Red Crescent approaches

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is involved in coordination of humanitarian assistance at all levels: national, bilateral, regional and international. Such coordination, although strictly internal in objective and effect, reaches out beyond the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement since all coordination functions must be designed to take into account the activities of the many other organizations and actors concerned. This reflects the simple fact that, like individuals, no organization can act in isolation but must constantly seek awareness of the actions of others in order to be effective.

At the national level, the Red Cross or Red Crescent Society is often a major operating agency if not the principal one responsible for relief action, and hence a National Society is likely to have a central position in the national system of coordination. At the regional level, coordination of humanitarian assistance falls within the general field of disaster-related cooperation, which includes not only relief but also preparedness and prevention activities. At the international level, not only does coordination take place between the various components of the Movement, but at this level assistance by the Movement is also coordinated with that of other organizations and actors in the global humanitarian system. In practice, this general aspect of relief coordination includes relationships, *inter alia*, with numerous NGOs.

As to internal coordination, the *Principles and Rules for Red Cross Disaster Relief* form a detailed code designed to regulate the planning, coordination and operation of the Movement's relief policy and operations.¹ The Principles and Rules provide that every relief operation carried out by the Movement in situations of war, civil war or internal disturbance shall be regulated by the provisions of the 1969 Agreement between the League of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC which specifies certain of their respective functions.² This Agreement, which has its basis in the fact that possible areas of overlap of functions between the ICRC and the League can arise, recognizes that when a neutral

¹ Text in *International Red Cross Handbook* (12th ed., Geneva 1983), pp 488-494.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 475-480.

intermediary is necessary, it is up to the ICRC to act as coordinator. In other situations, the coordination functions of the League itself are designed to facilitate the international assistance provided through the National Society network, these functions deriving naturally from the League's federal role within the Movement. The Principles and Rules emphasize that the Movement should endeavour to take into account the help given by other national and international organizations, while remaining true to its principles.³

Role of the United Nations

In 1971 the United Nations General Assembly established the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (Undro), and laid down the Co-ordinator's mandate.⁴ Undro was created to be the focal point in the UN system for disaster-related matters. All organizations within the UN system, as well as other organizations concerned, were invited to cooperate with the new office. Recognizing that non-governmental activities could be coordinated not only on an *inter se* basis but also with those of governments, the resolution establishing Undro authorized the Disaster Relief Co-ordinator to coordinate UN assistance with that given by NGOs.⁵

Under the terms of the Co-ordinator's mandate, Undro was thus brought into contact not only with UN bodies and governments, but also with NGOs. Undro has relations with most elements of the international humanitarian system, of which the United Nations is only one part. However, the type of coordination which may originally have been envisaged by the United Nations has not yet been developed, although positive developments have taken place and contacts and cooperation between the governmental and non-governmental sectors continue to be expanded. Undro regularly convenes information meetings on operational situations where humanitarian assistance is being provided, at which representatives of governments, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs are present.

³ Principles and Rules for Red Cross Disaster Relief, para. 6 in *International Red Cross Handbook*, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

⁴ UN General Assembly Res. 2816 (XXVI) of 14 December 1971.

⁵ *Ibid.*, sub-para. 1 (a), (c) and (g).

Coordination possibilities between the United Nations and NGOs also exist by virtue of the consultative arrangements with NGOs which have been laid down by the UN itself and by various UN specialized agencies and subsidiary organs. Article 71 of the UN Charter sets the basis for regulating NGO association with the work of the UN Economic and Social Council.⁶ The system of consultation is intended to permit the securing of information and advice from organizations with particular competences. In the humanitarian field, several UN bodies have established particularly close relations with NGOs, and with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. While the difference between truly effective participation on the one hand and the present arrangements for consultation on the other hand is still a fundamental one, considerable progress has been made in the area of direct collaboration in humanitarian matters. At the same time, the main contribution of NGOs in the humanitarian field remains outside the UN framework and firmly within their own sphere of activity.

Role of other organizations

Several regional organizations have taken measures relating to coordination of humanitarian assistance within their region, in which NGOs may be involved. The association of NGOs with governmental bodies, for example in receiving funds for specified purposes or in carrying out operational tasks on behalf of such bodies, greatly increase the scope of NGO actions. Such association extends not only the overall contribution of the NGO sector in humanitarian matters, but also the scope of and possibilities for coordination of humanitarian assistance. Particular examples of developments which could be mentioned in this regard include measures taken within the Council of Europe, by the European Economic Community and by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Other governmental organizations

⁶ Art. 71 of the Charter of the United Nations: "The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Member of the United Nations concerned."—See also UN Economic and Social Council Res. 1296 (XLIV) of 27 May 1968, which revised the system of consultation.

such as the Organization of African Unity, the Organization of American States and the Association of South-East Asian Nations have all at times acted in a general coordinating capacity with regard to humanitarian assistance, including coordination with regard to NGO activities.

Some conclusions

The great variety of organizations capable of contributing to humanitarian assistance, as well as the great potential scale and complexity of relief operations, clearly demonstrate the need for coordination of humanitarian assistance. Although major responsibilities for the planning, implementation and coordination of relief action rest with national authorities, the concept itself of international coordination of humanitarian assistance is not in question.

For these reasons alone, and whatever future developments take place in the field of humanitarian action, it seems certain that the need to maintain and improve the coordination mechanisms at the national and international levels will remain for the foreseeable future.

Yet while the need for coordination within the international relief system is generally accepted, it has proved difficult in practice to define coordination more closely, and to agree on the necessary action. Probably no one would deny being in favour of coordination of humanitarian assistance in principle, but the real problems arise in practice in determining who shall coordinate and who shall be coordinated.

The political problems inherent in many situations where humanitarian assistance is required create additional difficulties for all coordination activities. Indeed, even the basic task of transmitting information can raise not only questions of the limits of institutional independence, for example with respect to verification or assessment of needs, but also the possibility of differences with official sources, thereby further complicating the process of coordination.

Within this process NGOs have a major role, both in terms of coordination in the non-governmental sector and with regard to coordination with the other organizations and actors involved in humanitarian assistance.

Despite all the difficulties, the potential benefits to be gained from effective coordination of humanitarian assistance are many and great. This potential suggests that continuing efforts to strengthen the system of coordination of humanitarian assistance are likely to be made by all concerned, taking into account the lessons derived from ever-accumulating operational experience.

Peter Macalister-Smith

Peter Macalister-Smith is a jurist and senior editor employed since 1982 at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, Heidelberg, Federal Republic of Germany. He is a member of the Editorial Committee of the Encyclopedia of Public International Law. After obtaining his doctorate in the United Kingdom, he was engaged as a staff member of the secretariat of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva. He has published widely in scholarly journals on topics of international law and international relations, specializing in the work of humanitarian organizations. Dr. Macalister-Smith is the author of *International Humanitarian Assistance* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff; Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute 1985).