Inter-Agency Access Mechanisms
Coordinating to enhance humanitarian access

From bureaucratic pressures to logistical impediments, access challenges rarely affect a single agency in isolation. Rare also are the cases in which they can be resolved singlehandedly, without transferring risk to other humanitarian actors, creating future dilemmas and ultimately curtailing the population's own ability to access the assistance they need. To seek common solutions to challenges, NRC regularly engages with other actors on access issues through formal and informal coordination mechanisms. To ensure that the organisation is engaging in the most effective way, NRC recently reviewed inter-agency access mechanisms to find out what the current state of access coordination is, what works well, and what lessons can be learned.

Background

NRC has been heavily engaged in inter-agency access coordination initiatives in many of the contexts in which it works. In 2016, NRC commissioned a review of inter-agency access mechanisms to make informed decisions on where to focus efforts and advocacy and how to engage. This briefing note offers a summary of the resulting report written by Kathryn O'Rourke. The research looked at initiatives in Afghanistan, Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan in depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 stakeholders from NRC, other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the United Nations (UN) and donor agencies.

Strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination

Inter-agency access coordination mechanisms come in many different shapes and aim to tackle challenges in different ways. Some have ambitious goals of working towards common access strategies, while others aim to tackle

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logistical or bureaucratic impediments, or resolve civil-military issues. Some groups are formal, others are informal, some comprise of NGOs exclusively, while others include UN agencies. Despite the broad range of approaches examined, interviews revealed that perceived strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to access coordination were largely similar in each of the four contexts.

Generally, there was a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the lack of progress made by formal inter-agency access mechanisms. Interviewees across the four contexts made references to the burden of multiple meetings and frustration with the repetition of access-related discussions taking place in different coordination fora. Most agreed that merely turning up to meetings is insufficient, highlighting the need for organisations to commit financial and human resources to joint work, as well as the need for clarity on what concrete outcomes can realistically be achieved through coordination mechanisms.

The lack of tangible progress made by formal inter-agency access mechanisms appeared to be linked to the fact that frank discourse on access issues was often inhibited by lack of coherence and trust among group members. Many participants are reluctant to openly share sensitive information about security, local networks, and operating procedures in formal coordination meetings. In particular, some NGO respondents expressed concern about the risk of being closely associated with UN coordination mechanisms, especially where the UN's political objectives were seen to compromise its neutrality. In such contexts NGOs are likely to have more confidence in NGO-only access coordination mechanisms, making them more effective than NGO-UN mechanisms.

The importance of NGO-only coordination is reflected in the success of the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) in Afghanistan, Somalia and CAR. INSO is seen to play an essential role in consolidating information from

disparate sources on security-related access constraints. Their robust reciprocal relationships, protection of individual identities and tight restrictions on the dissemination of data instils confidence among NGOs that they can balance the benefits of sharing access-related information, while minimising the potential risks to their own operations.

In several contexts NGO-only coordination mechanisms used their leverage to successfully advocate for the maintenance of humanitarian space for NGOs. The South Sudan NGO Forum built constructive relations with a range of authorities, using these to lobby against the imposition of punitive bureaucratic impediments. Recently, the Forum's advocacy towards the transitional government is believed to have influenced revision of proposed laws that threatened to impede humanitarian agencies' independence and operations. In Somalia in late 2015, NGOs working in Puntland came under increasing pressure to accept local authorities' intervention in their operations, jeopardising humanitarian independence. After attempts to negotiate bilaterally were unsuccessful, the Somalia NGO Consortium stepped in. They advocated on behalf of the wider community, directly towards relevant government authorities, as well as enlisting the support of UN leadership and the donor community. The coordinated action led by the Consortium shielded individual NGOs from further repercussions.

It should be noted, however, that even those NGO-only coordination mechanisms that could point to tangible successes in overcoming access constraints had difficulty in ensuring transparency in discussion and reporting. This seemed to be linked to concerns about how information could potentially be misused, as well as scepticism about the value of sharing information to achieve operational or policy outcomes. This reluctance to share information limited the ability of coordination mechanisms'

to analyse access challenges and identify good practice.

Related to concerns about sharing sensitive information with broader groups, many interviewees stressed the importance of developing informal networks to exchange access-related information. These are typically grounded in trusted, personal relationships and are pragmatically-oriented, with logisticians, security and safety advisors, and country directors interacting closely with their respective counterparts in other agencies. In some contexts, such as CAR, informal networks were seen as more effective than formal coordination mechanisms, particularly during emergency response, when formal mechanisms were seen as too slow to be useful.

Training was frequently cited as an example of a practical benefit that access initiatives can facilitate. Understanding of the core humanitarian principles, approaches to promoting acceptance, and negotiation skills were seen to be widely lacking across the contexts studied. In CAR, OCHA, supported by the Comité de Coordination des ONGI en RCA (CCO) are leading an initiative to counteract this by building capacity among aid workers for better access through comprehensive training on conflict sensitivity, do no harm, humanitarian principles, protection mainstreaming, mediation processes and negotiation. Training graduates are expected to enhance their own agencies' ability to secure access, and improve coordination by sharing information and learning from each other's experience.

Finally, it should be noted that in all contexts those interviewed acknowledged the importance of logistics clusters and the WFP-managed UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) in facilitating access to difficult to reach areas. UNHAS was commonly seen as vital for the transportation of personnel and supplies to areas that are only accessible by air because of conflict and insecurity, or lack of adequate road infrastructure.

Main Findings

Despite the dissatisfaction often expressed by field-based practitioners when discussing the weaknesses of existing coordination mechanisms, the review demonstrated that both formal and informal mechanisms are clearly useful. Across the contexts studied, and in light of the complexities imposed by contextual constraints in each country, inter-agency mechanisms demonstrated their worth in a variety of ways. This was particularly evident in capacity building and negotiation with authorities to maintain humanitarian space.

However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to access coordination that will reliably yield effective outcomes across all humanitarian contexts. Developing and advocating for tailor-made approaches, which include both formal and informal initiatives, as well as mechanisms exclusively for NGO coordination, is most likely to promote open information sharing and effective collaboration. It is also vitally important to set concrete objectives, and produce tangible results that demonstrate the value of coordination. Inter-agency access initiatives will only succeed if organisations continue to constructively engage and seek to tackle challenges together.

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