UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Coordination skills, methods and good practices

07 June 2024

Key points

- Understand the demands of a coordination role and the expectations of the persons we serve, your partner constituency, and UNHCR's and humanitarian leadership. Bear in mind that coordination is a service and requires service orientation
- Adapt a coordination role to context, applicable coordination model and coordination level. Bear in mind the differences between refugee coordination and cluster coordination settings
- See the coordination role as part of the wider emergency coordination system in place and work with other coordinators in UNHCR and the wider system. Create linkages, not siloes
- As a coordinator, stay level-headed, pragmatic and focused on the essentials and priorities in a fast-paced, busy and chaotic emergency response. Don't get bogged down in details and focus on WINs – What is Important Now
- Remember that a coordinator's networks and relationships are an essential part of UNHCR's leadership and reputation. Continuously invest in those and maintain good communication within UNHCR and with partners even amidst the pressures of an emergency

1. Overview

Sector or Cluster coordination are inter-agency roles required in refugee, internal displacement and mixed emergencies. Typically, coordination roles, which may be needed at national and sub-national levels, need to fulfill a range of core functions. They include support to service delivery, informing strategic decision-making, planning and strategy development, response monitoring and reporting, contingency planning and preparedness, capacity building and advocacy. Coordination roles are demanding. They span the spectrum from strategic to operational responsibilities and require a high degree of consensus-building, collaboration and alignment, both within UNHCR – the coordination lead agency – and with a broad array of stakeholders. As a

coordinator, it is important to bear in mind that the leadership of a sector lies with the agency i.e. with the Representative of a country operation. It is key to the success of a coordination function to engage the leadership and manage this relationship proactively.

Coordinators work without formal hierarchy. Thus, to successfully perform the core functions, and help attain *quality coordination* coordinators must master a range of practical skills and competencies, including:

- Leadership,
- Stakeholder management and negotiation,
- Empowering and building trust,
- Communication,
- Conflict resolution,
- Decision-making.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Humanitarian coordination systems, whether it is the refugee coordination model (RCM) or the IASC humanitarian cluster coordination model, are designed for emergency responses. Contingency planning and preparedness are a core function of any Cluster or Sector, and during and immediately an emergency response, coordination is essential given the increase in number and diversity of responders, the heightened pace of the response and the various strategic and operational shifts emergency contexts typically bring along.

An effective emergency response hinges to a great extent on quality coordination. Subject matter expertise plus a suitable and well applied skillset help ensure such quality coordination. They enable a coordinator to balance the need for clear direction and speedy decision-making with consensus building and participatory approaches, to exercise sound judgment, and to undertake effective prioritization, delegation and time management in often time pressured situations with significant workloads. Emergency coordination roles are often under particular scrutiny requiring even more emphasis on quality coordination to achieve humanitarian objectives and forego eventual reputational risks for the organization as lead agency and related responsibility as Provider of Last Resort.

3. Main guidance

The main purposes of coordination in emergency settings are to increase the effectiveness, scale and reach of the response, accountability of the response, and adherence to standards of humanitarian action for quality and coherence. Thus, a main objective of a coordinator is to foster collaboration and alignment across constituencies on strategy, response plan and the actual response.

A coordinator does not have authority over sector or cluster members. Legitimacy – and ultimately leadership by the agency – is gained through respect and trust in one’s quality coordination work and the extent to which coordination is seen and perceived as a service or support. Knowledge of the humanitarian situation, subject matter expertise, understanding of the

applicable coordination architecture are important. However, they must be complemented with a broad range of skills that are equally important to achieve the purposes of coordination.

How one uses and applies these skills and manages and regulates one's strengths and weaknesses will determine the coordination style. This style will need to be highly adaptable to the context in which you coordinate and your interlocutors. We describe below the necessary skillsets as well as tried and tested practices and methods in more detail, which can help a coordinator to deploy them more effectively.

1. Leadership

Leadership essentials in coordination settings

Leadership is the ability to provide a team with a vision, create alignment of its members towards it, and enhance commitment to its realization. It includes the capacity to manage changes, make or facilitate sound and timely decisions, enhance accountability for them and motivate partners to achieve planned results. As a coordinator you will need to constantly bear in mind that the agency is the lead, and your role as coordinator is to enable the agency's leadership through quality coordination.

Effective leadership in a coordination context comes with two key considerations.

First, a coordinator does not have formal authority over cluster or sector members. Authority, or the ability to foster alignment and commitment, must be built through legitimacy, trust and respect in the role and its inter-agency nature and voice. This includes, in particular, the reality – and perception – of the coordinator's work as a service to enable the collective to better achieve humanitarian goals.

Second, context will to a great extent dictate the style of leadership required. Important elements of context include:

- The humanitarian situation. This includes its extent and gravity, its changeability as well as the extent to which the response is sufficient and adequate at a given point in time.
- The capacities and expectations of cluster and sector members as regards the level of coordination. Typically, this goes beyond mere information sharing, and will often stop short of operational collaboration and joint work. The preference is usually general alignment under a common strategy without giving up operational autonomy.
- The humanitarian architecture. This includes the applicable coordination model (RCM, IASC, mixed situations) and level of coordination (national, sub-national). In IDP and mixed situations, the roles of OCHA and the HC as well as the specific role and responsibility of UNHCR as lead agency and provider of last resort need to be clear to a coordinator. Crucially, it includes also the Government's appetite for leadership and its articulation with the existing coordination mechanisms and in keeping with humanitarian principles.

Collaborative leadership and decision-making is the norm in coordination settings, requiring a significant difference in style compared to partner management for UNHCR's own programmes.

This being said, it is equally important to realize that certain contexts demand more robust

interventions by coordinators to steer the team towards an agreed-upon direction. This is the case for instance, when the humanitarian response lacks a coherent strategy or when the existing strategy needs to quickly adapt to a sudden change of context. It can also be the case when existing humanitarian gaps are not being covered with sufficient speed and adequacy.

Relation to UNHCR

The relation of a sector/cluster coordinator to UNHCR does often raise questions. This is due to the dual role UNHCR has in coordination contexts: UNHCR leads the coordination of a certain sector, and UNHCR responds in that sector. As a coordinator, the relationship with and in UNHCR must be managed at three levels – vis a vis UNHCR's operations, with UNHCR's leadership (which is at the same time the cluster lead), and in IDP or mixed settings also the relationship with the coordinators of the other Clusters UNHCR leads.

- With UNHCR operations: As Coordinator, it is important to bear in mind that the role is an inter-agency one and about enabling the collective response of a cluster or sector, and not to represent UNHCR's agency interests. As an example, UNHCR as an agency is a member of a sector/cluster and must be represented by someone other than the coordinator. At the same time, UNHCR as agency is the provider of last resort in a sector/cluster and it is essential for a coordinator to invoke this role of UNHCR in a timely manner to cover critical gaps, which requires strong bilateral relations and awareness of the capacity of UNHCR's operations to exercise this role in a given context.
- With UNHCR's leadership: The leadership of a cluster lies with the agency i.e. with the Representative of a country operation. It is key to the success of a coordination function to engage the leadership and manage this relationship proactively by supporting the Representative's leadership role and participation at the HCT, leveraging the system-complementarity of UNHCR's leadership and coordination roles. In particular on vision and strategy setting, it is essential to have UNHCR's leadership engaged. It is helpful for both, UNHCR in its agency and its coordination role to have national-level coordinators as part of its Senior Management to inform strategy setting and keep UNHCR's operations abreast of the inter-agency context to assist in positioning and resourcing decisions.
- With other UNHCR coordinators: In cluster contexts, UNHCR usually leads three Clusters – Protection, CCCM and Shelter. Adopting a high level of collaboration between the three Coordinators, and even pursue a Tri-Cluster approach is generally advisable to yield strategic and operational dividends.

Specific leadership skills

A few specific skills are a crucial component of an effective leaders' skillset, among them:

- Strategic planning and vision. This entails the ability to understand the broad humanitarian and operational context, to think strategically about humanitarian outcomes and to facilitate and communicate a clear general direction and objectives for the cluster or sector. The desired approach to strategy setting is, in general, inclusive and collaborative. Context will dictate the extent to which the coordinator needs to provide guidance on substantive issues and steer the team more directly. In any case, strong analytical, communication and drafting skills will lend authority to the coordinators' role.

- Consensus-building and negotiation. Consensus is the default decision-making mechanism in sector or cluster settings. A coordinator will need to understand the objectives and interests behind different positions and find creative ways to help members achieve effective and reasonable middle grounds through persuation and negotiation.
- Planning and organizing. An effective coordinator is able to organize self and others over the short, medium and long term. The workload of a coordinator can be immense. It is essential to know how and what to prioritize, how to focus on essentials and avoid being bogged down in details. A strong coordinator determines quickly what can be delegated and how to manage time and competing priorities.

Methods, tips and good practices

- Knowledge is power, and can assist in a coordinator's leverage in the absence of a formal authority. This includes the nuts and bolts of the coordination endeavour, as well as of the humanitarian architecture and key partners. Importantly, it entails first hand knowledge of the context, conflict/disaster dynamics and ensuing humanitarian situation, priorities and gaps, across the most important geographical areas.
- The coordination role can be extremely demanding. Often, a coordinator does not have all the skills, knowledge or time to carry out all necessary tasks. Delegation is of the essence. Be realistic and transparent when workload, timelines or demands are not manageable. Develop clarity as regards needs for support staff and the methods to obtain it, either through UNHCR or through partners.
- Remember that leadership style and preferred methods need to be redefined and reoriented when necessary, according to what works and how the context evolves.
- Strategic Advisory Groups (SAGs) and technical working groups are useful tools for delegation, where they do not proliferate.
- Be quick and flexible as regards the establishment of subnational coordination structures. Be mindful, however, of the need to avoid an excess of coordination layers or bureaucracy.
- Be mindful that coordination is, above all, a service to operational agencies. Adopt a "servant leader" approach, being a convener and a role model as regards teamwork. Be mindful that you are not a project manager. Approach complex issues without necessarily having a preconceived outcome in mind, and objectively guide toward one.
- Be supportive to partners. Whenever possible and reasonable, volunteer to do leg work. Be reliable and do what you committed to. Be responsive and answer requests on time. Be accountable and adhere to agreed actions and outcomes.
- Go often to the field and talk to forcibly displaced and stateless populations, besides of more formal missions. A useful rule of thumb is to do it at least once a week, seeking to progressively cover most of the applicable relevant area. Invite partners, taking into account inclusivity, the relations you want to build, issues you want to learn, and the need to foster collaboration. Field visits are often handy to identify key humanitarian actors who, for one reason or another, do not attend cluster or sector meetings. Be an AAP and participation champion.
- Be a champion of prioritizing delivery over process.
- Self-awareness and ability to manage oneself is of the essence. Few things transmits leadership as the ability to come across as level-headed, fair and calm. It is often difficult to obtain straight feedback from partners on your performance, including positive feedback when deserved. it is important not to take this personally.

2. Stakeholder management and negotiation

An effective coordinator knows and manages a broad range of stakeholders, including communities themselves. She or he identifies and understands relationships, motivations, constraints and pressures affecting others, and works within a network of relations with stakeholders to achieve humanitarian deliverables in a coordinated manner.

Good stakeholder management also entails political awareness, including the ability to navigate complex and, at times, competitive inter-agency landscapes for humanitarian objectives. However, a coordinator must not think of alliances as purely instrumental. A focus on short gains can undermine trust in a coordinator. Rather, relationship management needs to go beyond transactions towards longer-term relationships based on trust and mutual support. A coordinator needs to be support-minded and a trust-builder, thinking of what she or he can offer to others to attain the outcome of a better humanitarian response. Adopting an inter-agency voice and being a champion of partnership will go a long way to building trust.

A strong coordinator will often use a "360 degrees" approach to stakeholder management. She or he sees the coordination role as part of the wider emergency coordination system in place and work with other coordinators in UNHCR and the wider system to create linkages and avoid siloes.

Negotiation skills

Building consensus among partners often entails negotiations between different positions. Key to a successful negotiation lies in understanding and analysing interests or needs underlying the negotiation positions, as well as the ability to establish the *best alternative to a negotiated agreement* (BATNA) – which is often necessary to establish one's own position in a negotiation. In a humanitarian context, negotiation generally seeks to find common ground. This entails also a number of interpersonal skills, including the ability to read, analyse and respect others' interests and needs, trust building, as well as the capacity to leverage influence in complex environments, alongside the ability to balance interests and find the right compromises.

The importance of relationships with authorities

The humanitarian coordination system is not to replace Government, and it is key to build and nurture relationships with authorities. Regular and transparent communications with authorities are important. Difficulties can arise when advocacy is needed, for instance when Government positions and actions counter protection and humanitarian principles. In such situations it is key to ensure the leadership is aware and involved, as appropriate, in conducting such advocacy or navigating sensitive issues, such as adherence to protection and humanitarian principles. It is also important to seek out possible champions within Government, such as human rights bodies.

Participation of local actors

Dedicate time and effort to enable participation of national NGOs and civil society, including the role of affected communities themselves, such as refugee or IDP-led organizations. Such participation needs to be meaningful and throughout the humanitarian system and programme cycle. It is not enough to consult, and barriers to participation need to be proactively identified and addressed at sector/cluster-level, at inter-cluster level and as needed at HCT-level. For

example, if language is a barrier, change to local language or use interpreters, where affordable. Ask openly about the preferred methods of communication – it may not be email. As a coordinator, it is important to champion localization and AAP by putting the role of communities central to the response.

Mechanisms, tips and good practices

- Have a mental – or written – stakeholder map considering a whole of society approach, and maintain relationships across the board. Government, the humanitarian hierarchy, other sectors or clusters and affected populations are all important. Do not forget other stakeholders, such as academia or faith-based organizations. When time is short, establish priorities in a collaborative manner.
- Be mindful to value relationships for their own sake, and to maintain an open mind. Valued insights, alliances and reputational capital may lie within stakeholders not commonly thought of as humanitarian actors, including the academia, grassroots organizations and faith leaders. Coordinators may need to invest effort in understanding local customs, social norms and relationships.
- Remember that successful negotiations and consensus-building are often built on previous efforts to establish quality, trustful relations with partners.
- Beyond meetings with multiple stakeholders, establish bilateral relations with partners. This can be done for a specific purpose such as mobilizing participation and buy-in, informal consultation on a particular issue, addressing particular challenges or getting new partners on board for example. It should also be done simply to listen, understand and build/maintain a relationship. Prefer visiting partners in their offices, even if it entails travel time. Make sure bilaterals are consistent with transparency of decision-making and consensus.
- Seek informal occasions, such as corridor talk and social events, to build networks and engagement and exchange information and views. As a coordinator, it is essential to engage in semi-social/semi-professional environments, which can also be important for trust building.

3. Empowering and building trust

A coordinator must strive to create an athmosphere of trust and confidence, where cluster or sector members and other key stakeholders feel able and motivated to contribute their best. An environment in which partners are comfortable expressing their positions, ideas and opinions will also, in most cases, foster alignment and collaboration.

Trust-building and psychological safety

The concept and practice of *psychological safety* entails creating a trusting culture in which ideas, opinions, concerns can be expressed and mistakes made admitted without the fear of retribution or judgment. This is important for the coordinator and for sector/cluster members, and enable the needed earnesty and meaningful coordination as a result. Remember that, ultimately, the coordinator must build trust in the coordination and leadership ability of UNHCR as lead agency.

Complex humanitarian contexts may demand a pragmatic trial-and-error approach to decision-

making. While this can yield important learnings and improvements for a next time, a trusting environment in which learning is possible is required. As a coordinator it is important to create and contribute to such an environment, to enable experiment and taking initiatives, and to show ability to learn and course correct as needed.

Accountability

The culture and practice of accountability is key. Good leadership entails recognizing and applying the difference between responsibility (the duty of those discharging a task) and accountability (a leader's acceptance that she or he guides and empowers the team and is answerable for its actions). There is, of course, a nuance in the coordination context – a coordinator is not accountable for sector or cluster member's actions. She or he embodies, however, agency accountability for quality coordination, including alignment towards commonly agreed humanitarian objectives.

Accountability also means avoiding blame-shifting and owning collective decisions. Blame-shifting stunts the initiative and the growth of a sector/cluster. It also reduces the appetite for taking calculated risks which is often needed for an effective emergency response.

Mechanisms, tips and good practices

- Be respectful and courteous with partners at all times, including (and especially) in stressful situations. This is not only a matter of principle, but also a condition for effective coordination.
- Stepping back and withholding immediate reactions can be helpful to create space for exchange and discussion. This is often key to consensus building and to generate buy in.
- Be proactive and humble in soliciting ideas among the constituency. Practice, and exhibit, interest and willingness to learn and exchange opinions and stances when necessary.
- Proactively engage partners who are less active in broad/public meetings.
- Take difficult conversations with partners up separately, rather than in public meetings.

4. Communication

Good coordinators are sensitive, compelling and clear in formal and informal communication, which encourages engagement and contribution to improved outcomes for all stakeholders. They adapt their communication style to different audiences and partners of different backgrounds, have well honed listening skills and explain complex matters in a direct, informative and motivational way. A good coordinator must also, when necessary, openly inquire about the preferred communication level, style and channel for different settings and partners.

Communication is key to advocacy. Advocacy in humanitarian settings must be strategic with clear objectives, evidence-based, tailored to audiences with influence on the advocacy matter, and directly referring to the rights, needs and interests of forcibly displaced and stateless persons. It is important to use simple language and avoid jargon. A strong coordinator understands the influence of data and information. He or she sees clearly the importance of translating the results of analysis and strategy-setting into well-crafted and communicated advocacy.

A good coordinator also uses storytelling and eloquence to connect the dots and paint a meaningful picture of the wider context beyond cluster or sectoral confines. Sense-making, or the ability to help others obtain a clearer understanding of complex events and the decisions they demand, is a key leadership skill in emergencies. This applies in particular in chaotic, rapidly evolving situations where the amount of human suffering may appear as overwhelming to those mandated to respond to it.

Mechanisms, tips and good practices

- Effective listening
  - Avoid interrupting, assuming you already know what is going to be said and mentally rehearsing what to say next, rather than paying attention to the speaker.
  - Repeat, paraphrase, reframe back to the speaker to check whether your understanding is correct.
  - Listen for emotions as well as facts.
- Clear verbal communication
  - Use language your audience understands.
  - Be prepared to repeat yourself when you feel it is necessary.
  - Check others have understood what you said and provide clarifications as required.
- Non-verbal communication
  - Angling of upper body conveys interest and empathy.
  - Head nod communicates encouragement.
  - Eye contact communicates interest.
  - Be aware, however, of cultural differences in non-verbal communication.
- Facilitation
  - Keep discussion on focus.
  - Encourage understanding and compromise between different groups and ideas.
  - Ask pertinent questions to generate new avenues of thinking.
  - Ensure clear concise information is communicated.
- Quality written communication
  - Be direct and to the point.
  - Use short sentences and simple language.
  - Structure well. Use headlines and sub-headlines.
  - Avoid blind copy in emails.
  - Never get personal.
  - Prefer face to face meetings when required, e.g. when you need to build consensus or manage emotions.

5. Conflict resolution

Conflicts or deep differences in position are not uncommon in sector or cluster settings. Thus, coordinators often need to facilitate compromise and practical solutions to disagreements and conflicts with a focus to enable decision-making and a functioning work environment.

When conflict is not promptly identified and addressed, it can affect the effectiveness of coordination. Thus, a coordinator will need to both intervene quickly when needed to diffuse tension, and where disagreements or conflicts have arisen chose the appropriate method to

address and resolve it. At all times, a coordinator should be level-headed and neutral, addressing controversy in a transparent manner, with the sole interest of achieving a solution which is, and is perceived as fair to all partners. Maintaining quality coordination and advancing towards humanitarian objectives must remain at the forefront of any solution.

Mechanisms, tips and good practices

- Be attentive to symptoms. Conflict can translate into anger, arguments and the formation of cliques. It can sometimes also be at the basis of lack of participation and attendance.
- Tackle tensions early, to avoid escalation and spread.
- Try to identify the cause of conflict. When necessary, use bilaterals and seek the opinion of key partners.
- Focus on core issues, avoid accusations, invite suggestions, seek external help when necessary and foster consensus on the solutions proposed.
- When necessary and possible, delegate to someone with particular credibility and mediation and conflict-resolution skills.

6. Decision-making methods

Decisions are needed to bring clarity and direction to ambiguous, complex or difficult issues. Sound and balanced decision-making is important in coordination efforts and are typically based on information and evidence available and sound judgment as needed.

A coordinator, however, is rarely in a position to take unilateral decisions. Rather, she or he must read how decision-making must be done in a given context. Important factors are the nature of the issue at hand (e.g. strategic vs. technical), and the time available to take the decision. Analytical and problem-solving skills are necessary and transparency and inclusivity a must, time permitting. Research shows that decisions taken by consensus are more adequate and sustainable over time. They also encourage participation and buy-in since they create trust in the fairness of the decision-making process. Consensus-making, as well as relationship-building, are also key in preventing conflict from arising. At the same time, time pressures of an emergency and the need to act fast at times, can require other than consensus-based decision-making.

The following diagram can be useful:

WHO DECIDES	HOW IS THE DECISION TAKEN

Whole group	Consensus	This is the choice method. It is particularly adequate when the issue is important, complex or unclear and there is some time for consultation, such as when deciding on general strategies.
	Voting	It can be used for uncomplicated issues where there is little time or need for extensive consultation, such as deciding on regularity of meetings.
Small group	Delegation to the group	Adequate for relatively technical issues where partners are comfortable with delegation. It can also be used in conjunction with consensus. As an instance, a small group develops a draft shelter strategy, as a basis to build further consensus with the whole group.
Coordinator	Unilateral decision	Only advisable when there is little time, when the issue is not sufficiently important or when this is the only possible way and the coordinator has an excellent level of trust of all members. This is a last resort option.

Post emergency phase

Humanitarian coordination systems often stay in place in the post emergency phase. It is important, however, to proactively seek a transition toward alternative coordination arrangements that offer more entry points for development and peacebuilding stakeholders, for example area-based coordination, and align with Government coordination structures and mechanisms where possible, including through closer linkages with line Ministries for example. Coordination in post emergency phases requires to steer toward such a transition. When doing so, coordination needs to remain guided by humanitarian principles and the priorities of the displaced and the wider displacement-affected populations. Good relationships established early in the emergency with authorities and other local actors will also help in the transition phase.

Typically, such shifts should be pursued by the entire coordination system and be backed by the HCT or equivalent, including UNHCR as the lead agency of the respective sector/cluster. Steering toward a transition can be a difficult task and a coordinator will often be confronted with different and opposing perspectives, often more so in situations in which the Government is a party to the conflict and adherence to humanitarian principles is questioned. In such situations it is important to remain open to different viewpoints, transparent and inclusive in the way of working, and principled yet pragmatic.

Checklist for Coordinators

- **Understand and manage expectations:** Understand expectations of the leadership (UNHCR Representative), partners and persons we serve toward the coordination role.
- **Familiarize yourself:** Familiarize yourself quickly with the context, displacement situation and partners, including communities themselves. Be open and interested. This builds trust and confidence in you as a coordinator.
- **Set transparent working methods:** Set clear, transparent and inclusive working methods. Be mindful of having to strike the balance between speed and inclusivity. Don't be rigid, make adjustments as needed.
- **Be a convener:** Exercising the convening role early demonstrates inclusivity and leadership. Use it purposefully, focused on content and not process.
- **Provide direction:** Set vision and strategy through a collaborative approach and stay focused on the big picture issues. It is important to steer in one agreed upon direction.
- **Stay outcome and solutions-oriented:** Stay focused on outcomes and be solutions-oriented, leveraging your range of skills.
- **Always manage relations and communicate well:** Bear in mind that good communication and relationship management is an important and iterative task and requires continuous investment.

Annexes

IASC, Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level, 2015

4. Learning and field practices

Online training - accessible to UNHCR staff only

Interagency Coordination in Emergencies

5. Links

Health Cluster Guide: A Practical Handbook How to be an effective Cluster Coordinator Exploring coordination in humanitarian clusters. ALNAP, 2015

6. Main contacts

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