

# Strengthening the HC System: the Unfinished Agenda\*

## I Background

There has long been dissatisfaction with the HC system among many of its stakeholders, primarily humanitarian actors and donors.<sup>1</sup> Such dissatisfaction fundamentally revolves around the performance of humanitarian coordination functions by Humanitarian Coordinators and Resident Coordinators (from now on, for simplicity's sake they will be called "Coordinators").<sup>2</sup> Dissatisfaction has never been properly measured, however. As a result, there is neither clarity nor consensus among stakeholders on — at the micro level — which Coordinators are not performing satisfactorily and why, and — at the macro level — what is the scale of the problem (i.e. what share of Coordinators is not performing satisfactorily), what variables can explain differentials in performance, and trends over time (has the share of performing Coordinators increased, decreased, or remained stable since the HC system was established? What variables can explain such a trend?).

Rather, the performance of humanitarian coordination functions by Coordinators has been gauged against idiosyncratic and largely subjective benchmarks, differing from one stakeholder to the other. Nor has performance been appraised through a transparent and fair process, which would allow Coordinators eventually to rebut criticism.<sup>3</sup> In short, Coordinators have been and continue to be judged by the "tribunal of public opinion".

Given the lack of objective benchmarks and of a transparent process for appraising performance, it is legitimate to ask to what extent the underperformance of Coordinators is a reality, and to what extent it is a perception. While it is impossible to give a definitive answer to this question at present, it is worth reflecting on where such a perception might originate from.

First, some stakeholders hold unrealistic or misguided expectations as to what Coordinators should or can achieve. This usually stems from a lack of understanding of the limits of coordination in a context of non-hierarchical relationships, as well as of the limits of the role that international actors can play in national contexts. Second, some stakeholders do not know what Coordinators actually do, and therefore assume that they

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\* This paper was drafted by OCHA and presented to the IASC Working Group in March 2009. The Working Group "took note with appreciation of the frankness and quality of the analysis and the strategic directions" provided by the paper, and "requested the HC Group take the analysis into account in its forward planning."

<sup>1</sup> The term "humanitarian actors" includes both UN and non-UN humanitarian actors. It is unclear whether dissatisfaction is shared by the other main stakeholders of the HC system, namely host governments: while their views are often bound to be biased in complex emergency contexts, they would deserve to be heard in disaster contexts. The views of other stakeholders, including in particular other UN actors in contexts of integrated UN presences, are also not known. The perceptions of affected populations are not known either; given the distance that separates them from Coordinators however, it is virtually impossible for the former to pinpoint the share of responsibility that the latter bear in outcomes in the field.

<sup>2</sup> Other sources of dissatisfaction, relating for instance to the selection process of Coordinators, are to a significant extent ancillary to the issue of performance. In other words, if leaders were considered well performing, dissatisfaction with the selection process would largely wane.

<sup>3</sup> The humanitarian coordination section of the RC/HC/DO Performance Appraisal System developed by UNDOCO is still inchoate.

are not doing much. This is particularly the case for non-UN actors, who are not always made privy to all aspects of the Coordinators' activities. Third, there is a natural tendency to attribute the failings of a system to its leadership. This conveniently allows humanitarian actors to exonerate themselves from their own responsibilities in such failings, and donors to believe that a "quick fix" can be found to complex problems. Fourth, perceptions are shaped by others' perceptions. Stakeholders who do not have first-hand experience of Coordinators rely on those who have such experience, or who have credibility within the community. Typically, the perceptions of donors are shaped by those of northern NGOs, who are perceived as being the true standard bearers of humanitarian principles.

While underperformance of Coordinators is in part — and probably in larger part than has been acknowledged so far — based on perceptions, it is also based on facts. Three sets of inter-related variables can be identified to explain it.<sup>4</sup> First, variables relating to individuals: Coordinators may not have the right knowledge, skills, experience, or motivation. While all four elements contribute to successful performance, anecdotal evidence suggests that skills and motivation are more important than knowledge and experience. In other words, Coordinators without the right knowledge or experience can perform successfully, whereas those without the right skills or motivation rarely do.

Second, variables relating to the management of Coordinators: Coordinators may not be properly managed or supported. Many of these variables relate to OCHA's own performance. Performance management of Coordinators is particularly problematic. While *de jure* Coordinators report directly to the ERC, *de facto* it is impossible for him to line manage 27 RC/HCs and 110 RCs.<sup>5</sup> With regard to support, at the field level variables include the quality of the support provided by OCHA Offices to HCs — which remains inconsistent — and the type of support provided to RCs. More specifically, while RCs are usually adequately supported by the OCHA Regional Offices in the response phase, they receive only sporadic support in the preparedness phase, which yet is key to an effective response.<sup>6</sup> Providing Coordinators with swift and effective support in case of major sudden-onset emergencies has also proved problematic in the past. At headquarters level, in addition to the working-level support that may be provided to Coordinators a key variable is the political support that they may receive from the senior leadership of OCHA and of the major humanitarian agencies.

Since Coordinators are almost always (also) RCs however, this set of variables goes well beyond OCHA. The responsibility for managing the performance of RCs rests on Regional Managers Teams (RMTs), which include Regional Directors of the operational agencies of

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<sup>4</sup> Variables related to the operating environment (e.g. the extent to which the host government, non-state actors, and other stakeholders such as SRSGs or political DSRSs, Member States, regional organisations, etc., have a cooperative attitude) are not considered here.

<sup>5</sup> Coordinators are accountable to the ERC for the performance of humanitarian coordination functions in both the response and the preparedness phase. This entails that the ERC is supposed to manage not only the 27 RC/HCs, but also all the other 110 RCs: indeed, while only a limited number of RCs are involved in response efforts at any given moment, all of them are required to coordinate preparedness efforts all year round.

<sup>6</sup> At present the OCHA Regional Offices support RCs in carrying out discrete tasks (such as drafting a contingency plan) through short-term missions, but due to lack of capacity they are not able to support all the RCs in their region who would need their help, nor to support them regularly. Yet RCs usually have very limited capacity in their Office to help them fulfil their responsibilities with regard to preparedness. Support to RCs in the transition/recovery phase is even more problematic, but goes beyond OCHA's remit.

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the UN system, and are accountable to the UN Development Group (UNDG).<sup>7</sup> This is problematic with regard to the humanitarian coordination function, given that the accountability line for this function is directly to the ERC, that OCHA and several UN humanitarian agencies do not have a decentralised structure and therefore cannot meaningfully participate in RMTs, and that RMTs are not inclusive of non-UN actors. The fate of non-performing RCs is also handled by UNDG.

In sum, a number of key management-related variables are linked to the RC system, which is governed by UNDG.<sup>8</sup> Yet up to now UN humanitarian actors have not played a role in the RC system that is commensurate to their stake in it. Although all UN entities that are part of the IASC are also part of UNDG, in UNDG meetings they — with the exception of UNHCR and OCHA — represent solely the development portfolio of their agencies, and not also the humanitarian one.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, UN agencies seem to pursue opposite objectives in the two fora with regard to Coordinators: in UNDG, they seek to limit the role of Coordinators; in the IASC, they seek to strengthen it.

Furthermore, in their capacity as RCs Coordinators are required to represent the diverse and at times conflicting interests of different parts of the UN system — mainly in the development, political, human rights, and security domains, beside the humanitarian one.<sup>10</sup> The UN entities responsible for these agendas relate to Coordinators in a stovepiped manner, without taking into account the demands placed upon them by other parts of the UN system. The burden of reconciling these different agendas rests entirely on Coordinators. As a result, the humanitarian agenda may not get the priority it deserves in the eyes of humanitarian actors.<sup>11</sup> Thus, some management-related variables are linked to the functioning of the UN system as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

The third set of variables relates to the institutional set-up in which Coordinators are placed: the role they play in the UN Country Team (UNCT) and Humanitarian Country Team or similar humanitarian coordination forum (HCT), and the other roles they may play as RCs, Designated Officials for Security (DOs), or DSRSGs. While the role that Coordinators play in the UNCT and HCT has never been clearly defined, the general

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<sup>7</sup> More precisely, they include “Regional Directors and relevant senior managers with direct supervisory responsibilities for agency engagement at country level”. RMTs are accountable to the UNDG Chair and Advisory Group, supported by the UNDG Assistant Secretary-General and UNDOCO. See UNDG, “The Management and Accountability System of the UN Development and RC System, Including the “Functional Firewall” for the RC System”, August 2008.

<sup>8</sup> A related set of variables stems from the fact that RCs are always also UNDP Resident Representatives (RR). This has implications in case of underperformance, and in terms of the support that RCs can benefit from (which is often drawn from the UNDP Office).

<sup>9</sup> The only UN entity that participates in the IASC but not in UNDG is the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs.

<sup>10</sup> The security agenda is carried by Coordinators in their capacity as Designated Officials for Security. As a rule this function is associated with the most senior UN official in-country, who in most cases is the RC.

<sup>11</sup> The opposite may also happen: short-term humanitarian efforts may get more attention than some of the longer-term development or more sensitive political issues.

<sup>12</sup> There is an increasing understanding of the ineffectiveness of this approach, particularly in the case of integrated missions. Thus, following the UN Policy Committee decision on integration of June 2008 (decision 2008/24), the UN Integrated Task Forces (chaired by DPA) and Integrated Mission Task Forces (chaired by DPKO) have been revived. The UN Framework Teams (in full: “UN Inter-Agency Framework for Coordinating Early Warning and Preventive Action”) represent another attempt by UN headquarters to address country situations in a coherent fashion. This is an informal forum of 24 UN agencies, departments, funds and programmes that meet regularly to discuss countries at risk of violent conflict and formulate joint preventive measures.

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understanding is that it is one of active facilitation and leadership from behind.<sup>13</sup> This horizontal role (as opposed to a vertical, command-and-control role) is extremely delicate, insofar as it takes place in a context of non-hierarchical relationships where engagement in coordination arrangements is voluntary, and relies on intellectual leadership and persuasion rather than on formal authority. Such a role can be performed successfully only if each and every stakeholder — members of the UNCT and HCT, but also agency headquarters and donors at field and headquarters level — is committed to making it work. This is far from being the case at present, as none of the stakeholders has sufficient incentives to do so.

Some NGOs and donors argue that the other roles that Coordinators may play as RCs or DSRSGs similarly constrain them to such an extent that they cannot but underperform. They argue that when Coordinators have to carry multiple agendas, the development, political and peace-keeping ones inevitably trump the humanitarian one. The question, however, is whether the alternative is any better: separating the HC function from the others could lead to marginalising the humanitarian agenda. The discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of different HC models belongs elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Here, suffice it to say that multi-hatting entails certain structural constraints that may impact on the performance of Coordinators.

In conclusion, underperformance of Coordinators may be due to any combination of three sets of variables (individual-, management-, and institutional-level ones), with the relative weight of each depending on the circumstances. This means that attributing underperformance to personal shortcomings of Coordinators alone — as is routinely done — not only is reductive and unfair, but also obscures other determinants that must be tackled if performance is to improve. In other words, even individuals with the best possible knowledge, skills, experience, and motivation are bound to underperform if they are not properly supported, or if Humanitarian Country Team members are not committed to making coordination work. Yet, up to now discussions and efforts have focused mostly on individual-level variables.

## II Overall objective

The overall objective is simple: we want Coordinators who perform.

## III Strategic directions

In order to achieve our objective, the following strategic directions should be pursued:

**Agree on what successful performance means.** This will help harmonise stakeholders' expectations vis-à-vis Coordinators. Benchmarks have been developed: the Humanitarian Coordination Competencies. Stakeholders should discuss them widely within their own organisation, test them against their expectations, and eventually readjust either of them.

**Measure performance.** Develop and implement a professional, transparent, participatory, and fair performance appraisal system for the humanitarian coordination function, so as to understand — at both micro and macro level — where problems lie and whether progress is being made in addressing them. We should build on the RC/HC/DO Performance

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<sup>13</sup> The role that the RC plays in the UN Country Team has been defined in the UNDG Guidance Note on Resident Coordinator and UN Country Team Working Relations of November 2008. No similar guidance exists on the relationship between Coordinators and the Humanitarian Country Team.

<sup>14</sup> See Randolph Kent, "Mapping the Models: The Roles and Rationale of the Humanitarian Coordinator", February 2009.

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Appraisal System, and specifically work on five areas: the system should be aligned with humanitarian planning mechanisms (the CHAP, the ERC/HC Compact); the appraisal of humanitarian coordination functions should be based on the HC Competencies; it should involve all HCT members;<sup>15</sup> it should be reciprocal, with HCT members appraising the performance of the Coordinator and of the team as a whole, and the Coordinator appraising the performance of HCT members and of the team as a whole; and the system should be linked to the selection process, as well as to career development and training programs.

**Tackle perceptions.** While a professional performance appraisal system will reduce the role played by perceptions, some initiatives should nonetheless be taken to address the latter. First, stakeholders should come to a common understanding of what coordination means in a context of non-hierarchical relationships, and of the role that international actors can play in national contexts. This can be achieved by producing short papers on these subjects and discussing them widely. Second, Coordinators should communicate more openly with their stakeholders, particularly non-UN ones, on some of the less visible aspects of their activities. Third, opportunities should be created for stakeholders to see for themselves how Coordinators perform: this can be done through donor visits to the field, and visits of Coordinators to agency headquarters and donor capitals.

*To address individual-level variables:*

**Invest in Coordinators.** Three areas require greater investment: selection, career development, and training. With regard to selection, the newly-revamped HC Pool will succeed only if agencies release some of their best leaders and provide secondment opportunities for candidates, and if OCHA actively carries out head-hunting and talent management. This requires the active engagement of senior managers in both OCHA and agencies.

The career development of Coordinators has been overlooked until recently.<sup>16</sup> An inter-agency career development program should be developed covering both upstream paths — those leading to a Coordinator posting — and downstream ones — those following such a posting — and dovetailing with the leadership development programs of individual agencies.<sup>17</sup> Upstream, the program should identify and fast-track promising individuals, and develop career paths for them that would include postings in different types of organisations (UN and non-UN ones, humanitarian and development ones). Downstream, it should offer Coordinators a gamut of options, depending on their performance, ranging from short- or long-term field positions to return to their agency of origin at the current level of seniority.<sup>18</sup>

While the training program has been the most visibly successful part of the HC strengthening project to date, it does not have the critical mass required to achieve meaningful results in a reasonable time frame. With current resources, only by the end of

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<sup>15</sup> Currently it includes only UNCT members.

<sup>16</sup> The RC Talent Management Task Force of the UNDG Working Group on RC System Issues recently developed a “talent management plan” to “attract, develop and retain high caliber candidates for RC posts”. See “Assessment of RC Talent Management: Report on Main Findings, Trends and Recommendations”, February 2009.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, very few humanitarian agencies have well developed career development programs for their own leaders.

<sup>18</sup> Currently agencies of origin only have a responsibility to take Coordinators back at the level of seniority they had when they left the agency, which in many cases leads to a demotion. This is clearly a major disincentive for prospective Coordinators.

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2011 will all Coordinators have undergone training on international humanitarian law — a foundation course without which no senior official expected to perform humanitarian coordination functions should be deployed to the field. Besides, group trainings have obvious limitations, and should be complemented by an individualised approach to the professional development needs of Coordinators, which would include coaching and mentoring. Most importantly, training of Coordinators has a limited impact if it is not replicated at the country level for HCT members and Cluster Leads, as well as for the staff directly supporting Coordinators, namely OCHA Heads of Office and Coordination Officers in RC Offices.

*To address management-level variables:*

**Manage performance.** OCHA should establish a clear and effective system for managing the performance of the 137 Coordinators who are — to varying extents — accountable to the ERC.<sup>19</sup> This could entail delegating such a responsibility either to a number of OCHA senior managers, or to the Heads of OCHA’s Regional Offices.<sup>20</sup>

**Support Coordinators.** OCHA should develop a clear roadmap for identifying and addressing gaps in the quality and quantity of support to Coordinators. Support to RCs in disaster-prone countries should be rethought. If humanitarian actors want RCs to take their responsibilities vis-à-vis preparedness seriously, they should enable them to do so by posting a national or international staff member in their Office. Cost-sharing options should be explored. Support to Coordinators in case of sudden-onset emergencies should also be reconfigured, by building and deploying inter-agency teams to support them in inter-cluster coordination. Most importantly, the senior leadership of OCHA and of the major humanitarian agencies should actively support Coordinators at the political level, particularly when they have to contend with other UN actors due to their other “hats”. Such support could be coordinated through the IASC or other fora.

**Engage with UNDG on the RC system.** Humanitarian actors should leverage their considerable weight with UNDG (through the UN members of the IASC that are also members of UNDG) with a view to influencing developments on issues that impact on the humanitarian coordination function. These range from RC selection, training, knowledge management and performance appraisal, to performance management, support and broader policy issues relating to the RC system. For each of these issues IASC agencies should agree on common objectives, and UN members of the IASC should represent the consolidated IASC position in UNDG fora.

**Engage with the UN system.** Humanitarian actors should coalesce around a common agenda vis-à-vis the UN system on issues that impact on the humanitarian coordination function. In particular, if humanitarian actors want Coordinators to take the humanitarian agenda seriously, they must help them reconcile it with the agendas that other parts of the UN system thrust upon them. Such a reconciliation should happen at headquarters level through joint task forces, in which the various UN entities that rely on the RC system would agree on a common strategy for a given country, together with the Coordinator. OCHA and the UN members of the IASC should therefore lobby for an expanded use of joint task forces, and represent the consolidated interests of the IASC in such fora.

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<sup>19</sup> All 27 HCs and all RCs performing humanitarian coordination functions are accountable to the ERC for the performance of such functions; all 110 RCs are accountable to the ERC for coordinating response preparedness efforts.

<sup>20</sup> The latter would require i.a. upgrading the level of the Head of OCHA Regional Office position, which is currently lower than that of Coordinators.

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*To address institutional-level variables:*

**Strengthen commitment to coordination.** This is the most complex aspect to tackle, as it requires concerted and sustained efforts by all stakeholders. First, incentives should be strengthened. This primarily means ensuring that coordination adds value to the work of individual actors, which is not always the case at present. The pooling of funding can also serve as an incentive. Second, the normative framework should be clarified. Humanitarian actors should agree on the expected roles and responsibilities of each set of actors: Coordinators, Cluster Leads, Humanitarian Country Team members and OCHA Heads of Office at the field level, and – at the headquarters level – the ERC, OCHA, the IASC and agencies. To this end, a mutual accountability framework should be developed, similar to the one that was recently developed for the RC system. This framework should be reflected in the Terms of Reference of each set of actors. Third, compliance with this framework should be monitored, possibly through the RC/HC/DO Performance Appraisal System, but also through the performance appraisal systems of individual agencies. Most importantly, non-compliance should be systematically discussed in inter-agency fora, and ways to address it jointly identified and implemented. As for donors, they should review the extent to which their behaviours at field and global level strengthen coordination, and develop an action plan to address problem areas. The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative could serve as a useful platform in this respect.

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While all the strategic directions that have been highlighted need to be pursued for there to be visible progress on the HC strengthening agenda, two of them stand out: enhancing support to Coordinators and strengthening stakeholders' commitment to coordination. Providing Coordinators with quality support is the fastest and most efficient way to boost the effectiveness of well performing Coordinators and mitigate the weaknesses of less performing ones. As for stakeholders' commitment to coordination, it is simply indispensable for the system to work. Ultimately, this entails placing the ownership (and onus) of field coordination where it belongs – with all humanitarian actors, rather than with Coordinators alone. Simply put, leadership does not happen in a vacuum.

#### **IV Progress to date**

In September 2007 the IASC HC Group adopted a three-year Work Plan operationalising the Action Plan approved by IASC Principals in April 2006. Since then significant progress has been made in revamping the normative basis of the humanitarian coordination function (the humanitarian section of the new RC Terms of Reference entrenches the accountability of all RCs vis-à-vis the ERC with regard not only to response but also to response preparedness; the HC Terms of Reference have been revised); developing a professional, transparent, and participatory selection system (the second phase of the HC Pool has been launched); providing basic training on humanitarian coordination to sitting RCs (more than half have been trained); developing knowledge management tools (the RC Emergency Handbook is currently being developed); and developing accountability mechanisms (the ERC/HC Compact and the humanitarian section of the RC/HC/DO Performance Appraisal System have been developed). OCHA has also actively engaged with UNDG on a range of issues related to the RC system that have an impact on the humanitarian coordination function.

By the end of 2009, it is expected that further progress will be made on the normative basis (an accountability framework will be developed), selection (the HC Pool and the inter-

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agency succession planning panel will be in place by summer), training (all HCs will be trained on humanitarian advocacy; all RCs will be trained on humanitarian coordination; all new RCs will attend a three-day humanitarian induction), knowledge management (the RC Emergency Handbook will be published; a guidance system for Coordinators will be developed) and accountability (the humanitarian section of the RC/HC/DO Performance Appraisal System will be further enhanced along the lines mentioned above).

Clearly, work has just begun.

## **V Conclusion**

As countless evaluations have shown, the impact that Coordinators have on the effectiveness of humanitarian action is incalculable. Yet the human, financial and — most importantly — political resources that have been invested up to now by the humanitarian community in this agenda have been exceedingly modest, if compared to those invested in response. What is more, efforts have mostly focused on individual-level variables. These efforts will not bear fruit if they are not coupled with a concerted and sustained effort to address management- and institutional-level variables.

Strengthening the humanitarian coordination function is the collective responsibility of the humanitarian community as a whole. It is time for each and every stakeholder to demonstrate its commitment to it.

April 2009.

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