

## **Inter-Organizational Trust, Boundary Spanning and Humanitarian Relief Coordination**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the frequently cited argument that coordination issues in humanitarian relief can be addressed more effectively with greater centralized authority and argues for a new conceptualization of aid delivery. The former position suggests a hierarchical, top-down view of the humanitarian relief theater, while this analysis contends that the relief implementation structure may be better conceived as consisting of a network of loosely coupled semi-autonomous organizations (Weick, 1976). A network approach allows examination of aid coordination dynamics at multiple levels of analysis: individual (professional and personal), organizational and inter-organizational (operational) as well as strategic (structural/contextual). So viewed, factors that influence relief delivery, including both contextual or strategic conditions and organization-scale concerns, may either encourage or dissuade coordination across institutional boundaries. We argue that trust is a key precondition to coordination and that its extension is in turn conditioned by a number of strategic and operating level factors. We concentrate on operational coordination, as strategic concerns are not often open to the control of lone organizational actors. Our analysis rests in part on in-depth interviews (each consisted of open-ended questions and lasted an average of 90-100 minutes) with a small sample of experienced international nongovernmental organization relief professionals who were engaged in aid efforts in Kosovo following the 1999 NATO intervention in that region.

## **Introduction**

Humanitarian relief organization coordination has been widely researched in recent years (e.g. Minear, 2002; Macrae, 2003; Rey, 1999). Scholars, as well as aid professionals, funders and United Nations representatives have recognized harmonization as a pressing issue. All agree that more successful inter-organizational cooperation will yield improved outcomes for those being served. However, factors both internal and external to aid delivery add to the complexities and challenges that attend attainment of successful coordination (Van de Ven, Walker, 1984).

Studies of humanitarian aid delivery have routinely concluded that these complex crises provide an inhospitable setting for coordination (Minear, 2002; Stockton, 2002, Stephenson, 2005, 2006). There are many reasons why this is so. First, the United Nations (UN) is a complex and multifaceted institution that carries out many roles in humanitarian relief by means of multiple organizations. However, the General Assembly has not designated a lead agency among these entities or provided one with full authority to coordinate and monitor the activities of the others. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, The United Nations Children's Education Fund, the World Health Organization, and the World Food Program, among others, may all be involved in any given crisis. None, however, enjoys an authoritative role to oversee its peers. None can require that other participating units undertake specific actions. Consequently, the UN response to humanitarian crises is fractionated organizationally along functional lines (Kent, 1987; Borton, 1993).

This institutional and managerial complexity is not the least of the obstacles to effective humanitarian coordination. The variety of UN agencies that may be deployed in crises is matched by the fact that a host of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and state actors are also likely to be engaged in specific relief events. These organizations all strive to provide direct aid and capacity building to those affected by crises.

Another way to frame this issue is simply to say that the implementation environment of humanitarian emergencies includes a variety of actors, each of which operates under different constraints. No one of the various UN relief agencies enjoys a mandate (and a secure budget) to ensure coordination among them. INGOs, as separate organizational actors with their own missions, face similar financial uncertainty and, in any case, also lack a common overseer. Local NGOs may also be actively involved in the provision of aid and these organizations, by definition, are likely to vary widely in organizational legitimacy and fiscal and managerial capacity. Forces deployed by other nations, as well as those of the affected state, may also be involved and the reasons for their engagement may differ little or sharply from those of other primary actors (as their sponsors elect). To complicate matters still further, if the disaster is linked to war or internal conflict, the local government's capacity and political will to act may be severely limited (The Economist, Sudan, 2004).

The plurality of aid organizations involved in relief delivery suggests that the strategic context for top-down coordination is likely to be inauspicious. Competing missions, differing organizational strategies, policies and norms as well as funding mandates make it difficult for the

leaders of this complex array of relief institutions to focus on matters (inter-organizational coordination) that seem to lie beyond their own organizational reach (Scott, 2003). Additionally, relationships among UN organizations, INGOs and NGOs often create subnetworks of action that complicate further the humanitarian aid delivery structure. Operating authority in this decentralized and multi-organizational structure is shared among a number of related, but at least quasi-autonomous, participants.

### **Relief Aid Structures as Inter-organizational Networks**

In 1991 the United Nations established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, later named the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Its mandate includes “the coordination of humanitarian response, policy development and humanitarian advocacy” (United Nations Office of Humanitarian Affairs, 2005). Despite its charge, OCHA does not enjoy command and control authority over the many UN entities often engaged in humanitarian relief, let alone over the other organizations involved in these emergencies (Reindorp and Wiles, 2001). As Larry Minear, a leading researcher in this field has remarked, “In my judgment, the continuing absence of effective coordination structures remains the soft underbelly of the humanitarian enterprise” (2002, p. 21). While sharing the view that the UN designate an agency to provide authority over the players in the field, he recognizes that this proposition is arguable and that neither the various UN organizations nor the key donor nations have thus far assented to it. Indeed, he has suggested that they have actively resisted it (Minear, 2002, p. 22).

Given that the complexity of aid delivery and the contested role of potential leaders make centralized control unlikely, perhaps there is a different way to conceptualize the challenges

these complex implementation structures represent (Ring, 1997). Rather than continue to contend that the present organization of humanitarian actors should conform with a principal-agent view of organizational coordination, it might be useful to conceive of humanitarian organizations engaged in relief work as engaged in an implementation network and seek to build some common set of claims on that basis. O'Toole (1997) has offered a relevant definition of networks:

Networks are structures of interdependence involving multiple organizations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate of the other in some larger hierarchical arrangement. Networks exhibit some structural stability but extend beyond formal established linkages and policy legitimated ties. The notion of networks excludes more formal hierarchies and perfect markets, but includes a wide range of structures in between. The institutional glue congealing networked ties may include authority bonds, exchange relations and coalitions based on common interest, all within a single multiunit structure (1997, p.45.)

No formal hierarchy exists amongst humanitarian aid actors. Indeed, the primary “glue” which may be said to bind the diverse organizations involved in relief efforts together is their common interest in providing aid. Each may also perhaps be said to share an interest in developing some (contestable) norms of how relief should be delivered. Beyond these potentials, such coordination as occurs is (re)created with each new crisis situation.

The humanitarian scenario is one of diffuse authority among a range of players unwilling, for a variety of often cogent reasons—competition for media salience, competition for resources, fragmented missions, perceived national interests, among others—to cede controlling authority of organizational action to any other single network player (Borton, 1993). The operational

challenge therefore, lies not in finding means to persuade UN members or INGOs or NGOs to provide for more centralized strategic level coordination and control of their actions or in seeking to overcome the deficiencies of coordination by consensus, but in devising humanitarian social networks of action that can act effectively without such central control or direction. This requires the development of organizational networks in which stakeholders develop a robust array of communication channels that foster inter-organizational awareness and trust (Hattori and Lapidus, 2004). Trust may be the lubricant for inter-organizational action but it is clear that it is not automatically extended or renewed once lost (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). It is also clear that trust alone is not likely to be sufficient to secure coordination. Trust may well exist between organizations or specific professionals in different organizations and not prove so strong as other competing organizational or professional claims.

## **Methodology**

To begin to explore empirically the utility of this conceptualization of relief efforts we conducted lengthy open-ended interviews with a small sample (n=5) of experienced international nongovernmental organization professionals and leaders who were deployed in the Kosovo region in late summer, 1999. Each individual interviewed worked for a different INGO. We tape recorded and transcribed each interview. On average, each session lasted about 90-100 minutes. Respondents, whose professional experience averaged 15 years each, provided their insights into patterns of inter-institutional trust building, boundary spanning behavior (why an individual would choose to work with someone in another organization) and coordination in that crisis. We recognize that our sample, indeed the Kosovo aid scenario itself, is not representative, if such a thing as a representative relief experience may even be said to exist. Nevertheless, this

approach enabled us to contextualize our research with thick descriptions even as it allowed us, however tentatively, to begin exploring the dynamics that underpin the development and extension of trust across organizational boundaries in relief scenarios. INGOs often interact with virtually all other organizational players in these complex structures. As a result, our observers were well positioned to help us understand more thoroughly the dynamics of these efforts.

We sought to use our interviews to understand more fully the context in which such choices were made and the role that trust played in professionals' decisions to seek or agree to coordination. Our respondents requested that we keep their identities confidential. Thus, all names used here are fictitious. We have retained transcripts in a secure location should there ever be reason to ask interviewees to divulge their identities. As we began, we postulated, as the relevant literature has argued, that trust was essential to boundary spanning between organizations and that such bridging behavior, in turn, was essential to effective inter-organizational coordination (Noteboom and Six, 2003, pp. 5-7).

### **Kosovo 1999**

The history of the Kosovo crisis has been well treated elsewhere (e.g. Minear et al., 2002). We provide a capsule description of events leading up to the crisis and a depiction of humanitarian aid deployment to address it. This analysis is followed by a consideration of factors, as identified by our INGO interviewees, of conditions that either fostered or hampered humanitarian aid coordination, including the role of UN donor nations. These insights provide a basis for understanding the challenges of aid delivery coordination in context, as well some clues concerning the role of trust in inter-organizational relationships. Our interviews also shed light



on some possible ways more effective aid agency coordination might be achieved. Or, perhaps better put, they help to paint a more thorough portrait of the nature of the coordination challenge.

On June 25, 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Slovenia broke free without incident, while the situation in Croatia escalated into a war between Croatia's Serb minority and its majority ethnic Croat population. Similarly, in April 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence. The resultant conflict there found ethnic Serbs, Croats and Muslims at war (Young, 2001). Whatever the origins of these conflicts, each shortly became a struggle for territory with human displacement a central aim of several of the principal combatants.

The initial international community response to these events was to offer humanitarian aid rather than to intervene militarily. At the local level, "the parties to the conflict regarded the humanitarian players as protagonists in the political process" (Young, 2001, p. 788). Since siege and starvation were weapons of the war, "the delivery of humanitarian relief was not seen as a neutral humanitarian act" (Young, 2001, p. 789). The preventive protection policy of the UNHCR directly contradicted the displacement aims of the warring factions. It was difficult, therefore, for that agency, as well as other INGOs and NGOs, to intervene "neutrally" to provide humanitarian aid—at least as the antagonists perceived matters.

Our respondents worked in Kosovo to address the humanitarian aid crisis that arose in the wake of the NATO bombings there in spring, 1999. The bombings, carried out to end what had become an especially cruel and brutal ethnic conflict, paradoxically created a severe refugee

crisis. Aid organizations deployed to deliver food, shelter and medical assistance to those refugees. Strong media coverage focused international attention on the crisis, thus increasing the amount of funding distributed among aid organizations willing to work in the theater. Our interviewees reported an intense agglomeration and proliferation of aid delivery organizations in the region within a very short period. According to one of our respondents, for example, “in August, there were already somewhere around 200 organizations, 250 organizations. By September or October, there was something like 500. ... It was just unbelievable.” (Linden)

The Kosovo aid situation was overseen by UNHCR for the UN, which disbursed funds and held sector-specific meetings among organizations receiving funding—e.g. health, water and sanitation, education, housing and infrastructure—aimed at securing increased cooperation and coordination among them. In addition to those INGOs receiving support through UNHCR, there were independent INGOs of varying size, faith-based INGOs and various NGOs and for-profit organizations operating in country—all with the avowed aim of providing emergency humanitarian relief. There was no local government in place immediately following the bombings and no umbrella organization of local NGOs aimed at coordinating their efforts existed either.

### **Trust and Coordination in Kosovo**

The aid situation in Kosovo evidenced relationships among actors on several levels. First, there was a network of principals through which aid funding flowed. In this case, state actors, the United States and the European Union for example, provided funding for projects separately, as well as via the UN through UNHCR. Second, a core group of INGOs operated in the theater.

These organizations tend to provide aid in virtually all major aid emergencies and include the International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, CARE, Worldvision, Americare and Doctors Without Borders. These institutions are well known to the various UN aid agencies, to major state donors and to each other. Each enjoys a reputation for special capacity in aid delivery in particular sectors (health, food, shelter, sanitation). In addition to this group, other INGOs and for-profit entities were present in Kosovo. Last, among the organizational actors, “veteran” relief workers formed interpersonal networks with staff of other organizations with whom they had served previously.

A network approach allows the analyst to focus on a number of important dimensions of humanitarian aid delivery (Ring, 1997). Network structures are uniquely adaptive to highly complex situations characterized by crisis and change. Research on networks “focuses on relations and patterns of relations rather than on [the] attributes of actors” (organizations) though analysts recognize the interdependence of these factors. In addition, networks may be examined at multiple levels or scales of analysis (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003, p. 19).

Our interviews suggest that different mechanisms for trust and coordination correspond with each of the analytic levels at which interactions occur among the array of organizations in the relief network. At the organizational scale, funding through the UN provided both incentive and at least a potential mechanism for cooperation; however, that incentive (largely the implicit threat of a loss of funding) was often either not present in practice (the UN lacked sufficient capacity or will, or both, to deliver the services in lieu of the organizations with which it was

contracting) or not determinative (for organizations with independent sources of funds, including support from specific nations or multi-laterals).

Different forms of information sharing aimed at coordination occurred at different levels in the network as well (Williams, 2002, p. 118). In Kosovo, for example, UNHCR hosted NGO coordinating council and sectoral meetings that provided a means for understanding what each organization was doing, and who the other actors in the relief network were.

*Especially at the beginning, there were a lot of meetings to basically carve out, you know, the sectors and the problems and say, okay, well you will do this in (city) and we will do X in (city), and that's the way we're going to divide it to make sure that everybody gets a piece of the pie. (Jackson)*

Our respondents, all veterans of many emergency relief efforts, characterized these meetings as generally helpful, but that helpfulness came with certain drawbacks.

*There were so many coordination meetings, if I'm not mistaken; there were a dozen a day for different sectors. But the major ones which happened would often involve a hundred plus people sitting in a room and somebody would just call out security information, and so there wasn't any real, shared objective... So I think that that would also help to build trust, if you knew why you were going there and you had a common objective. (Lin)*

As this observation suggests, the most significant value of these meetings was the networking opportunities they presented.

*It wasn't so much about coordination, I think, as much as it was about information sharing. (Jackson)*

*... Usually you go for, you meet some people, and at that meeting nothing happens. But maybe three weeks down the line, something is coming up ... you say, oh yeah, I met that guy there... remember that guy say he was in this?' and that's how it happens. So, it's ... as a matter of fact, when you look at the general meetings, you can see they are useful because people complain about it, but they are still coming. (Linden)*

At the organizational level, the main basis for trust, a sine qua non of willingness to work across organizational boundaries and therefore of coordination, appears to be a multi-faceted view of reputation, based both on the standing and mission of the organization with which an individual is affiliated and on past personal and professional interaction(s) with that person (Williams, 2002. Pp. 110-113). Our respondents indicated that they relied on knowledge of the organization's reputation for service-delivery in particular sectors, as well as perceptions of their (and others they trusted in their own organizations) experience with that institution in prior crises: "I trusted UNHCR or another organization if I felt that I could rely on what they were telling me, that their information was valid." (Jackson)

In addition to prior knowledge or experience with other organizations or individuals working in them, respondents placed a strong emphasis on other organizational factors when determining whether to trust and therefore cooperate with representatives of other institutions. An organization's mission, for example, and its reputation and capacity for carrying out that mission as it sought to address a specific humanitarian emergency, also shaped views of trustworthiness.

*I go to an intervention like Kosovo with the purpose of helping the community to overcome the situation they are facing, and the trust I will put in other organizations would be their capacity in country to support that mission with their own intervention.*  
*(Linden)*

Common organizational values were another basis for extending trust. Perhaps not surprisingly, interviewees found it easier to trust other organizational representatives when their stated aims were similar. Other characteristics, such as complementary competencies, also caused participants to view coordination more positively and to be more likely to trust other organization incumbents than they would have otherwise.

*I would say it's around clarity, in terms of different roles and responsibilities. It's respect for each other's particular competencies, and it's a confidence in each other that we will act consistently in the best interest of those who we seek to help. (Hannaford)*

In short, given the large number of actors and the pressure for rapid service-delivery, respondents relied heavily on a reputation decision heuristic that connoted trustworthiness and operated at both organizational and individual scales when deciding when and with whom to cooperate across organizational lines. When devoting attention to the provision of key services, there is often simply not time to develop professional relationships with new or unknown actors; therefore, knowledge of an organization and established perceptions of its competence become a method for deciding with whom to coordinate. Given the deluge of responsibilities and the limited time in which to address them, willingness to coordinate is often determined by pre-

existing network paths such as those that exist among a core group of INGO professionals whose organizations, operations and even professional reputations are well known to one another.

Our respondents also suggested that aid delivery is strongly shaped by personal relationships. At the interpersonal level, respondents reported that “personalities” and perceived professional competence and relationships were key to effective coordination.

*If I have a choice, I will pick up somebody I like. If I don't have a choice, and I need that service, the community needs that service, well, I will go along with that organization providing that their professionalism and their resources are adequate.*  
*(Linden)*

Such relationships are embedded within the context of aid delivery and may be conveyed from country to country, crisis to crisis. Indeed, some respondents explicitly relied upon a network of contacts in Kosovo.

*I mean, sometimes you go to places like (country) and it's like drowning, you know, everybody you've ever known in your life for the last 15 years passes before your eyes, and nobody's surprised to see each other. And that—good personal relationships—are actually fundamental to that. (Hannaford)*

A reputation heuristic, in this case one developed on the basis of prior experience with an individual in a crisis intervention, appears to play a significant role in individual willingness to

trust others in different organizations to work with them and to cooperate in the provision of services.

*You know, when people ask you, well, you know, where were you before, or how many years you have been doing this, and you kind of think, to sort of establish your credibility and how much they can trust you. (Jackson)*

Organization reputation and perceived professional competence trump personal relationships in the absence of such knowledge, but personal knowledge, when it exists, may be critical to decisions to extend trust and therefore to cooperate across organization lines. Aid workers may be skeptical or even jaundiced about a specific organization, but if they believe their counterpart there is competent and trustworthy, they are likely to agree to coordinate anyway. These relationships are self-reinforcing; good reputations and experience in one theater make it more likely that harmonization of activities will occur in future scenarios, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In addition, inter-organizational relationships are often shaped significantly by role equivalence, that is, among actors who play similar roles within different organizations (Perrone, Zaheer, McEvily, 2003).

*Quite often it's easy, if not easier, for people with a common technical background and skill and discipline to form relationships among their counterparts. (Hannaford)*



Organizational representatives describe a situation in which relationships, at the inter-organizational (network), organizational and interpersonal levels, play a major role in coordination. This finding supports previous findings (Friedman and Podolny, 1992). Each of these scales constitutes a piece of the network of humanitarian aid delivery, of which single organizations are only a part. The existence of these networks has a strong influence on the way organizations behave in country. Given the variability of pre-existing organizational and individual (personal and professional) ties and varying crisis situations, we turn next to a discussion of the factors particular to organizations that might encourage or discourage coordination.

### **Funding and Coordination**

If funding can operate as an organizationally exogenous or strategic scale variable, source of funding can also act as an organizational level incentive that conditions whether institutions participate in coordination efforts. If an organization relies primarily on private and dedicated funding sources, it may have no incentive to cooperate with other institutions. Many of our respondents observed that they were familiar with organizations acting as “lone wolves.” These actors operate outside of networks and the independent character of their funding ultimately shapes how aid is delivered since many feel no imperative to coordinate their efforts with other organizations in the network.

*... If you've got your own independent funding, why there's no pressure on you, nobody can really pressure you into collaborating. And typically quite a few of those individuals and people show up, but a lot of them are hustlers. I mean, some of them are*

*very good, but a lot of them are hustlers who make big promises and then disappear.*  
(Grimes)

Private funders (like public ones) may place restrictions on the type of aid delivered. This leads some organizations to provide services only so long as funding lasts.

*This is a problem with a lot of smaller, mostly faith-based agencies, or agencies coming from countries that don't have a lot of experience doing humanitarian work, who would go into different villages and say that they were going to work on a project, and you know, start the project, and then, you know, run out of funds in the middle of it and leave it there. ... And of course they hadn't coordinated with anybody.<sup>1</sup> (Jackson)*

Since whether to accept funding lies within each organizational actor's purview, funding source may act within organizations to condition their willingness to coordinate with other entities.

Organizational type can also play a role in organizational choice making concerning coordination. For-profit organizations are beginning to emerge as aid contractors. Our respondents found for-profits to be highly competitive in their behavior vis-à-vis other relief providers.

*I think this new environment where the for-profits are playing a larger role probably discourages information sharing ... a lot of NGOs have gotten a little bit burned by for-profits coming and using a lot of information and then not giving you any, or actually using it to go and get a huge contract. (Jackson)*

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<sup>1</sup> While some pointed to smaller faith-based organizations as more likely to go it alone, respondents, when asked to elaborate, refused to generalize, affirming that there are many faith-based organizations that operate in "good faith" as well as many competent small organizations operating in the field.

While their service delivery could be characterized as “efficient,” our interviewees suggested that for-profits did not give much thought to “holistic” service delivery or capacity building. The profit motive may not encourage coordination with other organizations or aid recipients.

*(For-profits want to) get the job done and make some money doing it, and NGOs wouldn't be quite as mercenary, but they would want to do the job right. They wouldn't just want to put a school on the ground. They would want to make sure that local folks built it, and there was a teacher, and there were schoolbooks, and you would hope that they would do a more rounded package beyond what a contractor might do. (Grimes)*

Many other factors, including staff training and composition, are clearly within the control of organizations and influence service delivery choices and strategies. Staff training shapes how prepared relief organizations are to act within their missions to deliver services and to cope with a crisis environment. Representatives of the large INGOs place an emphasis on coordination and stress it in their staff retention and development programs. Organizations also control the mix of staff, combining experienced and inexperienced employees such that the latter can be drawn into existing networks: “if individual organizations are responsible around the blend of experience and innovation and bringing people on within their team, then it means that you can actually bring to the table a whole wealth of prior organizational relationships.” (Hannaford) However, the rapid deployment of assistance in Kosovo resulted in understaffing, as well as problems with inexperienced people on the ground, that is, with “individuals within the organizations not being aware of their organizational mandates, organizational history, and also not being fully aware of the context of the Kosovo crisis.” (Lin)

Viewing Kosovo through a network lens points up aspects of coordination that lie beyond the control of any single organizational actor. Indeed, a complex structure of inter-organizational relationships exists in virtually any conceivable crisis-aid situation. But it cannot be said that such structures are static from crisis to crisis. This is so because not only do organizational incentives and personnel change, but so too does the strategic context to which both organizations and individuals react and in which they are inevitably enmeshed. The context of humanitarian crises and the impact of that context on the network of organizations carry implications for whether and to what extent coordination may occur (Wicks and Berman, 2004).

### **The Strategic Structure of the Humanitarian Network Operating Environment**

We have argued that humanitarian aid delivery networks evince relatively weak but enduring structural ties. This is so because a common cast of actors—UN agencies and major INGOs—typically responds when humanitarian crises erupt. However, the context of each crisis differs, presenting challenges to coordination and cooperation even among network actors that are otherwise aware of one another’s activities and strengths and weaknesses. Some of these contextual factors include:

- Local capacity, the stability of government in the affected nation as well as its will and ability to respond.
- Financial resources available at the national and international levels.
- The response of the United Nations military, humanitarian, or both in the context of civil conflict.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The presence or absence of civil conflict changes the humanitarian environment profoundly. This is so both because its presence often endangers the lives of humanitarian aid agents while making their already difficult responsibilities often

- Character and capacity of the leadership of relevant UN, INGO, governmental and local actors.

Our interviewees indicated that factors such as media salience, funding, inter-organizational competition, stress and the unfolding of events on the ground also had a profound impact on the coordination of aid delivery in Kosovo. We discuss these issues further below.

### **Media Salience**

Many strategic conditions contributed to the chaotic organizational environment of aid delivery in Kosovo. Chief among these was media attention, which influenced the amount of available funding and led to a comparatively large level of service organization deployment. Cooley and Ron (2002) have characterized the aid delivery scenario as innately highly competitive. Our respondents agree, indicating that funding created a large pool of actors, all vying for available contracts. As indicated above, the rapid rise in the number of organizations in country created a chaotic environment characterized by competition, on the one hand ...

*... There's always that competition. I mean, I was certainly guilty of it in Kosovo, you know, and I competed with a lot of agencies and made sure I got my proposals in there first, so that I would get the money and not the others. You know, we all want to be able to say that our NGO is doing the most work, or the best work, and I think that's part of human nature. (Jackson)*

... and a narrow focus on the task at hand on the other hand.

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impossible to prosecute. It is also the case, however, because such strife—ethnic cleansing, warlord genocide, etc.—may bring foreign troops, and when nations commit troops they are very likely to set the conditions for all forms of action, humanitarian or otherwise, while their troops are under duress. Such nations control the theater of action and may simply use their military resources to augment if not eclipse their civilian humanitarian aid counterparts. Civil conflict is important for itself but just as significant for the interventions it brings and the consequences those choices bring for humanitarian organizations.

*People weren't sure what others were doing, there were simply too many NGOs, and the pressures of running your organization, running your program and meeting media and donor demands meant that people very quickly found niches to operate in, and that then stopped the consultation process, or the sharing process between NGOs, but more importantly, between NGOs and beneficiaries. (Lin)*

*... As a result of that, we worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and if you were coming to my office and say 'you know, I need to coordinate, or this or this,' right now, with crisis after crisis after crisis, I don't have the time or the mind, I don't have the mind, to just talk about coordination, you see what I mean? (Linden)*

## **Stress and Timing**

In part due to the large number of actors in theater, several respondents characterized Kosovo as among the most highly stressful aid interventions in which they had participated.

*... It wasn't just the pressure of the work and the media and the donors, but also the living conditions were pretty bad. It was one of the worst winters in history, and there was no heat, no hot water, and no electricity, and so, you know, you would be putting in twelve hours at work and then going home to a cold apartment that you couldn't heat properly, and it made it very difficult for people to cope with the circumstances. (Jackson)*

One compared Kosovo to less stressful situations, and pointed to stages of the intervention that were more or less conducive to coordination.

*I will take the example of (country), as being the other extreme for me was probably my best experience over the last ten years I spent overseas. And the reason was it was a small community of NGOs. I think when we had general meetings, you could put us around the dining room table, it was something like 7 or 8 organizations ... as a result of that ... the level of coordination there was something I never experienced before or since. (Linden)*

This quotation also illustrates several dimensions of the context of relief network coordination dynamics. To use a democratic analogy, it is difficult to manage democratic participation among large numbers of agents. The ability to coordinate ultimately may be related to the number of actors or entities involved. The problem is how to know when the threshold of “too many” is reached and what might be done when it is attained. The complexity of humanitarian relief structures should, at the least, elicit a certain modesty of expectations for widespread coordination among the many parties. In addition, the capacity of the various participants to coordinate is clearly shaped fundamentally by the level of stress in a given scenario, a strategic factor that is beyond the purview of any one organization or group of organizations. Stress appears to work against fulsome coordination. Harmonization may be more possible at various stages of an intervention. Early stages featuring intense world attention, high funding levels and many actors may not be as conducive to coordination as later stages. Ironically, when stress and emotionally pervasive urgency are reduced, inter-organizational coordination may be more possible and broader ranging.

Media attention, funding cycles and organizational competition may also have an unfortunate impact on service recipients. Funding, for example, can determine whether or not an adequate level of humanitarian assistance is available for a given crisis situation.

*Everybody likes to work in Thailand, for example ... the joke in Thailand is, you know, every NGO's got its own refugee. But you go over to Bangladesh, and you don't find that many of them ... so there tends to be a disproportionate amount of aid going into some areas—the more comfortable, nice areas—and less aid going into other areas that might be equally or even more needy. (Grimes)*

*The number of organizations was due to funding availability, the media attention and a subset to that is the fact that this was the first big crisis, the first very big publicized crisis where the beneficiaries were all white. And there was ... proximity to places where there were a lot of charitable organizations (Lin)*

Funding restrictions may actually mediate against capacity building among service recipients. In effect, funding may create a condition in which recipients are excluded from networks.

Perversely, too much cash available in too short a time frame can also interfere with effective aid delivery and with coordination. In Kosovo, a great deal of aid flowed in a very limited period (roughly 90 days) and the result was increased competition among aid organizations and less willingness to coordinate activities with potential recipients. The UN, bi-lateral and INGO organizations may not be as open to citizens and NGOs in country as one might imagine.

*There was a great deal of provision of services without any consultation ... whether it was what the people really wanted or prioritized themselves, and people's lack of involvement in implementation of services, I mean, beneficiaries lack of involvement. (Lin)*



*In Kosovo, you have no NGO leaders of a sector meeting. They were always from some big international organization. And that kind of disenfranchised them, I think.*

*(Linden)*

Funding availability may provide incentives to harmonize, but it may also operate against coordination. Money alone is not a sufficient condition to ensure that individual actors will elect to span organizational boundaries and work with representatives of other organizations to secure coordination, or to secure organization-to-organization boundary spanning either (Noteboom and Six, 2003, pp. 30-34).

One large barrier to developing capacity is the pay structure of international aid organizations.

*The Kosovar government, the new Kosovar government after the Serbs were thrown out, after the war, after the refugees came back, paid about \$100 to doctors. So, doctors were going to work for the UN as chauffeurs at \$400 a month. And this is typical. The UN grabs the best of the people, or USAID grabs the best of the people because they pay the best salaries. The NGOs get the second best because they pay the second best salaries. And the government, that your overriding objective in the country is to create a viable government, gets nothing. (Grimes)*

The network of humanitarian aid is thus conditioned by strategic factors present in the crisis situation itself. Competition, media attention, funding levels and timing, and the intensity of the crisis can all influence the ability and willingness of network actors to coordinate across organizational lines. These factors may even operate at some points to exclude some groups, including aid recipients and NGOs, from their rightful roles in coordination efforts since these

parties are often new to other actors, may evidence relatively weak or evolving capacities and are “untested.”

### **Whither Humanitarian Relief Coordination?**

A contextualized view of aid delivery in humanitarian crises illustrates the complexity, as well as the barriers to coordination across organizational lines. In our view, we should be modest in our expectations about how quickly and completely inter-organizational structures of this size and complexity may be expected to respond to calls for increased coordination. Our respondents offered many insights regarding how to improve the likelihood of improved harmonization in relief networks. First, many were skeptical of centralized coordination through UNHCR, UNOCHA, ECHO or any other UN entity. Significantly, as a group, their level of trust of these entities was limited.

*UNHCR certainly didn't work; there was very little mutual trust within that.*

*(Hannaford)*

*I had some difficulties at one point with UNHCR, and part of it stems from the fact that, that it was difficult to get reliable information from them, that they would tell you one thing one day, and another one the next. ... Also, different people within the organization were telling you different things. So, that made it very, very difficult for a while to actually be able to have a really meaningful and trusting working relationship with them. (Jackson)*

This is not to suggest that more centralized forms of coordination are impossible. Rather, it implies that further exploration of network dynamics is needed to discover the type(s) of leadership and forms of information sharing that would be most effective in this complex set of

relationships. At the least, one may not simply assume the efficacy of a principal-agent set of relationships or simple command-control approach.

As an alternative, many of our respondents believed that coordination might well be improved by means of a non-hierarchical, network-type response. In this view, INGO and NGO representatives themselves could assume a leadership role in coordination.

*... In many cases, the United Nations is not in a good position at all to coordinate the work of NGOs. The NGOs themselves, and perhaps with civil society, would be in a better position to self-manage their activities, to self-regulate their work, and, the UN being as it is, inevitably highly politicized, highly bureaucratic, not in all cases but generally I would say, and also having many, many other agendas, but also not necessarily understanding ... NGO workers and NGO agendas. (Lin)*

*But national and ... international organizations ... they are core groups that are very well known from the donor, and they are well known to each other because they work together, and that could be put in a role of leadership. And I'm not saying that there aren't issues with leadership in every country, because we do not have that capacity in every country, but there are countries where we are able to be the leadership role. (Linden)*


Such an approach, however, would need to have a strong foundation of shared values and standards as these underpin decisions among professionals to extend trust across organizational boundaries to secure improved coordination (Benini, 1997). Several of our respondents noted that aid delivery has improved markedly in the years since Kosovo, largely due to the development of service and professional standards by a number of groups.

*I think there's been a sort of a quantum leap in the last four years, five years, in organizations understanding the need for standards, minimum standards in the work they do, particularly in service positions, and in particular SPHERE standards and similar internal standards which have been developed by MSF or other organizations. (Lin)*

*The Good Donorship Initiative ... meets a couple of times a year; it's basically a set up of major humanitarian aid donors, and they've gotten together and put together some, I think, common codes or principles which they are promoting. (Lin)*

Organizations themselves, recognizing the need for better coordination, are embracing such standards as well as developing their own. While developing policies, practices and values at the organizational level is certainly feasible, the adoption and integration of a set of common standards among a changing and diverse network of organizations and entities is hardly a sure thing and there is no obvious path for the transmission of such standards among “lone wolves,” those organizations with no obvious incentive to coordinate. Further, such an approach is heavily dependent upon an honor system among organizations, and strong mission identification and training within organizations because of the highly dynamic nature of crisis intervention.

		Contextual Factors			
Operative Levels of Trust					
	Interpersonal Contacts / Reputation	Funding	Inter-Organizational Competition	Media Saliency	Stress of Relief Work
Strategic	Pre-existing network paths; common cast of actors	High funding levels supporting many actors not as conducive to coordination at later stages	For-profit aid contractors less likely to coordinate	Media attention influences amount of available funding and may lead to large level of service organization deployment in short time frames	Capacity to coordinate beyond purview of any one organization
	Character and capacity of leadership of relevant UN, INGO, governmental and local actors	Number of organizations related to funding availability	Funding creates a large pool of actors vying for available contracts	Harmonization possible at early stages with world attention	Reduced stress and urgency promotes inter-organizational coordination
	Many actors skeptical of centralized coordination	Funding restrictions mediate against capacity building among service recipients	Ability to coordinate related to number of actors or entities involved		
	Strong foundation of shared values and standards required for trust and boundary spanning	Too much funding within a short time frame at early stages can interfere with effective aid delivery and coordination	Response of United Nations: Whether and How		
Organizational	Complementary competencies between organizations	Potential mechanism for cooperation; incentive (threat of loss of funding)			
	Knowledge of service delivery in particular sectors; standing and capacity for carrying out mission	Resources available at national and international levels	Pay structure of international aid organizations competes with UN or USAID for the best staff		
	"Untested" actors may be excluded		Local capacity; stability of government and its will and ability to respond		
	Shared service and professional standards improve aid delivery				
Individual	Past personal & professional interaction; role equivalence	Funding alone not sufficient to ensure that individual actors will span organizational boundaries	Staff training and core competencies		Inexperienced staff on the ground
	Perceptions of individual's experience with organization in prior crises				

 Elements that promote trust & boundary spanning

**Figure 1**

Figure 1 summarizes a number of the contextual factors we have discussed and suggests how each helps shape the potential for coordination at different levels of analysis and of organizational action. The extension of trust at least partially mediates these potentials at all levels of analysis. First, at the macro-strategic level, it seems clear that nations and national

policy choices shape all else in the humanitarian environment. If key countries elect not to respond to a crisis or to do so half-heartedly, the consequences for all that follows are profound. The tepid American response to the Rwanda and Darfur genocides may provide examples (Dallaire, 2004, Hatzfeld, 2005). These state calculations are not solely the products of trust or its dearth, but instead the consequences of multiple factors including protection of state sovereignty and perceived scope of action. Once an intervention is accepted, however, levels of interstate trust may indeed become more salient for coordination as key choices occur concerning funding and support levels. At the network level, meanwhile, the decision by member nations not to accord a single UN entity authority over relief efforts guarantees that the current clumsy international inter-organizational humanitarian service structure will endure. That choice surely reflects, at least in part, the judgments of member nations about which organizations may be trusted and which not even as it obviously reflects their collective desire to preserve wide discretion over how to react to humanitarian relief emergencies. Media salience matters to states strategically as they make these choices, at least to the extent that it may arouse their populations to demand a response. It appears, however, that such salience may make it more, not less, difficult for network participants to cooperate as it places enormous pressures on each to demonstrate its role and efficacy to its stakeholders.

Trust appears significant at the organizational scale in at least two ways. First, it may help to establish shared organizational norms that, encouraged by similar missions or normative aspirations, may encourage organization-to-organization cooperation. Second, it may encourage individual professionals with knowledge of a counterpart in another organization to work across organizational boundaries and coordinate activities with that individual and, thereby, her

organization. Meanwhile, it is important to recall that at the organization scale, factors such as competition for salience or funding may work against these possibilities.

Finally, in an important sense, individuals mediate many operating level choices in relief operations. They can, if they so elect, reach across organizational boundaries even in the face of incentives not to do so, but they do so at considerable cost. Conversely, individuals may also resist inter-organizational cooperation even when their organizational leaders request such action. Ultimately, much of the potential for coordination rests with individual choices made by professionals in the field. As we note above, these are partly the product of disposition and personality, partly of professional capacity and partly of the individual's "read" of the incentives at play. For those who would encourage greater coordination of activities in inter-organizational relief networks the challenge is to maximize the number and quality of incentives that encourage cooperation—as field-level professionals understand these.

### **Concluding Observations**

Our interviews confirmed for us afresh what others have already observed. Humanitarian aid efforts are fraught with competition and confusion. These conditions are part and parcel of the overall environment of relief delivery and cannot simply be "fixed" by means of a more thoroughgoing top-down coordination. Humanitarian aid implementation is better conceived as a network of actors enmeshed, in part, within a set of pre-existing relationships, brought together by an emergency, but with no natural lines of authority existing among them. This suggests that coordination takes place within a relational network of more or less independent organizations (at least from one another).

Our respondents often reminded us, if a reminder was needed, of the stressful, complex environment of humanitarian assistance. The intense pressure of emergency intervention and the often competitive processes by which aid allocations are provided make an already difficult situation still more challenging. These conditions suggest that any sort of coordination will be difficult, but it does appear that a network form of organization ultimately may be more responsive to the turbulent and changing situation. The notion that polycentricity permits more innovative and more varied responses is not new, but it does appear to be operative in humanitarian relief efforts. Its twin may also be operative: Polycentric implementation structures implicitly depend upon their weakest links for their overall effectiveness. In situations of crisis and dire need, this reality, whatever its theoretic advantages, may not be permissible to the parties involved.

The noncentralized character of aid delivery suggests in turn that the factors that can improve trust and coordination in humanitarian relief networks do not rest with any single actor. Organizations can individually institute rules and standards, but cannot control the behavior of other organizations. One promising alternative is the establishment of norms and standards, such as those developed by SPHERE and the Good Donorship Initiative, in networks that include major INGOs and donors. These standards condition the behavior of numerous organizations in an effort to secure coordination via self-regulation. While they are only as strong as the common normative claims that sustain them, these standards do appear to be a reasonable and necessary, if not yet sufficient, response to the strategic and operational environment of humanitarian aid delivery.



We set out to explore with a small but experienced group of professionals (our respondents) a key hypothesis advanced in the literature: whether and how trust might play a role in securing improved coordination among the many participants providing services in humanitarian relief scenarios. We found it does, but in unexpectedly complex ways that befit and mirror the complexities of the operating environment in which such choices are made. We also found that decisions to extend trust and thereby to enable various degrees of coordination and cooperation among organizations were influenced by factors at play at multiple analytic levels and so are subject to the vagaries of network dynamics.

As many in the literature have argued, trust is surely the lubricant of inter-organizational decisions to coordinate activities in as much as effective coordination implies a disciplining of one's own unfettered capacity to act as perceived desirable in order to take into account the needs, claims and desires of others. Such choices demand trust, which may result from personal or professional perceptions and knowledge, or amalgams of both of these, and may occur primarily at the individual level. Alternately, in the absence of the relationships and knowledge necessary for such personal judgments, relief professionals may nonetheless extend trust to their counterparts in other organizations on the basis of perceived organizational legitimacy and competence. In either case, individuals alone do not mediate such choices, which are instead the product of organizational expectations, operating routines and a host of strategic factors as well as personal predilection. Trust may be vital to decisions to coordinate actions across organizational boundaries, but it is hardly autonomously determined and by itself is unlikely to prove sufficient to secure coordination. That fact, coupled with the complexity of the

implementation structure through which humanitarian relief is delivered, leads us to conclude that we should conceive of such efforts as networks and to imagine ways in which we can secure goal and values awareness and complementarity (where possible) among relief organizations and professionals before each is ensconced in the hothouse conditions that are the stuff of humanitarian relief. We are heartened by the steps that have been taken in this direction in recent years by a variety of relevant professional groups and hope such dialogue continues but these initiatives will only be so successful as their widespread adoption (that is, active acceptance) by individuals involved in the many roles related to humanitarian relief. The challenge is not dissimilar to that which confronts any leader who would establish global norms of action. In any case, the “relief coordination problem” is not merely structural and we can conceive of no simple organizational fix that will “set matters right” among so complex a group of actors. Informed dialogue does seem an appropriate first order response.

Humanitarian aid delivery networks appear often to operate to exclude indigenous NGOs and citizens, and thereby indirectly to thwart in-country capacity building. The frequent absence of national representatives in coordinating meetings and the reliance among network participants on “known quantities” appear to make it especially difficult to develop relationships and build the capacity of NGOs in country. This result appears to be the product, at least in part, of the self-reinforcing feedback loops that typify relationships among actors who work together in one crisis after another. That almost dialectical relationship is constructive in the sense that it may create boundary spanning behavior among individuals based on trust but, paradoxically, may be accompanied by an important negative externality. The very “strangeness” or novelty of most NGOs may make it more difficult for those entities to gain legitimacy in the relief process, even

when they possess the necessary capacities and domestic representativeness and/or legitimacy to play significant aid roles. We believe that this is an area in which the need for more robust forms of trust and boundary spanning behavior are keenly felt. In our view, the dynamics of how such inclinations might be developed or encouraged among otherwise often disparate organizations and between professionals within them requires more thorough study.

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