Implications of a Rights-Based Approach for Humanitarian Coordination

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Coordination and rights-based approaches to humanitarian action represent two of the most significant issues and trends in the humanitarian field so far this century. Both topics have dominated academic and professional discourse, cutting to the very heart of the on-going debate around so-called ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ humanitarianism (Chandler 11). Attracting a range of differing and sometimes seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints, the controversy surrounding these issues has had little impact on overall trends towards ever-expanding coordination mechanisms and a reconceptualization of humanitarian action as a practice firmly grounded in the principles and language of human rights (Chandler 1; Darcy-a 4; Klasing et al 2; Slim 15).

Regardless of how these trends are viewed by individual academics, practitioners and organisations it is clear that they, and the paradigm they shape for many of the central actors, are a reality that forms part of the operating environment for modern humanitarian action. Furthermore, though they will almost certainly continue to evolve and be supplemented – most recently by IASC’s ‘Transformative Agenda’ and the increased emphasis being placed on resilience – there is little evidence to suggest these trends towards greater coordination and rights-based humanitarianism will be halted or reversed any time soon.

It is somewhat surprising then that so little attention has been given to the junction between these two dominant concepts and trends. In particular, the implications of a rights-based approach to humanitarian action on the issue of coordination appears to have been entirely neglected. As countless humanitarian organisations and staff have embraced the idea of a rights-based approach, real questions have been raised as to just how many have an in-depth understanding of the concept and have given consideration to the full implications of such an approach (Klasing et al 2). This ‘gap’ is most evident in the less technically-focused aspects of humanitarian work, such as coordination.

This paper seeks to provide a logical and coherent analysis of the implications of a rights-based approach to humanitarian action on the issue of coordination. It will do so by reviewing theory, policy and practice in each area individually before combining the two to distil a set of clear and justifiable conclusions.
Importantly, this paper will not seek to pass judgement on the value of current perspectives on coordination and rights-based approaches. Rather, it will endeavour to provide as an objective an analysis as possible, so as to promote an increased understanding of what the logical and coherent application of a rights-based approach would entail. It is hoped this will be of value to both organisations and practitioners professing such an approach, as well to others wishing to understand those that do.

**Outlining the Topic**

Before defining a specific research question, it is necessary to formulate a more detailed outline of the topic in question, its importance and why this research is necessary. This will also provide an opportunity to define several key terms and how they are used in this paper. This section will serve both as an extended introduction for readers less familiar with the humanitarian field and a clarification of the specific perspective and interpretations being used by the author for those with a more advanced understanding.

**The ‘humanitarian’ question**

It has become a virtual truism within the humanitarian world – both academic and professional – to state that not only is there no agreed definition of the term ‘humanitarian’, but that it is probably the most hotly contested debate within the field (Chandler 14). The gradual shift from strict or ‘traditional’ humanitarianism which limited itself to actions aimed at relieving the suffering of those affected by disasters and conflict (Darcy-a 9-10), to ‘new’ humanitarianism which seeks to go further, providing relief but also addressing the underlying causes of crises in the hopes of preventing them in the future (Chandler 4), has been both heralded as the moral awakening of the field and criticised as its very death knell (Chandler; Rieff; Slim).

For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘humanitarian’ will be taken to mean action aimed at alleviating the suffering of people affected by emergencies, primarily – but not exclusively – in the present and immediate future.\(^1\) This definition has been selected for its utility in that it is considered to adequately encapsulate the activities of organisations

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\(^1\) This definition of humanitarian will be extended to other areas (eg humanitarian coordination) with some exceptions. “Humanitarian intervention” while perhaps fitting with this definition in theory, has the specific connotation of military action and is not included in the humanitarian action described in this paper. Similarly, actions aimed at alleviating suffering of people affected by emergencies, but carried out by actors with primarily non-humanitarian goals, such as militaries and private sector business, is not considered humanitarian action here and will be dealt with separately.
adopting a rights-based approach to humanitarian action, thus enabling a productive analysis of those topics that are the focus of this paper. While some would challenge this definition and the validity of rights-based humanitarianism (Chandler; Rieff) if it is to be examined as a concept, it must be taken on its own terms. It should be noted however that this definition is not intended as a normative statement by the author.

A rights-based approach to humanitarian action

Rights-based approaches are one of many paradigms through which to view or engage in humanitarian action. They essentially view a humanitarian situation as one of unfulfilled human rights (Dufour et al 132). With reference to generally recognised rights, such as the right to life with dignity, rights-based approaches establish principles, objectives and programs aimed at ensuring the fulfilment of those rights (Concannon and Linstrom 1147). They can be contrasted with alternatives such as philanthropic charity, needs based approaches and human security, all of which include some areas of overlap with rights-based approaches, as well as marked differences (Concannon and Linstrom 1149; Slim 3).

Rights-based approaches began to emerge in the late 1990s and have gradually been further elaborated and accepted as a new norm in humanitarian action (Miller 916; Ouyang et al 152), generally mirroring and being influenced by similar changes in the area of development more generally (Darcy-a 4; Slim 17,19). There has however been notable resistance (Darcy-a 11-13; Dufour et al 129), primarily from those organisations subscribing to more traditional interpretations of humanitarianism and others who dismissively consider it little more than a new fad (Piron-a 27). Despite this, a rights-based approach to humanitarian action is now the stated policy of key United Nations (UN) humanitarian agencies and many of the fields leading actors (Cotterrell 5-6; Darcy-a 4-6; Slim 19-20), as well as at least nominally forming the basis of the most widely accepted technical standards in the field – those of the Sphere Project² (Concannon and Linstrom 1157; Klasing et al 3; Walker and Purdin 105). This growing dominance has not however, been accompanied by a unified understanding of exactly what a rights-based approach entails (Cotterrell 5; Klasing et al 9; Piron-a 23). Indeed there is not really ‘a rights-based approach’ so much as there is a variety of mostly self-

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² The full title of the main Sphere standards document is the Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response. For brevity, it will be referred to in this paper simply as the Sphere Handbook or Sphere standards.
identifying ‘rights-based approaches’ (Klasing et al 11; Miller 916). These can also be further distinguished from other approaches which utilised the concepts and language of rights without actually being based on them (Darcy-a 10; Klasing et al 12). These points will be returned to in more detail in Chapter 2, suffice to say that in formulating a useful definition, this variation must be taken into account.

For the purposes of this paper, a rights-based approach (RBA) will be taken to be any approach to humanitarian action that conceptualises humanitarian situations in terms of unfulfilled human rights and utilises this perspective in forming principles, objectives and programs for action. These include those approaches that self-identify as RBAs and those in which this characterisation is less explicit. Importantly, the RBA is recognised as being both a concept and an evolving normative trend that is still changing and, arguably, incomplete in its articulation and application.

Coordination in humanitarian action

Coordination has long been a central issue in humanitarian action and essentially relates to the ways in which different humanitarian actors work together before, during and after emergencies (Seybolt 1027). A less prominent issue in the past when far fewer actors sought to provide humanitarian assistance, coordination has grown in importance over the past twenty years. Successive large-scale international emergency responses – such as in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC), the former Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Haiti and Pakistan – and their perceived short-comings have led to a series of evaluations and subsequent changes (Cosgrave; ODI; Seybolt 1036). While resistance has been frequent and there remains a huge variety of positions taken by individual organisations, a clear overall trend towards enhanced coordination is evident, as is the virtual consensus that at least some level of coordination is necessary and beneficial (Ngamassi et al 1; Seybolt 1034).

There is far less consensus as to the exact extent and type of coordination that should be pursued and it is worth noting the huge variety of activities and mechanisms that may be considered ‘coordination’. Coordination, along with similar terms such as ‘cooperation’ and ‘collaboration’, can include, inter alia, information sharing, joint assessments or evaluations, partnerships, formal coordination structures and joint program implementation (Jahre and Jensen 664). In this paper, the term ‘coordination’ will be used as an umbrella term to incorporate all of these mechanisms and behaviours.
Coordination could also be said to incorporate a number of other important sub-topics which form highly discussed and debated issues in their own right. Among them are; civil-military coordination, coordination with and by government, and business or private sector partnerships. For the purpose of this paper, each of these will be considered as components of the discussion, but outside the definition of ‘coordination’ used, as they involve non-humanitarian actors.

Thus for the purposes of this paper, coordination will be taken as a broad term incorporating all activities in which multiple humanitarian organisations consciously work together to deliver humanitarian assistance. Coordination will be approached as both a practice – engaged in by different actors for often very different reasons – and a dynamic trend with changing patterns and characteristics. Despite the current dominance of their international counterparts, it is also important to note that this definition includes often forgotten local humanitarian actors.

**Academic or Practical Value?**

Coordination is consistently identified as a central issue in humanitarian action as effective coordination (or a lack thereof) can directly affect the quantity, quality and process of assistance to affected communities (Seybolt 1027; Stephenson 41-42). It can also raise challenging questions relating to the principles, objectives and ethics of humanitarian action. Conversely, while the RBA to humanitarian action is also immersed in these more theoretical discussions, it has been criticised for lacking a practical perspective and being little more than a useful slogan (Miller 918; Slim 4).

Proponents of RBAs would argue that practical articulations can be found in the Sphere standards and various policies and tools of individual organisations (Cotterrell 8; Slim 18). Despite this, there is no agreed definition or framework and clearly an incomplete understanding of the concept and how it impacts on the day-to-day activities of humanitarian organisations (Cotterrell 5; Miller 916). Given its predominance in the humanitarian sector and its use as a rationale for a wide range of activities, it is essential

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3 It should be noted that many humanitarian organisations are not one organisation at all. Many, such as the United Nations, Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and some NGOs, are in fact made up of many separate organisations. Coordination between organisations within the same federation or ‘family’ will be only be considered in this paper to the extent that it is voluntary – that is, not enforceable through some unifying structure or system.
that a fuller understanding of RBAs is developed, particularly in relation to its practical implications for humanitarian organisations in areas not yet addressed.

As both a topic of regular debate and a practical challenge faced by humanitarian actors before, during and after emergencies, coordination is then a logical subject for analysis from an RBA perspective. The likelihood than many in the humanitarian field would not immediately be able to identify any implications of the RBA on coordination, positive or negative, only underlines the lack of consideration that has been given to this topic. Evidence of this can be seen in the process of developing a specific coordination standard for the most recent edition of the Sphere Handbook (See Box 1.1).

**Box 1.1: Sphere 2011 – A new coordination standard**

The Sphere Handbook is commonly regarded as one of the most practical articulations of the RBA and its standards are, at least in theory, based on the idea of rights-based humanitarianism (Cotterrell 8; Walker and Purdin 105). With the 3rd edition of the handbook, released in 2011, Sphere included for the first time a standard on the issue of coordination – Core Standard 2: Coordination and collaboration.

“Humanitarian response is planned and implemented in coordination with the relevant authorities, humanitarian agencies and civil society organisations engaged in impartial humanitarian action, working together for maximum efficiency, coverage and effectiveness.” (Sphere Project 58)

In addition to the standard, the Key Actions, Indicators and Guidance Notes call on organisations to;

- Be informed of and participate in coordination mechanisms (sectoral and general)
- Share information about mandate, objectives and programs, as well as assessment and progress data
- Take into account information from other organisations in decision making
- Collaborate with other organisations on advocacy issues
- Define clear policies for engagement with non-humanitarian actors (eg military and private sector)

Source: Sphere Project (58-60)
The development of this standard emerged as a result of extensive consultation in the Sphere Handbook revision process in which coordination was regularly highlighted as a key issue. There was broad consensus in favour of enhancing the coordination related content in Sphere. Initial ideas of ‘mainstreaming’ coordination eventually evolved into support for the dedicated standard which was included in the handbook (Sandison).

The impetus for a coordination standard came largely from a common desire for greater efficiency and effectiveness, as well as a need to address civil-military and private partnership coordination issues. Interestingly however, despite it providing the theoretical and philosophical background for Sphere, discussion of the RBA as a rationale for coordination in general and the standard specifically was essentially absent. It appears the RBA, and rights in general, were not considered in the development process. Instead, the new Sphere coordination standard was driven largely by practical concerns and in this regard was generally well supported (Sandison).

The reality is that there is no real evidence of serious consideration being given to the implications of an RBA on the issue of coordination, let alone peer-reviewed academic research. Research leading to a finding of specific and practical implications in this area would be of considerable importance to organisations professing an RBA and to others who engage with or are impacted by their behaviour. Were contradictions between an organisation or body’s policies relating to the RBA and coordination found to exist, it would force a re-examination of those policies and potentially lead to changes in organisational practice.

**Research Question**

The research question used for this paper is then as follows: What are the implications of a rights-based approach to humanitarian action for inter-agency coordination in humanitarian action?

The phrasing of this research question is intentionally broad for a number of reasons. Firstly, so as not to pre-suppose the outcome of the research and analysis in type (eg theoretical or practical) or value judgement (eg positive or negative) of any potential implications. Secondly, using the broad definitions of the terms coordination and humanitarian described above, to cast as wide a net as possible and not omit any potentially significant findings.
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These two reasons are essentially characteristic of the third, which relates to the state of current research and the nature of the paper. Given the lack of existing research on this topic, and indeed the somewhat ambiguous and varied understanding of the RBA to humanitarian action, this research is essentially exploratory. Its objective is to identify the issues or areas where the two concepts meet and then draw logical conclusions based on current understanding of both. Thus the findings presented in this paper shall provide the basis for further examination of each of the areas identified and for testing of the conclusions drawn. Furthermore, the fact that both coordination and the RBA can be seen as evolving trends requires an open approach that will maintain validity and relevance over time. Indeed it is hoped that this research may contribute to current discussion and changes in relation to these concepts and trends.

Structure of Paper

Following this introduction, which includes a brief outline of the methodology undertaken in this research, this paper will begin by approaching its two key topics individually.

Chapter 2 will examine the RBA through three different lenses. The first will be historical, providing the background of events and trends that drove the development of the RBA, and heavily influenced its modern interpretation as a result. The second lens used will be legal, examining the basis of the RBA in terms of international law. Finally, the RBA will be considered in terms of its key issues and tensions so as to understand the complexity and challenges it presents. The understanding developed through analysis using these three lenses will enable a set of key characteristics of modern RBA to be identified and used in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3 will present a similar analysis of the humanitarian coordination. Once again, three different lenses will be used to develop a fuller picture of the topic. As with the RBA, coordination will be examined first through a historical lens to understand its evolution over time and current trends. Secondly, humanitarian coordination will be deconstructed in terms of a number of different factors so as to develop an appreciation and understanding of its complexity and the huge variety of coordination opportunities and practices in use. The third lens used will once again be that of key issues and tensions, to enable a more balanced and critical perception of coordination. Chapter 3
will also conclude with a set of key characteristics, this time of humanitarian coordination, which will feed into the subsequent analysis.

Chapter 4 utilises the understanding developed in Chapters 2 and 3, and in particular the characteristics of each of the two main topics distilled in the respective chapter conclusions. The findings of this research’s central analysis are presented, outlining the proposed implications of the RBA for humanitarian coordination. More specifically, three guiding principles are identified, as well as five common themes where implications have been found.

Chapter 5 provides the conclusion for this paper. It begins by briefly reviewing the process and findings of this paper and suggesting recommendations for further research. It also reflects on the implications of the research findings with particular reference to their significance and potential impact for humanitarian action and the actors subscribing to an RBA.

**Methodology**

As explained above, the lack of existing research in the area this paper will focus on, as well as the complexity and ambiguities of the central topics, suggests the need for a fairly exploratory and open approach in this research. Though the RBA and humanitarian coordination are dominant themes in the field, they are poorly defined and potential areas of convergence have not been considered in any systematic way. As a result no real hypothesis has, as yet, been formulated and therefore cannot be tested.

Rather than putting forward an intuitive hypothesis based on pre-conceived ideas, the author considered current research would be better served by an exploratory analysis which sought to develop a new hypothesis based on an objective analysis and logical consideration of the issues involved. This paper is then more conceptual in nature requiring an academic review of the key topics and themes, and an analysis that produces a model or set of findings that can be tested in subsequent research.

As such, a literature review based methodology has been selected. Each of the two central topics – the RBA and coordination in humanitarian action – has been researched via a literature review, including academic writing and other relevant material from the
field. Documentation reviewed includes journal articles, books, legal material, organisational policies, discussion papers, evaluation reports and historical documents.

While it was not the intention of the author to conduct primary research – for the reasons described above – some clarification was sought in terms of information not published or freely available to the public. For this reason, some correspondence with key people involved in the development of documents of relevance was entered into. Specifically, those involved in the consultation and drafting of the new Sphere coordination standard (see Box 1.1 above) were contacted via email to garner further information as to the development process and discussions involved.

With the information gathered through the literature review and targeted correspondence, the central analysis of this paper was undertaken. This involved comparing the outputs of the literature review and identifying common areas between the two core topics, identifying where similar or opposing ideas where present. In each of the areas identified the RBA, as the research shows it to be understood, was applied to the specific issue in question. The outputs of this application are presented in terms of the clear guidance, areas of conflict or tension, and unresolved ambiguities identified.

**Limitations**

The obvious limitation of the methodology chosen is that relies heavily on theory and academic literature. This has been somewhat mitigated through the extension of the literature review beyond academic work and the inclusion of policies and reports from those active in the field. In addition, a conscious effort has been made to ground the analysis in reality and avoid general or idealistic conclusions so that the practical implications of the findings are not inconsequential.

Another potential limitation is author bias. While every effort was made to ensure an objective analysis, the author’s previous knowledge and experience in the field cannot be ignored as potentially influencing factors. By the same token however, the fact that the author is not a complete outsider may also be seen as a strength in that it helps place the research in a realistic context. Nevertheless, the possibility of unintentional bias cannot be disregarded.

While these limitations are considered acceptable given the nature of the paper and the exploratory methodology chosen, these limitations must be considered by the reader.
Chapter 2 – The Rights-based Approach

Introduction

In order to analyse the implications of an RBA for coordination in humanitarian action, it is first necessary to understand the RBA in its current form. This is however, not a straight forward task. As alluded to in Chapter 1, there is no single agreed definition or outline of the RBA to humanitarian action (Miller 917).

There are multiple variations and interpretations of the RBA, with different focuses and implemented to different extents (Cotterrell 5; Klasing et al 11; Miller 916). Add to this the range of approaches to humanitarian action which invoke the language of rights, but which are not, strictly speaking, RBAs, and the picture gets very complicated (Darcy-a 10; Miller 918). The reality is that the RBA in its current form is more a category of approaches or philosophies to humanitarian action that share common characteristics and ideas, rather than a unified doctrine.

This chapter will examine the RBA to humanitarian action, as it is understood today and as dynamic trend that is still evolving, with the aim of identifying a set of common characteristics or elements with which to analyse the issue of coordination. Doing so will require consideration of the RBA through a number of different ‘lenses’.

The first lens will be historical. The background and evolution of the RBA over time will be examined, giving special consideration to the context in which this took place. A number of key moments and periods will be reviewed to build an understanding of the origins, issues and motivations behind the RBA. These provide perspective and an appreciation of several key elements of the RBA as it is interpreted in modern humanitarian action.

Secondly, the RBA will be examined in terms of its legal basis – to the extent that one exists. While a complete legal analysis of the RBA is beyond the scope of this paper, an overview of the major questions and issues stemming from a legal perspective of the RBA will be provided. In doing this, it will be possible to form a clear understanding of the extent to which the RBA is legalistic in nature and what its relationship with international law means in terms of the way it is understood and used today.
Finally, the RBA will be analysed through the lens of its key issues and the tensions it presents. This will provide the important perspective of the RBA as concept under debate, with considerable variation and ambiguities. It will also enable most of the main arguments against the RBA to humanitarian action to be considered, ensuring a more balanced understanding of the topic.

Utilising the insights provided by analysis through these three lenses, the chapter will conclude with an attempt to outline the key components of the RBA as it is understood today. This will be done by reviewing the major themes and points identified and throughout the chapter and highlighting the most significant characteristics. While this set of characteristics does not in itself provide a framework for the RBA, it will form the basis of the analysis of the RBA’s implications for the issue of humanitarian coordination, which is the central focus of this paper.

Each section will include a brief summary and reflection on the key points to be utilised in forming the chapter’s conclusion, which will distil the seven specific characteristics of the modern RBA. These characteristics

Before commencing, it is worth noting that while academic literature on the RBA to humanitarian action does exist, considerably more research has been done in relation to the wider concept of an RBA to development. There are clearly differences between these two topics however their similarities do mean that much that is written about one, is equally applicable to the other. As such, this paper will also draw on the more substantial research and commentary on the RBA to development where it is evident that the points raised are easily transferable and applicable to humanitarian action.

**LENS 1 – HISTORY AND EVOLUTION**

This section will briefly review the history and evolution of the RBA to humanitarian action. By examining the RBA through this ‘historical lens’ an appreciation of the background, context and contributing factors can be developed with which to garner a better understanding of several key elements of its current form.

It must be understood however, that this brief overview does not present a comprehensive outline of all the historical influences involved. Instead it highlights
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some specific moments and trends of importance. It must also be read with the understanding that reality is far more complex and disorganised than the rather chronological and categorised outline presented here, which has been somewhat simplified for ease of comprehension.

**Traditional and needs based humanitarianism**

The origins of the humanitarian tradition are typically dated to the work of Henry Dunant and the formation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1864 (Barnett and Weiss 23, 35; Walker and Purdin 101). For well over one hundred years, this tradition continued relatively unchanged, grounded in the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (Darcy-a 8).

The guiding principle here was the humanitarian imperative – the imperative that “human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found” (UNICEF 1) - and to a large extent, the others were more instrumental in that they could be seen as necessary to enable effective humanitarian action (Barnett and Weiss 109; Macdonald and Valenza 7). Though arguably not inherent in these humanitarian principles, they were for the most part framed in the idea of compassion, charity or philanthropy and helping those in need (Darcy-a 9; Slim 10).

With the expansion of humanitarian activity and the growth in the number of organisations undertaking humanitarian action throughout the second half of the 20th century (Barnett and Weiss 48-50), humanitarianism gradually became more organised and institutionalised – to some degree, more professional (Barnett and Weiss 66; Klasing et al 2). With this shift, came a more open recognition that doing something for people in need did not always result in their needs being met (Chandler 6).

The result was a general move towards a more explicit and structured needs based humanitarianism. Essentially this translated into a policy of assessing in advance of, and during, a given humanitarian situation, the needs of the affected individuals or communities (Darcy and Hofmann25). Humanitarian action would then, at least in theory, be directed at meeting those needs leading to more focused and relevant interventions (Darcy and Hofmann 52). To a large extent this needs based approach remains in place throughout the sector to this day and is not necessarily incongruous with the more recent philosophies that have succeeded it in terms of policy and rhetoric.
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(Darcy-a 10). This may be because it is considered, consciously or otherwise, as being a highly practical approach that is easily operationalised.

The 1990s – a new environment and a search for a ‘better’ humanitarianism

The dramatic changes in the humanitarian field that occurred in the 1990s have been documented and analysed at length. Thus this section will not seek to summarise all of them, but rather highlight some specific components of the upheaval which laid the path for the RBA to be emerge and remain core and distinguishing components of the concept.

Probably the most obvious change was the acceleration in the expansion of the humanitarian sector. Changes in global politics with the end of the Cold War and its knock on effects saw governments and international organisations placing increased emphasis on ‘humanitarian’ issues and action as they understood it (or chose to interpret it) (Barnett and Weiss 79,89; Chandler 1). With this emphasis came increased funding, more and bigger organisations and ever expanding programs (Barnett and Weiss 114). This rapid expansion in a changing global environment led to new issues emerging and old ones becoming more significant (Barnett and Weiss 102).

The perception that large scale humanitarian action was being used as a substitute for more risky military intervention, in the face of human rights violations in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the mid-90s, led many practitioners and organisations to question whether they were becoming geopolitical pawns (Barnett and Weiss 90; Chandler 15; Darcy-a 4). The daunting realisation that, in some circumstances, simply doing good – however well it was done – may ultimately contribute to making things worse for affected populations (Cotterrell 7; Darcy-b 116; Klasing et al 9-19), forced many to reflect on exactly what it was they were trying to achieve.

For more experienced staff, this accentuated existing frustrations at returning time and again to the same crises – sometimes in different areas, sometimes not – without seeing any real change or improvement in the lives of those they strived to help. This dissatisfaction with treating the symptoms rather than the causes of the problems they confronted led to the infamous questions of whether, in David Reiff’s words, they were simply providing ‘a bed for the night’ or looking after the well-fed dead (Chandler 6).

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4 See, for example, Barnett and Weiss (70-104), Chandler and Rieff.
Out of this sector-wide soul searching emerged the ideas behind the so-called ‘new humanitarianism’ (Chandler 3). Essentially it argued that alleviating human suffering could not be restricted only to immediate physiological needs (Chandler 10). Humanitarianism that sought to help those in need, while ignoring the factors that led to the need in the first place, was seen as failing on a moral level and making little sense from strategic point of view (Dufour et al 131). Instead, it was argued, humanitarianism needed to broaden and deepen its gaze, and ultimately seek to eliminate human suffering rather than simply mitigating it (Chandler 4).

Those organisations that did start doing more soon found themselves to be lacking a unifying philosophy to underpin their work. New humanitarianism was more a comparative description – often used as a derisive term – than a doctrine. Faced with the incongruence of a broad range of programs that could no longer be justified by the humanitarian principles alone, many individuals and organisations sought to develop new models and frameworks to encapsulate their beliefs and programs (Chandler 3, 7; Cotterrell 9; Slim 4). Aspiringly holistic concepts such as ‘human security’ and ‘protection’ emerged, were developed and implemented to varying degrees (Barnett and Weiss 77; Darcy-a 3; Slim 19; Young et al 144). As with the language of needs, these concepts were never really discarded and remain part of the humanitarian logic and lexicon today.

Along with these theoretical and even philosophical debates, the huge expansion of humanitarian activity had brought to the foreground some far more practical concerns (Macdonald and Valenza 6). Mistakes were made and here as well, humanitarians were faced with the possibility that their ‘assistance’ may directly be causing harm (Chandler 12; Cotterrell 7; Darcy-b 116; Klasing et al 9-10).

This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in refugee camps along the border of Zaire (now DRC) immediately following the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (Klasing et al 9-10). The scale of the international response made coordination a far bigger issue than it had previously been (ODI 7), but far more worrying for some was the fact that many of the Rwandans given key roles in running the camps and managing the aid were the very people responsible for the genocide (Klasing et al 9-10). Questions of who was benefiting from the humanitarian assistance and how it was being used were neither
easy, nor comfortable to answer. Transparency was lacking in a system not used to having to justify its activities.

Even more disconcerting was the lack of accountability. As the power of humanitarian action to have major negative as well as positive impacts became evident (Chandler 12; Macdonald and Valenza 5), so too did the fact that there was limited, if any, opportunity to hold individuals or organisations responsible for their performance (Seybolt 1041). There was no regulatory or accreditation systems and no over-arching body – absent the relevant government which often times lacked the capacity or will to act – to pull sub-standard organisations into line (Darcy-b 119; Ouyang et al 151; Stephenson and Schnitzer 921). As uncomfortable as such ideas were for organisations that included independence in the founding principles, self-regulation and good intentions were no longer enough.

All of this was complicated by the fact that there were no objective standards or processes through which to measure performance (Darcy-b 120; Dufour et al 133). There was no agreed way of distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ humanitarian action. This became a problem not just for those who were supposedly benefiting from the programs, but also for the organisations who felt they were delivering high quality initiatives only to see the sub-standard work of others diminish their impact and the perception of humanitarian action and organisations in general (Macdonald and Valenza 12-13).

Yet despite its problems, the profile of humanitarianism continued to grow, becoming more and more a topic of international politics and foreign policy which had largely ignored it in the past (Barnett and Weiss 79; Chandler 1). Humanitarianism was used to justify political and military action far beyond its traditional definition, and sometimes with the consent of the so-called new humanitarians (Chandler 14; Cotterrell 9). Wealthier governments in their role as funding donors began to pay more attention to and demand more results from the money they were investing. They too sought more accountability (Cosgrave 11).

In this environment, many in the field began to lament growing ‘distance’ between humanitarian action and those it was intended to benefit. There was a perception by some that the people affected by humanitarian emergencies were being used as pawns
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by governments and even by the humanitarian agencies themselves in their quest for funding and influence to help pursue their goals (Barnett and Weiss 101; Macdonald and Valenza 24). This is not to say that the pursuit of funding and political activity were inherently negative or ill-conceived. Instead it led to questions about the limitations of humanitarian action, whether ends justify means, and the absence of a clearly definable ‘moral compass’ or guiding principles within which to ground modern humanitarian action (Macdonald and Valenza 5).

This is, as stated, hardly a complete narrative of humanitarian thinking over that period – nor could one talk of a single line of unified humanitarian thought – however it does highlight some of the underlying drives that ultimately led to the RBA. Many sought, though perhaps not explicitly, a new philosophy or approach that brought coherence, linking humanitarian and other agendas, including wider development work (Chandler 7). There was a desire to:

- tackle root causes, while still alleviating symptoms,
- protect against humanitarianism being used as an excuse or a tool of global politics,
- bring greater transparency to the way in which humanitarian action was being implemented,
- dramatically enhance accountability in all directions,
- develop some form of common standards or way of measuring performance, and
- shift the focus back to people affected by humanitarian emergencies without ‘using’ them.

Thus to some degree it was an internal dissatisfaction with the humanitarian performance of the 90s and its perceived short-comings that formed a kind of subconscious checklist of things that needed to be addressed in any new doctrine.

Growing integration of human rights

At the same time as this upheaval in humanitarian action was taking place, human rights was re-emerging and gaining increased dominance as a normative framework in relations between the so-called global ‘North’ and ‘South’ (Barnett and Weiss 79-80; Piron-a 25). The same post-Cold War geopolitical changes that led to increased emphasis being placed on humanitarianism, pushed the idea of human rights to the
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forefront of global politics – no doubt still with other purposes in mind – and the UN agenda (Barnett and Weiss 79-81; Darcy-a 4; Piron-a 20-21; Slim 16-17).

The collapse of the bi-polar world and the subsequent breaking of the traditional deadlock in the UN Security Council enabled the UN to become much more active in pursuit of realising its own Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Chandler 10; Slim 16). Human rights became a focus and justification for international action, including the use of military force and UN peacekeeping missions (Barnett and Weiss 79-87; Slim 16-17). Many individuals and governments had – and still have – concerns that human rights were simply the creation and tool of western governments seeking to impose their own world views and order on others (Barnett and Weiss 79; Bricmont 26; Slim 23-24). Despite this, the language of human rights became more widely accepted in international relations and a useful framework with which to justify activity and political stances (Barnett and Weiss 79; Darcy-a 5).

The same was true in international development work. The concept of a ‘right to development’ actually pre-dates the dynamic described here, but in large part it was this environment that enabled significant progress to be made on the related, but different – and some would say watered down – idea of an RBA to development (Piron-a 20; Piron-b 7). Discussion of the right to development has its origins in post-colonialism and ideas of global justice, and achieved a milestone in the 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development (Piron-b 7). Ultimately however, it met with resistance from wealthier donor nations, wary of creating a legal obligation to, *inter alia*, commit funding to development programs (Piron-a 20).

The new found acceptance and pre-eminence of human rights in the 90s, along with the already sympathetic views of many development and humanitarian practitioners and organisations towards the concept and its legitimacy, led to a growing integration between these two previously separate domains (Cotterrell 7; Piron-a 20). Both development and humanitarian thinkers began to see not only the inherent values of human rights, but also relevance and linkages with their own work and long-term goals (Klasing *et al* 10; Piron-a 22-23,27). NGOs, multi-lateral agencies and donor governments began rethinking and re-framing their work in these areas in terms of rights (Klasing *et al* 2; Miller 924; Piron-a 21; Slim 20).
For the most part, the RBA to development has led the way (Klasing et al 10). The ‘breadth’ of development issues and programs being addressed, including supporting good governance, democracy and civil-society building made the jump to human rights a small one. It also had the advantage of being, if only nominally, neutral and universally accepted at a time when the supposed post-Cold War, agenda-free international cooperation was becoming less believable.

The introduction of human rights related development activities came first, before the impetus towards greater integration saw widespread calls for it to be ‘mainstreamed’(Cotterrell 5; Piron-a 20). This oft-maligned term was typically seen as a two-edged sword in development circles. Mainstreaming essentially means ‘elevating’ the given topic to the status of a ‘cross-cutting issue’ which must be addressed in all aspects of an organisation or program’s work (Piron-a 21). On the one hand this transforms a peripheral issue into an organisational priority and frequent topic of discussion, at least in theory leading to a re-think of all activities and enabling an organisation or program-wide impact to be made. Conversely, by stepping away from individual targeted programs and, for a large part, delegating responsibility for a complex issue to those in other fields of expertise, many have argued that mainstreaming ultimately leads to less impact via a classic recipe for all talk, no action.

Dissatisfaction with the limitations of mainstreaming, and the impact it had had where it was implemented, along with a growing understanding of the centrality of empowerment to fostering sustainable development outcomes, created momentum for human rights to be embraced even further (Piron-a 21). An argument began to be made for organisations to re-frame their core goals and operating principles in human rights with the expectation that this would finally lead to meaningful integration of development and human rights programs and agendas (Cotterrell 6; Klasing et al 10). Eventually, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this argument won out in many organisations officially embracing an RBA to development (Concannon and Lindstrom 1155,1157; Cotterrell 5-6; Slim 19-20).

Emerging rights-based humanitarianism
For many humanitarian organisations still coming to terms with their comparatively new development programing – and even more so for those that hadn’t taken that step – the link between human rights and humanitarian action was not so obvious (Slim 12).
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People who weren’t specialists in the field of human rights might typically associate the term with ideas such as anti-discrimination, freedom of religion and political association, and the rule of law (Slim 13). It was easy for humanitarians to see these rights as important, but somewhat secondary to the more immediate concerns of humanitarian action, such as ensuring people have adequate food, water, shelter and medical care (Barnett and Weiss 79; Slim 12-13).

This is not to suggest that practitioners and organisations were incapable of making the link between the suffering they saw every day in their programs and a violation of human rights. At the time however, gross human rights abuses, particularly those relating to conflict, were more commonly thought of in terms war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide – areas primarily dealt with under a different branch of international law. Indeed the fact that rights were considered essentially legal instruments only served to distance them even more from the practical focus of humanitarian thinking and organisations which, with the exception of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, had seldom engaged with the legal world (Slim 14).

As such, the humanitarian uptake of an RBA generally trailed that of development work (Darcy-a 4). It was largely through the so-called ‘multi-mandate’ organisations – those engaging in both humanitarian and wider development programing, and sometimes more (Barnett and Weiss 115) – that the divide began to be bridged (Chandler 10; Cotterrell 5-6; Slim 20). As these organisations contemplated, and gradually adopted as policy, human rights mainstreaming and then RBAs to development, they confronted the recent past of humanitarianism and drives for change described above. The possibility that an RBA could provide a coherent overarching framework with which to tackle both symptoms and root causes, while allowing for the more overt political activity of new humanitarianism, as well as serving as an objective anchor for enhanced accountability and standards, proved enough for many organisations to take the idea very seriously (Cotterrell 6; Darcy-a 5).

Thus the theoretical basis of rights-based humanitarianism took shape in a process which largely paralleled – if with a slight lag – that of the RBA to development, and with a vision of addressing the problems and challenges faced in the 90s (Darcy-a 4).
The Sphere Project

Central to the emergence and acceptance of an RBA to humanitarian action was the Sphere Project (Dufourp126; Ouyang et al 147; Walker and Purdin 110). Beginning in the mid-90s, the Sphere Project was only one of many new bi- or multi-lateral initiatives aimed at achieving improvements in specific areas or across the whole spectrum of humanitarian action (Klasing et al 10; Macdonald and Valenza 6; Walker and Purdin 101-102). Ultimately however, it proved to be one of the most influential, particularly in relation to linking rights with humanitarian action (Slim 18; Walker and Purdin 110).

The initial title of the project, “Towards quality and accountability standards in humanitarian relief” (Walker and Purdin 103), left no doubt as to which of the issues outlined above were seen as being the most important. Yet accountability and standards were not the only drivers behind the project. They alone would not provide a coherent paradigm with which to address root causes, nor would they guarantee a more people-centred approach. Following the above-mentioned trend towards embracing human rights, and with a degree of inspiration from the consumer rights of modern commercial and public sector performance charters, the Sphere Project sought to improve standards and accountability by grounding them in the idea of rights (Darcy-b 113, 116; Walker and Purdin 105).

The approach was not without its criticisms and there was far more consensus around the need for standards than a unified commitment to the RBA (Dufour et al 126; Walker and Purdin 109). This, along with other factors, eventually led to a sort of separation between efforts to articulate a statement of rights-based humanitarianism and those to codify practical standards by which to measure performance (Walker and Purdin 105-106; Young et al 143). These in turn were translated into the separate instruments described in the sub-title of the subsequent Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.

Many involved with the project saw the two as inherently connected and interdependent, arguing that accountability for achieving minimum standards must be extended to those whom assistance was intended to benefit in the form of rights (Darcy-b 117-118; Walker and Purdin 105). Despite this, the standards became essentially technical in nature and the justification or philosophy that supposedly underpinned them was separately encapsulated in the Charter. The practical embodiment of this disconnect...
was the fact that these two components of Sphere were “drafted in parallel, but there was little or no direct connection between the two processes. The drafters of the standards were unaware of the content of the draft charter” (Darcy-b 122).

Within the discussion around formulating the Humanitarian Charter – that bore responsibility for articulating Sphere’s grounding in rights – the rights-based humanitarianism championed by some, found resistance (Dufour et al 129; Walker and Purdin 109). Despite later claims of “the central importance of a rights-based approach” (Walker and Purdin 105) in Sphere, the term never made it into that edition of the Charter or Handbook. The language of rights and recognized legal instruments were still explicitly cited in the Charter (Slim 18), making it a landmark document even if it fell short of fully articulating an RBA to humanitarian action. This pragmatism was a necessary step to achieving the consensus and buy-in that ultimately made the Sphere Project so successful (Walker and Purdin 104-107).

Unfortunately for proponents of the RBA, Sphere’s popularity and uptake was primarily centred around the Minimum Standards (Dufour et al 127-128). Perhaps in line with their own priorities, organisations took on board the technical standards while bypassing the implications of the Charter (Darcy-b 112; Dufour et al 128). In a limited survey – conducted more than a decade after Sphere’s first active use on humanitarian programs and at time when its pre-eminence is widely recognised – of humanitarian and development workers in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, more than a quarter of respondents did not believe the Sphere standards to be rights-based (Klasing et al 12). While hardly conclusive evidence, it is clear that the connection between the Minimum Standards and an RBA is far from obvious or universally understood (Darcy-b 112; Dufour et al 128).

From theory to policy to practice
While the Sphere Project may not have completely succeeded in articulating the RBA and converting theory into practice, it did make considerable progress, pushing rights-based humanitarianism beyond the confines of pure theory and contributing to its endorsement as policy (Darcy-b 119; Slim 18). Indeed the wider adoption of an RBA to development at that time meant some multi-mandate agencies were already beginning to declare an organisation-wide policy of a RBA, even as its implications for humanitarian
action were still being explored (Cotterrell 5; Klasing et al 20). Arguably, this situation has continued to this day.

Gradually, more and more individual organisations made policy changes and commitments to an RBA (Cotterrell 5-6; Klasing et al 11; Slim 19-20). Of particular note is the UN’s 2003 *Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming*, once again without any specific mention of humanitarian action, but demonstrating the extent to which an RBA had become the norm in agencies that included humanitarian work in their mandate (Klasing et al 10).

Taking the next step from policy to practice has proved considerably more difficult, not least because of the lack of an actual framework – or at least an agreed one – of the RBA to humanitarian action (Cotterrell 5; Klasing et al 9; Piron-a 27). As something more akin to a philosophical approach than a strategic plan, operationalizing the RBA has been a difficult and largely ad-hoc process (Slim 4). Different proponents have used the RBA to justify different stances and actions as it suits their needs (Miller 917). This does not automatically void the validity of such arguments, but rather points to the incomplete nature of work in this area. Academics and practitioners alike have lamented a potential exploitation of the RBA in this way, as they have the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the approach (Cotterrell 5; Piron-a 24).

Sphere, along with some other high profile initiatives relating to accountability, is often cited as evidence of the RBA converted into practical policy and action but it remains limited in its scope (Klasin11p19; Ouyang et al 147,150). Revisions and subsequent editions of the Handbook in 2004 and 2011 sought to address problems and broaden its coverage of issues (Dufour et al 126). Notable additions in the most recent edition include the inclusion of a chapter on protection and, as mentioned in Chapter 1, a Core Standard on Coordination and Collaboration. Again, in a situation somewhat reminiscent of the first edition drafting process, the possibility of a link between coordination and an RBA to humanitarian action was never raised (Sandison).

Also of note in the 2011 edition were the explicit references to Sphere being ‘rights-based’ and the revision of the Humanitarian Charter. The aim of Sphere is described as being “to firmly anchor humanitarian response in a rights-based and participatory approach” (Sphere Project 5) and the Charter, Protection Principles and Core Standards
are described as articulating “Sphere’s rights-based and people-centred approach to humanitarian response” (Sphere Project 6). Though only two explicit references, these represent a noticeable advancement on previous editions in this regard. Furthermore, the revised Charter provides perhaps the most convincing attempt at clarifying a legal basis for the RBA – a point that will be returned to in more detail in the next section.

**History and Evolution Conclusions**

Once again, the simple overview of the events and thinking that led to the emergence of the RBA provided above cannot possibly encapsulate all the nuances, discussions and diversity of opinions involved. What can be drawn from this are some useful insights into the characteristics of modern rights-based humanitarianism.

Given the historical context and humanitarian experience of the 1990s, it is little surprise that so much of the emphasis has been on standards and accountability. It is likely for similar reasons that transparency, not really a right on its own or a direct prerequisite for the enjoyment of a life with dignity, has become one of the common characteristics of the RBA (Concannon and Lindstrom 1180; Ouyang et al 149). This is not to argue against such an interpretation, but rather to highlight the significance of other factors in its elaboration.

Another noticeable pattern is the tendency for the humanitarian RBA to follow its development counterpart. To some extent, the RBA to humanitarian action is the result of applying non-humanitarian-specific thinking and policy to humanitarian programming. Once again, this need not count against the RBA, but as a concept somewhat foreign in origin to this field, it is not necessarily a natural fit to the context and issues of humanitarian emergencies. The RBAs theoretical and philosophical aspects that were conceived with development in mind sometimes, then, clash with the necessary pragmatism of humanitarian action as well as the – perhaps equally theoretical – principles of its tradition (Cotterrell 5-7).

The relative absence of a strong legal perspective in the outline above is also characteristic of much current understanding of the RBA. This topic will be covered in more detail below, however it is worth noting here that, by and large, it was the humanitarians who sought to make use of legal frames, as opposed to human rights lawyers driving the application of their concepts in a new field. The result – which may
be viewed positively or negatively – is an RBA that is not overly legalistic and mostly pursues its own evolving agenda utilising legal tools where advantageous. Indeed humanitarian practitioners primarily invoke rights for the purpose of advocacy to address root causes, rather than for legal activity.

Perhaps most significant is the wider lesson that can be drawn. The RBA to humanitarian action, as it is understood today, is not a carefully constructed holistic framework, comprehensively extrapolating from foundational concepts to policy and practice. Instead it is a product of its environment and up-bringing. It may or may not be conceptually and practically valid, but this doesn’t change the fact that the RBA’s current form is also the result of past problems, issues and reactions, as well as the compromises necessary to achieve consensus.

It comes as little surprise then that thinking relating to the RBA might be incomplete. A focus on translation to technical standards through the Sphere project; on transparency and accountability mechanisms; as a basis for advocacy; and as a justification for a more people-centred humanitarianism, are all the result of a natural application of this new framework to areas of priority. This however, says nothing of areas and issues that might legitimately fall within the scope of the RBA, but which have hitherto been overlooked either accidentally or because of the challenges they present. More research is required to explore the implications of an RBA in these areas, including coordination, and this paper seeks to contribute to this effort.

**LENS 2 – LEGAL BASIS**

As noted above, the impetus in the development of an RBA came from primarily from humanitarian and development specialists as opposed to their legal counterparts. The result was that, although some general legal concepts and specific components of international law had a role to play, RBAs to humanitarian approaches have traditionally not been legalistic.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete analysis of the legal basis for a RBA to humanitarian action. Instead, this section will provide a brief overview of some of the major questions and issues related to the RBA’s legal aspects, once again in
order to better understand current perspectives of the RBA so as to enable an analysis of its implications.

**Which Law? Which Rights?**

Humanitarian emergencies do not fall neatly within one area of international law and there are significant overlaps, gaps and distinctions between those bodies of law that are applicable (Heintze 85; Spieker 7-22). This makes identifying and detailing exactly what rights people affected by humanitarian emergencies have rather difficult from a legal perspective.

**Applicability**

Human rights law is universal in that it applies to all people, but not necessarily in all circumstances (Hallo de Wolf-a; Young et al 148). Firstly, some human rights are subject to derogation in times of emergency (ICCPR art. 4 para. 1; Wallace and Martin-Ortega 245) and some allow for ‘progressive realisation’ (ICESCR art. 2 para. 1; Wallace and Martin-Ortega 243) and are therefore somewhat subject to circumstances (Cotterrell 2; Young et al 154). Secondly, human rights law is considered to have the status of *lex generalis*, meaning that while it is generally applicable, in situations of armed conflict it is somewhat limited and submissive to international humanitarian law, which has the status of *lex specialis*, meaning it is the primary source of law applicable to those circumstances (HallowdeWolf-a; Heintze 87-88).

International humanitarian law applies in situations of armed conflict however it is different in content to human rights law (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 325). The rights provided by international humanitarian law are not the same as those in human rights law and distinctions are made between different categories of people according to their status in relation to the conflict (eg combatants and non-combatants) (Cotterrell 3; Young et al 148). In addition, humanitarian law is focused on international armed conflicts and is less comprehensive in cases of non-international armed conflict, as well as, of course, not being applicable in times of peace (Hallo de Wolf-b). The fact that many consider the line between ‘peace’ and conflict to be increasingly blurred only complicates this further.

In addition to these main bodies of law, there is also refugee law however this is also limited in applicability in that it pertains only to people forced to flee across
international borders, though there is some supplementation with relation to internally displaced people (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 209-210). Refugee law is important in a number of respects, but greater emphasis is usually placed on human rights and international humanitarian law in terms of a legal basis for the RBA.

Rights or duties?
Another issue is the significant difference in the nature of these bodies of law and the fact that neither is entirely appropriate for establishing the rights of people affected by humanitarian emergencies. International humanitarian law was basically conceived as a set of rules for war (Slim 9). As such, it is generally articulated in terms of the rights and responsibilities of the conflicting parties. Its content relating to humanitarian action is mostly obligation or duty-based rather than rights-based (Cotterrell 3; Darcy-b 118).

By contrast, human rights law is (unsurprisingly) rights-based. However it is also more aspirational, as suggested by the concept of progressive realisation mentioned above, and many people’s on-going reality is one in which these rights go permanently unfulfilled. At its core, human rights law is about the more fundamental relationship between the individual and the state, and the rights and responsibilities of each (Cotterrell 2). Yet in the humanitarian context, the state in question is often unable or unwilling to ensure that relationship is maintained and rights are realised (Cotterrell 2; Darcy-a 12). Humanitarian action is largely about filling this gap, but while it may be able to bring about the fulfilment of specific rights, it cannot replace the state in its relationship to its citizens (Cotterrell 11).

Furthermore, it has been argued by many of those resisting the RBA that humanitarian action is too far removed from ‘social engineering’, to reach long-term aspirational goals and fundamentally alter the relationship between individual and state, for these concepts to provide a relevant legal frame for humanitarian action (Chandler 8).

Detail
Even for those who are willing to appropriate human rights law for the purposes of humanitarian action, its lack of detail may still present a significant obstacle (Cotterrell 2). Human rights law typically utilises broad statements when articulating rights, leaving a great deal of room for varied interpretation (Young et al 145). The fact that agreement cannot always be reached on what constitutes the practical realisation of
these rights under ‘normal’ circumstances makes their application in humanitarian emergencies – at least as far as establishing in meaningful detail what people are entitled to – somewhat untenable. This is in contrast to the relatively detailed provisions of international humanitarian law which, once again, does not contain the same clearly articulated rights and is only applicable in situations of armed conflict (Cotterrell 3; Spieker 28).

Thus it is clear that, working from existing legal instruments, there is no single, comprehensive area of international law articulating a universally applicable set of rights for people affected by humanitarian emergencies. As a result, those seeking a legal foundation for the RBA have typically had to resort to utilising components of a number of different legal instruments and sources (Dufour et al 126) – including the sometimes ambiguous area of customary law (Concannon and Lindstrom 1149; Cotterrell 4) – and developing their own, potentially justified, interpretation of international law (Darcy-b 113) such as the revised Humanitarian Charter (see Box 2.1 below).

### Box 2.1: The 2011 Humanitarian Charter – An Interpretation of International Law

Probably the most recent and advanced explanation of the legal foundation of the RBA is the revised Humanitarian Charter included in the 2011 edition of the Sphere Handbook.

More explicit than its predecessor in this regard, and no doubt benefiting from the more wide-spread acceptance of the RBA in recent times, the revised Charter documents some specific principles, rights and duties which its endorsers consider to be reflected in international law. In this way it may be considered a statement of interpretation of international law by the humanitarian community – or at least a significant part of it.

Specifically, the revised Charter summarises its interpretation of these rights as:

- The right to life with dignity
- The right to receive humanitarian assistance
- The right to protection and security
It qualifies this list with the following explanation.

“While these rights are not formulated in such terms in international law, they encapsulate a range of established legal rights and give fuller substance to the humanitarian imperative.” (Sphere Project 21)

The Charter also clearly states that the Sphere standards that accompany it in the 2011 edition of the Handbook are intended to be the practical articulation of these rights and “based on agencies’ understanding of the basic minimum requirements for life with dignity and their experience of providing humanitarian assistance” (Sphere Project 24).

This method may form a comfortable foundation on which to base humanitarian action, but it would not really be accurate to say that the Sphere standards are directly based on legal rights (Darcy-b 113). A more appropriate explanation would be that the charter is an interpretation of international law – and certainly not the only possible one - and the standards, an extrapolation of that interpretation, coloured by the opinions of humanitarian actors.

Who’s Responsible?

Even assuming a satisfactory legal foundation exists for a specific – in terms of content – set of rights applicable for people affected by humanitarian emergencies – the rights holders – one crucial component remains in order for the rights to be meaningful; the identification of duty bearers (Concannon and Lindstrom 1149; Dufour et al 131; Klasing et al 10; Slim 9). Duty bearers are those legally responsible for ensuring the fulfilment of the rights and this question of responsibility is a crucial one for humanitarian action. A number of different types of actors may be considered in locating responsibility.

States

The state or states involved bear primary responsibility for response to humanitarian emergencies and for ensuring the rights of the people within their territory are fulfilled (Klasing et al 3; OCHA-c 1; Spieker 21). This fact is unchallenged from a legal perspective but in reality it is an unsatisfactory answer for ensuring the fulfilment of rights. Almost by definition, humanitarian emergencies are situations in which the
state(s) involved lacks either the capacity or the will to look after its population. To simply state that they are the responsible duty-bearers and to seek only to have them fulfil this responsibility is generally acknowledged to be an unacceptable approach to humanitarian action, particularly where the state is actively responsible for the denial of those rights in the first place (Darcy-a 12).

Non-state actors in control of territory
In the case of conflict where non-state actors control territory and the populations located there – as well as other states in control as an occupying force – the obligations are much the same as that of the state (Cotterrell 3; Wallace and Martin-Ortega 96). To the extent that non-combatants (ie the civilian population) have rights in these situations, the party in control of a population is responsible for fulfilling those rights and for all intents and purposes functions as a state in this regard (Young et al 149). Equally then, this statement is subject to the same problems and limitations as that relating to the states themselves, described above.

Other states
The legal responsibility of other states in humanitarian emergencies is an evolving concept and has been the subject of much debate in recent times, particularly with reference to extreme cases of abuse and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (Barnett and Weiss 79-87; Darcy-a 13; ICISS 32-33). Outside the four exceptions identified in the responsibility to protect doctrine, if the state in question refuses to allow international humanitarian action to ensure the rights of its citizens are fulfilled, other states are essentially bound by the obligation to respect that state’s sovereignty (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 65,100). While they can push for humanitarian access using, for example, the provisions of international humanitarian law in the case of conflict, they cannot be held responsible under current international law.

In the less complicated scenarios where the state in questions asks for or allows outside assistance, there is greater potential to argue that other states have some level of responsibility for the fulfilment of the rights of the affected population. Concannon and Lindstrom make the argument that states are obliged under international law to engage in international assistance and cooperation aimed at the fulfilment of rights. Regardless of whether a legal obligation exists, many wealthier nations – and increasingly, other
low and middle income nations – will voluntarily act to provide assistance in the event of a humanitarian emergency.

Once a state engages, it is obliged by the treaties to which it is a party and customary international law to act in a way that respects and promotes human rights (Concannon and Lindstrom 1152). A state’s responsibility extends to its actions beyond its borders (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 224) and certainly includes any acts in a humanitarian situation which negatively impact or deprive people of their rights (Concannon and Lindstrom 1153). Whether this translates into an obligation to ensure the fulfilment of human rights – and a status as duty bearers – wherever they act is far less certain.

Concannon and Lindstrom (1151-1156) have argued that it does, particularly in situations where other states are heavily involved in, and in a position to have great influence over, the state in question’s actions relating to the humanitarian emergency, such as was the case in Haiti following (and arguably prior to) the 2010 earthquake.

Non-state humanitarian actors
In comparison with the other types of actors listed above, non-state humanitarian actors are probably the least likely candidate for the role of duty bearer in a humanitarian emergency, despite sometimes being the most active and the most directly involved with the fulfilment of rights of the people affected. Indeed with the exceptions of certain agencies of the UN and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, most do not possess international personality, meaning they have no real rights or responsibilities under international law (Cotterrell 5; Darcy-b 120; Wallace and Martin-Ortega 88,98). As such it is very difficult to assign them duty bearer status.

One potential argument by which non-state humanitarian actors such as NGOs may be considered to take on legal responsibility for the fulfilment of rights is if they are, with government agreement, taking on a state function (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 198) – for example by providing medical care or basic infrastructure such as water and sanitation (Concannon and Lindstrom 1151, 1156). While this may require the organisations involved to ensure the fulfilment of rights to the standards that would be required of the state, it does not transfer legal responsibility (Wallace and Martin-Ortega 198-199). In other words, the state would still be responsible – and hence the duty bearer – under international law for the actions of the organisations on its behalf.
Thus there is currently no international legal instrument justifying the allocation of the role of duty bearer to non-state humanitarian actors. This lack of responsibility has been bemoaned by many, including humanitarian agencies themselves, as an accountability gap (Darcy-b 115; Klasing et al 11-12; Young et al 156). Several initiatives have sought to fill this gap such as, once again, Sphere’s Humanitarian Charter which clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian agencies (Sphere Project 20-24; Young et al 155). These initiatives, however, recognize that non-state humanitarian actors do not control many aspects of their operating environment and do not have the capacity to ensure the fulfilment of rights (Darcy-b 113-114; Sphere Project 24; Maus 107). As such, they cannot be held legally responsible under international law and accountability initiatives must rely on other mechanisms.

Thus the state or controlling party of the territory in question bears primary responsibility for ensuring rights are fulfilled and, in the event of their inability or unwillingness to act, it seems other states are the most likely candidates to assume the role of duty bearer. The implications of this for an RBA to humanitarian action are that on the one hand, establishing a set of rights does not provide a legal basis for accountability of non-state humanitarian actors, while on the other, an RBA may be an appropriate basis for other states to be held legally accountable for the fulfilment of rights in humanitarian emergencies where they act (Concannon and Lindstrom 1151-1156; Piron-a 19).

One further implication is quite significant. As mentioned above, human rights are largely about the relationship between rights holders and duty bearers. It follows then that a comprehensive RBA requires humanitarian actors to both work with rights holders, helping empower them to better claim their rights, and with duty bearers, helping them better fulfil their rights-based obligations (Concannon and Lindstrom 1150; Cotterrell 5-6; Klasing et al 11; Miller 917). If the state is recognised as being the primary duty bearer responsible for ensuring the fulfilment of rights, a meaningful and comprehensive RBA must work with states to help them better play their role. In humanitarian terms, this translates as an obligation to ensure their participation and to engage in capacity building activities (Concannon and Lindstrom 1172).
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Prioritisation of Rights

One potential issue faced in operationalizing the RBA stems from legal nature of human rights in that they are considered to be indivisible and interdependent (Cotterrell 6; Darcy-a 9; Wallace and Martin-Ortega 238). This means that no rights take precedence over others and all must be fulfilled. In the humanitarian context, prioritisation and sequencing are both standard practice and a practical necessity (IASC-a 9; Macdonald and Valenza 12). Where insufficient resources exist – as is often the case in humanitarian action – to fulfil the rights of all those affected, decisions on resource allocation must be made and priorities established (Cotterrell 07). Even given adequate resources, the extreme nature of humanitarian emergencies may require dealing with certain issues before others can be addressed.

Prioritisation, in itself, need not necessarily make rights-based humanitarianism unviable. As mentioned previously, some rights allow for progressive realisation which would be consistent with prioritisation in a humanitarian emergency (Ouyang et al 149). If however, this ultimately leads to prioritisation on the basis of needs, as it typically does, it does call into question the value of an RBA. If the very nature and context of humanitarian action requires translating rights back into needs, then an operationalised RBA may be essentially identical to needs based humanitarianism, with rights simply as longer term goals to be achieved – arguably after the strict ‘humanitarian’ work is complete (Cotterrell 6).

Is law the right frame?

Following on from the previous section, the final question to be examined here is whether or not a legal approach is appropriate for humanitarian action. Some have argued strongly in favour of grounding the RBA more firmly in law, suggesting that doing so will make it more practical and real (Klasing et al 9; Slim 23-26). The issues and questions raised above, though perhaps resolvable, suggest that a strong legal frame may present serious obstacles and not be the ideal focus for the RBA.

The somewhat ad-hoc nature in which international law has developed presents a patchwork of legal mechanisms, each with its own limitations, and some formidable gaps in between. Without substantial additions or changes to existing international law,
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it provides an unsteady basis for an approach that is intended to be comprehensive and universally applicable (Cotterrell 1-2).

Furthermore, the aspirational nature of some of law in question, such as universal human rights, runs somewhat counter the necessary pragmatism of humanitarian action. It must be asked if it is somewhat disingenuous to speak of universal rights and standards guaranteed by law, when in reality virtually all humanitarian action is limited by politics and other factors far removed from the law (Stephenson 48). If so, it does not mean that human rights have no place in the humanitarian context, but perhaps their nature is more suited to a role as aspirational goals rather than as a comprehensive basis for practical humanitarian action where a more pragmatic approach may be necessary.

Finally, it may be argued that a legal approach is simply too slow and passive, leading only to action when a violation has already occurred or is in the process of occurring (Cotterrell 2-3,9). Humanitarian action typically places a great deal of emphasis on speed and requires pro-active forward planning in order to be truly effective (Darcy-a 6). Put crudely, humanitarian action is used to try to save a life, whereas the law is used to threaten legal action and hold people or organisations responsible when it is not saved (Cotterrell 8). Indeed this tension between legal ideals and humanitarian action outcomes can be seen to play out in the competing perspectives when it comes to arrest and prosecution of individuals currently in a position to greatly influence a particular humanitarian situation (Cotterrell 9; Darcy-a 14). Probably the most famous example in recent times is the indictment of the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, and the subsequent expulsion of numerous humanitarian organisations (Macdonald and Valenza 9; OCHA-a 1; Weissman 195).

These points do not challenge the importance of law in relation to humanitarian contexts. Instead they raise the question of whether a legalistic RBA is appropriate for humanitarian action. If not, it would suggest a less legally focused RBA drawing on the ‘concept of rights’ may be a better fit.

Legal Basis Conclusions
The issues and analysis presented above raise some serious questions and challenges to the legal aspect of an RBA to humanitarian action. It was however, not the objective of this section to criticise or pass judgement on that legal basis, but rather to understand its
current status. The fact that the analysis highlights a number of obstacles and issues not yet fully addressed, is probably quite reflective of the lack of a legal focus in the RBA to date.

The revised Humanitarian Charter outlined in Box 2.1 goes the furthest towards successfully resolving the issues raised here. It may well provide a valid legal basis for an RBA to humanitarian action, but it does not change the fact that the current RBA is not particularly legalistic in its focus.

This clarification of the legal basis has also come largely after the fact, highlighting that the RBA was neither conceived nor evolved from a rigorously legal perspective. Furthermore, accepting the decision to seek a legal foundation, it is clear that the choice of a rights focus was a conscious one with a specific purpose in mind.

Other legal frames, such as obligations or responsibilities, may have offered an easier fit with existing international law. The choice of to use rights instead represents a conscious desire to make humanitarian action more people centred (Darcy-b 118). Other goals, such as establishing standards and accountability, could perhaps have been pursued from an obligations frame without the use of rights, but this would have been disempowering for the populations affected and run counter to some of the drives that led to the RBA.

Thus four main points can be taken from this analysis through a legal lens in order to better assess the implications of an RBA to humanitarian action on the issue of coordination.

1. The RBA, as it is generally understood and applied today, does not have a legal focus even though it may well have a valid legal basis from which it may be justified. As such, it would be inappropriate to utilise a heavily legal perspective in applying it to a new area.

2. While other legal approaches may have been equally or more appropriate, human rights were chosen, most likely because they fit with preconceived goals of a more people-centred humanitarian approach, featuring empowerment, participation and downward accountability. This people centred aspect of the RBA must therefore be recognized as central in its interpretation, and it is
probably for this reason that the modern RBA is more focused on empowerment than legalism.

3. The previous point notwithstanding, the state’s status as primary duty bearer compels humanitarian actors subscribing to an RBA to at least try to engage with and support states in building their capacity to fulfil this role.

4. The current understanding of the RBA is better described as a philosophy for humanitarian action based on the concept of rights, rather than as a framework of legal rights, explicitly articulated and recognised in international law, in which to ground programs. This is not to say the two are mutually exclusive, and there are not elements of both currently in use, but it is from the first of these perspectives that any analysis should be conducted.

LENS 3 – KEY ISSUES AND TENSIONS

Having now viewed it through historical and legal lenses, this section will consider the RBA to humanitarian action in terms of its major questions and issues. There are numerous tensions and key debates that have shaped much of the thinking and discussion around the concept, and hence much to be learned from looking at them.

As it is not the intention of this paper to assess the value or validity of the RBA itself, a complete discussion and dissection of these points is not necessary here. This section will instead provide a brief overview of the major questions and issues so as better to understand the characteristics, as well as the ambiguities of the RBA as it is understood and used today. This in turn will allow a more complete analysis of its implications for coordination, taking into account the reality of uncertainty and debate relating to RBAs.

Critiques of the RBA to humanitarian action are not difficult to find in the literature. Interesting examples and summaries of these can be found in, to name a few, Chandler, Darcy-a and Piron-a. These issues are typically grouped and summarised in different ways. For the purposes of this paper they will be separated into 3 categories; fundamental objections to rights-based humanitarianism, risks in implementation, and potential conflicts with humanitarian principles.
Fundamental Objections

Fundamental objections are those that are raised in opposition to the very concept of rights-based humanitarianism. These would argue that, regardless of how it is implemented, an RBA is not appropriate for humanitarian action. These fundamental objections also apply largely to the concept of new humanitarianism in general and are typically voiced by the same critics.

Politisation

Perhaps best summarised by Jean Pictet’s famous quote that humanitarians must “beware of politics as they would of poison, for it threatens their very lives” (qtd. in Chandler 2). This fundamental objection argues that politics, at least to the level inherent in an RBA, has no place in humanitarian action (Chandler 1). It is inappropriate and a serious threat in its erosion of the so called ‘humanitarian space’ (Barnett and Weiss 110; Darcy-a 11).

Over-reaching

This argument considers talk of ensuring the fulfilment of human rights in a humanitarian context as unrealistic and inflating expectations (Darcy-a 12-13). Typically attributed to humanitarians trying to do too much, over-reaching risks impotence resulting from taking on evermore responsibilities when, arguably, humanitarian professionals are still unable to successfully live up to their existing promises. This, in turn, is unfair on and detrimental to the people affected by humanitarian emergencies in that it raises unrealistic hopes and leads to sub-standard performance across too many areas.

Too theoretical

Many have critiqued what they see as the vague and overly theoretical nature of the RBA (Miller 917; Piron-a 19), but while some feel this issue can be resolved through better implementation (Slim 23), others contend that it is fundamental. Essentially it is argued that, though sounding nice and appealing, legal theory and high-minded idealism are of no or little value in the humanitarian context and run counter to the pragmatism necessary in that environment (Darcy-a 12).
As the objections raised above are fundamental in nature, it is doubtful that any characteristics or further development of the RBA would have any success in resolving them. Despite this, many within the humanitarian field would acknowledge at least some degree of validity in these concerns and there has been an on-going, conscious effort to make the RBA as practical and realistic as possible. Examples, such as the Sphere Standards, are seen as proof that this can be done, yet there is often a significant gap between the theory of rights-based humanitarianism and its practical articulations (Ouyang et al 148) – in the case of Sphere evidenced by the disconnect between the Charter and Minimum Standards, and in the inconsistent understanding that it is rights-based.

**Risks in Implementation**

The following criticisms, though sometimes voiced by those in outright opposition to the RBA, are essentially risks – what might happen if it is implemented. While some would argue that these risks are so high so as to border on being inevitable and denied only by the naïve, they are, at least in theory, risks that could be managed in implementation.

*De-politicisation*

In direct contrast to the objection raised above that RBAs over-politicise the humanitarian space, this critique argues almost exactly the opposite – that reducing humanitarian action to a checklist of specific rights that need to be fulfilled risks making it little more than a technical business (Darcy-a 11; Dufour et al 126; Slim 6; Walker and Purdin 106). The real clash is in the underlying premise of these arguments. One envisages humanitarian action as an apolitical activity in which the avoidance of politics is critical to the successful achievement of its goals – the easing of human suffering. The other sees human suffering in humanitarian emergencies as inherently political, having at least some political causes that require political responses which must therefore form a central part of humanitarian action (Chandler 12; Darcy-a 10). Of those subscribing partially or completely to the second view, some see the RBA as a step towards the “proper politicisation of humanitarianism” (Slim 21), while others argue that it doesn’t go far enough, focusing too much on technical issues as evidenced by the Sphere Standards (Darcy-a 11; Darcy-b 112; Walker and Purdin 106).
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Undermining rights
More a risk to the concept and integrity of human rights, this argument suggests by allowing human rights language and ideas to be used inappropriately, the RBA undermines their status and credibility (Darcy-a 12; Dufour et al 133; Slim 24). As a blanket justification for any statement or action, an RBA can become “all things to all people” (qtd. in Miller 917), in turn diluting the value of human rights discourse (Miller 917). Similarly, inconsistent or selective application runs counter to the universal and absolute nature of human rights – even when done unknowingly, for example as suggested by the description of the RBA’s history and evolution above. When done deliberately in support of existing agendas, this instrumentalisation of human rights diminishes the concept, giving it less weight when its use is necessary (Darcy-a 12). Perhaps most disturbing of all, given that the RBA is inherently people centred, such instrumentalisation in pursuit of other agendas would equate to using people affected by humanitarian emergencies as tools to reach organisational goals (Chandler 11).

Superficiality
Related to the instrumentalisation described above, this critique is concerned with the possibility that the RBA may, or has, become simply a slogan (Miller 918) or public relations strategy – “philanthropy dressed up as rights” as Slim (4) calls it. As pointed out by Miller (920), a genuine RBA consists of more than simply the use of rights language and consideration of rights issues. A rights based approach implies grounding goals, principles, strategies and action in human rights, and for some organisations this entails making significant institutional changes (Piron-a 21). Without these, an RBA risks becoming superficial and disingenuous. In practical implementation, organisations may be faced with choices between ensuring fulfilment of human rights and organisational priorities such as the efficient use of resources. This risk of superficiality poses an interesting question; does an organisation need to ‘go all in’ – putting human rights ahead of all other considerations – to be considered to have a genuine RBA?

Co-option of the RBA
Of all the risks presented here, this is the only one that is largely beyond the control of the humanitarian actors involved. This argument against the RBA posits that there is a serious risk that the language of rights and the RBA will be co-opted by non-humanitarian actors for non-humanitarian purposes (Chandler 11; Darcy-a 5,11). The
obvious examples are the use of ‘ensuring rights in a humanitarian context’ as justification for forwarding political agendas or even military intervention. Recent history, since the RBA became more widely accepted, has shown this concern to be entirely valid. The counter argument however is that (i) humanitarians can hardly claim copyright over human rights or the RBA, making it beyond their control, and (ii) the same was said, and happened, for humanitarianism in general without the RBA, meaning it has had no real impact in this sense. It may in turn be suggested that these counter arguments only underscore the problems with new humanitarianism in general. However the concept of a ‘golden era of humanitarian space’ has been called into question (Collinson and Elhawary 25) and, regardless, these problems must be acknowledged as the reality of the modern humanitarian context, and therefore be accepted and managed as best as possible.

As with the case of co-option, the reality is that the RBA has been around long enough to see these risks borne out. To some degree, each of these risks has materialised. As noted above, however, these risks – with the possible exception of co-option which appears virtually inevitable no matter what strategy humanitarians take – can be managed and depend a great deal on how an RBA is conceived and implemented.

The thinking and implementation of RBAs has changed and evolved considerably since its emergence. As these risks have been acknowledged or come to fruition, change and development has occurred. The general point about the current understanding that can be drawn from this is the recognition that if an RBA is to be adopted, it must be meaningful and consistent in its application. It must go beyond the use of rights language and cause practitioners to reflect on all its potential implications and what that means for their own policies, principles and practices.

**Potential Conflicts with Humanitarian Principles**

Like new humanitarianism in general, the RBA has led to considerable discussion about its compatibility with traditional humanitarian principles (Chandler; Cotterrell; Darcy-a 7-9). There are various sets and definitions of exactly what the humanitarian principles are, however this paper will use the most commonly sighted four; humanity,
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Impartiality, neutrality and independence (Cotterrell 5; Darcy-a 8; Macdonald and Valenza 1).

*Humanity*

The principle of humanity is generally considered to be consistent with human rights and hence, the RBA (Darcy-a 8). It is not difficult to find common ground here in terms of the goals and outcomes sought. It has been noted, however, that this alignment might not be so clear cut when put into practice in the humanitarian context (Cotterrell 11).

It is not difficult to conceive, or indeed find examples of, situations where the conflicting priorities of human rights and the humanitarian imperative. Situations where exposing and documenting human rights violations may mean losing access to those affected are not so uncommon and require humanitarian actors to make a conscious choice, typically complicated by the fact that a decision to speak out does not guarantee rights will be fulfilled and a decision not to does not guarantee the ability to save lives and ease suffering (Lacharite 44).

This is hardly a new dilemma and it predates the RBA by not years, but decades. The stated commitment to human rights embodied in the RBA does, however, appear to force the issue. In embracing and defining their RBA, organisations must answer the question of whether or not it will supersede the humanitarian imperative in its practical implementation.

One approach to avoiding this difficult decision may be to argue that the conflict does not exist if the suffering and loss of life referred to in the humanitarian imperative is interpreted as human rights (Darcy-a 7). This interpretation, effectively changing the temporal assessment of suffering from the immediate to the long-term (Chandler 13), may present a satisfactory resolution at the theoretical level, but it leaves open the question of what to do in situations such as those described above. This ambiguity therefore allows a more flexible and context specific stance to be taken.

*Impartiality*

Impartiality may be considered to present the least potential for conflict with rights-based humanitarianism. It effectively reflects the human rights principle of non-discrimination and each can be seen to be inherent in the other (Cotterrell 6; Darcy-a 8). As long as partial advocacy activities aimed at bringing about the fulfilment of rights do
not translate into partiality in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, there should be no real conflict between these principles. An understanding that impartial humanitarian assistance is directed at those most in need (Young et al 153), and that this does not constitute a form of discrimination, is also necessary but not generally challenged (Darcy-a 8).

Neutrality

Neutrality presents by far the greatest conflict between the humanitarian principles and the RBA, and indeed sits at the very heart of the debate between traditional and new humanitarianism (Chandler 10; Darcy-a 8). The first tension arises from the fact that an impartial commitment to human rights cannot be neutral in a world where clear violations exist. Neutrality as it is traditionally understood in humanitarian terms means not supporting or opposing sides where some form of (not necessarily armed) conflict exists (Macdonald and Valenza 4). Rights-based humanitarianism demands humanitarian actors oppose those actively violating human rights. Some organisations have overcome this issue by essentially redefining neutrality as an unbiased pursuit of the fulfilment of human rights (Darcy-a 8).

Aside from opposing those responsible for human rights violations, it could be argued that an RBA requires support for and alignment with non-humanitarian actors and activities that are aimed at ensuring human rights. This potentially places humanitarian actors in implicit or explicit alignment with political and military actors, often under frameworks – such as controversial ‘stabilisation’ and ‘transition’ strategies – that aim to provide a holistic response to humanitarian emergencies while being underpinned by geopolitical agendas (Macdonald and Valenza 21). It seems doubtful that an RBA actually compels an organisation to support such action, but it does allow for it, in direct opposition to the principle of neutrality. It should also be noted that such a position is not always opposed by humanitarian actors, some of which see military intervention as occasionally necessary (Darcy-a 10), essentially subscribing to Sadako Ogata’s view that “There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems” (qtd. in Barnett and Weiss 90).

In complex and politically charged situations, an organisation’s decision on whether or not to support a particular political or military actor may be something of a moot point. The reality is they may well be perceived as being in support of one or more actors and
having violated the principle of neutrality without actually having done so (Darcy-a 8).

By using the same language of protecting human rights and providing humanitarian assistance, humanitarian actors are easily conflated with non-neutral political and military actors. Once again, it is highly doubtful this is due to the use of a RBA – often the general appearance or nationality of an organisation and its staff is enough to compromised perceived neutrality – but it seems likely that is at least a contributing factor, though one not entirely within the control of humanitarian actors.

The final potential conflicts with neutrality here are somewhat different. The first stems from the understanding – outlined in Lens 2 above – that the states or a combatant party in control of territory are the primary duty bearers responsible for ensuring rights are fulfilled. It follows that a comprehensive RBA, in addition to helping empower rights holders, should seek to build these duty bearers’ capacity to ensure that rights are fulfilled. Engagement with belligerents is challenging for humanitarian actors at the best of times, so it is difficult to see how supporting a party to a conflict to better fulfil the rights of the people in their territory would not be at least perceived as violating the principle of neutrality by a population or opposing sides.

Conceding that, under such circumstances, duty bearer capacity building could justifiably be omitted from an RBA, it is difficult to argue the same for participation. Local participation and self-determination are fundamental to the RBA and were part of the driving force for its adoption (Klasing et al 13-14). In practice, local participation inevitably involves some degree of representation, if only for logistical reasons when large populations are involved. Where a population has, formerly or informally, selected its representatives, humanitarian actors are compelled to respect their decision and seek their input and participation in programming. If these representatives are – whether in the form of a government or not – also the commanders of a party to a conflict, a genuine tension may exist between maintaining neutrality and ensuring local participation. Even a decision to bypass the representatives in seeking alternate forms of participation may be considered an implicit statement of opposition to those representatives given their status and a rejection of the will of the population in question.

5 Obviously it is not always possible to ascertain to what degree representatives are really ‘selected’ by a population. It could be argued that, in some situations, even non-democratic systems of representation entail a degree of consent. The reality is that this is something that may be difficult for humanitarian actors to judge.
Independence

The tensions relating to independence are somewhat related to the points raised under neutrality above, as are the principles themselves. The distinction here is that independence refers to the influence of other organisations or groups on the decisions and programs of the humanitarian actor in question, and their ability to overcome that influence if they choose.

Following from the consideration of participation above, it could be argued that a genuine commitment to local participation inherent in the RBA requires a humanitarian actor to put the desires of the affected population ahead of their own preferences. A choice to ignore or override their wishes, for example based on the belief that the humanitarian professional knows best, can be conceived as violation of their rights or at least counter to the RBA. On the other hand, subjecting an organisation's will to that of the people and their representatives – especially when they are a government – runs directly counter to the humanitarian principle of independence.

Independence may also be challenged as a result of the closer alignment with other actors mentioned above. Unified interests, in this case the fulfilment of human rights, can lead to common strategies and further integration of activities. Where this occurs, humanitarian actors may be compromising their independence, partially or fully. This may manifest itself in overt agreements and decision making structures, but it is often the more subtle, institutional encroachment that is most feared as it isn’t always the result of a conscious decision. Greater alignment with other actors, particularly governments and donor agencies, risks allowing a gradual merger of interests and agendas that can compromise an organisation’s independence (Dufour et al 139). The classic example of this is the NGO that accepts ever-increasing funding from a donor in areas of shared interest to the point that its very existence and capacity to act becomes dependent on that donor's support. In such a situation, independence is difficult if not impossible to maintain. Once again, this is not necessarily unique to the RBA, but the wide-spread acceptance of human rights norms and its prominence in the strategies of many donors may make it more likely.

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6 Provided, of course, these desires do not violate the rights of others.
The tensions between traditional humanitarian principles and the RBA present some very difficult questions for its adherents to answer. At the heart of these questions is the need to identify which principles take precedence. Such a choice does not mean the other will be discarded completely, but it does mean specifying which are to be taken as fundamental and which become optional. This represents a painful choice for humanitarian actors and one many may wish to avoid. In this sense, the ambiguity surrounding the RBA to date, decreasing though it may be, is something of an advantage in that it enables these questions to be sidestepped or ignored.

**Key Issues and Tensions Summary**

The key issues and tensions discussed here are clearly more than just of theoretical or academic interest. Many of them have arisen and played out in the reality of humanitarian action in recent decades. This means that even if organisations reject the counter-arguments and seek to implement RBAs, they must confront the potential problems that follow.

While some fundamental objections exist, many of the criticisms of the RBA could be, at least in theory, managed in implementation. Doing so however, requires conscious consideration of the issues involved and an effort to resolve several specific tensions and questions (Cotterrell 11).

Interestingly, these questions need not necessarily be answered as one. Individual questions or principles may be considered individually, allowing an organisation to decide for itself its particular hierarchy of principles and unique brand of RBA (Cotterrell 6). Some have also argued that these issues should be resolved on a situational basis, creating a context specific RBA tailored to that environment (Darcy-a 16). These approaches no doubt appeal to the pragmatism necessary in humanitarian action but they do raise concerns once again about inconsistent and superficial implementation, as well as the question of whether such customized RBAs can still be considered strictly rights-based.
CONCLUSIONS – CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE RBA TO HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Having reviewed the RBA to humanitarian action through the lenses of its history and evolution, its legal aspect, and its major issues and tensions, it is now possible to draw some conclusions based on justifiable observations. These do not constitute a comprehensive framework for the RBA – nor was it the intention that they should – but rather a set of specific characteristics and common components that define current understanding of the RBA. Seven characteristic have been identified and these will be used, in the following chapters, to analyse the implications of an RBA for the issue of coordination in humanitarian action.

1. Current understanding of the RBA is a product of its environment and its past

The RBA and modern understanding of it emerged at a time when humanitarian practitioners and organisations sought to address numerous issues affecting their field and human rights were growing in significance and usage. It was developed by humanitarian and development specialists, and influenced by (conscious or otherwise) preconceived objectives and characteristics that a new approach needed to have. Indeed, had it not been possible to construct an RBA that included these components, it is doubtful that it would have emerged as a dominant paradigm.

This fact does not, in itself, undermine the validity of the elements currently articulated and emphasised in the RBA. It simply highlights that certain areas, such as accountability and professional standards for core technical activities, have received greater attention and been developed further than others. It also suggests that the current understanding of the RBA is probably incomplete and that some areas have (consciously or otherwise) been overlooked.

2. RBAs aim to provide a coherent and comprehensive framework

One central characteristic of the RBA that made it so appealing was its potential to provide a coherent, overarching framework capable of incorporating both humanitarian work and human rights concerns, as well as general development programming (Slim 21). In particular, it allows for organisations to try to address the root causes of humanitarian emergencies, while simultaneously treating the symptoms and alleviating human suffering.
In more practical terms, the RBA provides a justification for humanitarian actors to engage in political activity previously considered beyond the scope of humanitarian action, such as public advocacy. It allowed them a voice and provided a widely recognised and accepted basis from which to justify their positions.

3. Current RBAs may have a legal basis, but are not legalistic in nature

Though far less clear in its earlier articulations, current RBAs not only make use of legal language, but also claim to have a valid legal basis. Specific rights have been identified, justified by (perhaps questionable) interpretation of international law, and subsequently extrapolated into practical standards.

Despite this, the RBA has never been particularly legalistic, nor is it today. RBAs tend to be based more on the concept of rights, rather than a strictly legal analysis and operationalization. To the extent that a legal aspect has been considered, it is recognised that states are the responsible duty bearers – first the state(s) in question, then others that choose to engage – and that there are limitations to the degree to which non-state humanitarian actors can be held legally accountable for the fulfilment of rights. It also implies an obligation on the part of humanitarian actors to seek the participation, and perhaps build the capacity, of the government or other duty bearer.

Some have called for greater emphasis to be given to the legal aspects of the RBA and for it to be more practically grounded in international law (Klasing et al 13; Slim 23-26). There are, however, significant obstacles to this such as the fractured nature of international law.

4. The choice of the rights frame aims to make humanitarian action more people centred

The decision to use the language and concept of rights, as opposed to other legal or moral frames, represents a deliberate attempt to make humanitarian action people centred. This emphasis on those affected by humanitarian emergencies, and ensuring their rights are given priority, must therefore be recognised as being a core characteristic of the RBA. Implicit in this is the requirement for humanitarian actors to commit to the empowerment and participation of rights holders, as well as greater transparency and ‘downward accountability’ in their programs.
5. An emphasis on quality is central to current understanding of the RBA

A desire to improve the quality of humanitarian action and outcomes was one of the driving forces behind the emergence of the RBA and has been a central focus ever since. Common performance standards aimed at improving quality were demanded and developed even before understanding and acceptance of the RBA became widespread. Indeed, it seems likely that some form of acknowledged performance standards would have emerged with or without the RBA. The perceived advantage of linking standards with human rights was that it gave them a kind of objective anchor, rather than being somewhat arbitrary in nature.

The development of performance standards is also seen as being essential to keeping (or making) the RBA as practical and realistic as possible. This ability to operationalise the theory of rights-based humanitarianism is important to easing concerns that the RBA is too idealistic and leads to over-reaching and creating unrealistic expectations.

6. An emphasis on accountability is central to current understanding of the RBA

Directly related to the emphasis on quality, the choice of the rights frame and historical influence, is the fundamental importance of accountability in the RBA. Any meaningful understanding of rights-based humanitarianism must acknowledge the centrality of accountability first and foremost to those affected, but also to the other actors and donors involved. Genuine accountability also relies on clearly identifiable rights and quality standards against which to measure performance, as well as transparency in all aspects of an actor’s work.

7. Current understanding of the RBA is varied and at times ambiguous

Despite all of the above, and significant progress over time, there is no standard or accepted understanding of the RBA and all its implications. Considerable variation exists between RBAs as they are interpreted and implemented by different actors and even differently in different situations – including some support for such a context specific approach. Notable also, is the fact that some approaches utilise human rights language and concepts without actually being rights based, while others demand more institutional changes, such as reinterpreting organisational goals and operating principles.
The ambiguity represented here is not without its advantages. It enables humanitarian actors to (consciously or otherwise) avoid some difficult decisions, particularly in relation to the RBA’s compatibility with traditional humanitarian principles. On the other hand, inconsistent or superficial application has the potential to not only undermine the RBA, but also the concept of human rights which it invokes.

Given the variation in descriptions and understanding of the RBA, it does present some notable definitional questions. Perhaps the most significant question is whether a true RBA necessitates the subjugation of all other concerns, including organisational priorities such as efficiency and humanitarian principles such as neutrality, to the rights of those people affected. It is doubtful agreement on this or other questions will be reached in the near future (if ever). As such, it is essential that any understanding of the modern RBA, or analysis utilising it, take into account the reality that multiple RBAs exist and are applied in different ways and to different extents.
Chapter 3 – Humanitarian Coordination

Introduction

Coordination in humanitarian action is anything but straightforward (Seybolt 1035). Though often thought of and spoken of as a single issue, in reality it encapsulates numerous different activities, ideas and approaches, linking with nearly all the key issues of modern humanitarianism. Indeed it is difficult or impossible to talk about accountability, effectiveness, local partnership, stabilisation and integration without discussing coordination.

On the one hand this importance and centrality makes coordination a critical issue that must be addressed by any potential framework for humanitarian action, including the RBA. On the other, its complexity and interconnectedness make it a challenging topic to engage with. Taken as a whole, analysing coordination presents a daunting task.

This chapter will seek to analyse coordination in humanitarian action from a holistic perspective, but one grounded in reality. As with the previous chapter, it shall be divided into three sections providing different perspectives of the topic so as to triangulate important information. The first section will once more make use of the historical lens, comprising of a brief review of recent history, highlighting issues and initiatives of relevance. This will again allow a clearer understanding of the background and origins of modern approaches to humanitarian coordination.

In the second section, coordination will be deconstructed according to a number of different factors, enabling an analysis of the various forms and characteristics of coordination available and currently in use. This will be used to provide substance to this discussion and a better appreciation of the diversity and complexity encapsulated in humanitarian coordination. The analysis will also highlight some factors and components of coordination of considerable importance, both in themselves and to the central question of this paper.

Finally, coordination will also be considered through the lens of its own key issues and tensions. Once again, in developing a sense of the often hotly contested debate involved, an appreciation of the critical questions and nuances of this topic can be
formed enabling a more balanced and realistic analysis in relation to rights-based humanitarianism.

Following the logic of the previous chapter, the findings of the analysis of coordination through these three lenses will be used to form an overall picture of modern humanitarian coordination. This will take the form of a set of characteristics identified from the most significant themes and points presented in this chapter. These characteristics are presented in the chapter conclusion.

As a final note, it must be remembered that it is not the intention of this chapter to present a comprehensive analysis of humanitarian coordination, but rather a brief overview from which to draw valid and useful conclusions so that a meaningful analysis of the implications of a RBA on coordination can be carried out.

**LENS 1 – HISTORY AND EVOLUTION**

As noted in previous chapters, the beginning of the 1990s marks something of a watershed for humanitarian action for a variety of reasons, not the least of which were the geopolitical changes emanating from the end of the Cold War. There is no doubt that coordination existed as an issue and a (perhaps limited) practice prior to this point (Barnett and Weiss 50), but it was the dramatic expansion and politicisation of humanitarian action of this period that brought it to prominence (Macdonald and Valenza 5). It is the events and actions since the early 1990s that have shaped much of humanitarian coordination today and hence will form the focus of this section.

*Early 1990s – Emergence and disaster*

Much of the framework for modern humanitarian coordination, particularly in relation to UN agencies, can be found in the *UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182* of 1991 entitled “Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations” (OCHA-c 1; Zwitter 55). The fact that it was seen as necessary to pass such a resolution is evidence that coordination had indeed become an issue at that time. Resolution 46/182 provided the basis for several key humanitarian coordination institutions (Zwitter 55):

- Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) – a more expanded position than the previous Disaster Relief Coordinator
Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) – a systemised approach to coordinating humanitarian planning and funding in response to specific emergencies

Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) – a central fund through which to collect and allocate money for emergency response. Later renamed Central Emergency Response Fund

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – a coordination and policy committee with representatives from numerous humanitarian organisations including UN agencies, the World Bank, the Red Cross Movement and NGOs (OCHA-c 1-2)

The resolution and creation of the ERC position also led to the establishment of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) which went on to become the current Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (OCHA-c 1). Though possessing very little authority over UN agencies and none over non-UN organisations (Stephenson and Schnitzer 921), the DHA – and later OCHA – was tasked with bringing about greater coordination in humanitarian action (Stephenson 43).

Over the next few years these arrangements were further developed but it was the generally acknowledged failure of humanitarian coordination in Zaire following the 1994 Rwandan genocide that marked the next turning point. The massive humanitarian operation along the eastern border of Zaire descended into complete chaos and highlighted in particular the lack of effective mechanisms for coordination and accountability (Seybolt 1036). It was this perceived failure which drove the next wave of efforts toward enhanced coordination, as well as accountability and standards, as described in Chapter 2.

In the same year, the IASC created the position of Humanitarian Coordinator (OCHA-c 2). The Humanitarian Coordinator was to be appointed at the country level to coordinate response to specific humanitarian emergencies and would be the senior UN humanitarian official (Adinolfi et al 48). Notably however, as a UN official their authority was limited to the UN system and questions around their exact relationship with other senior non-humanitarian officials, such as the Resident Coordinator where one existed, remained.
Military coordination and the former Yugoslavia

The breakup of the former Yugoslavia throughout the 90s saw the issue of civil-military coordination emerge as a dominant question faced by humanitarians, first in Bosnia and later in Kosovo (Weissman 185-191). Haunted by the lack of military action to stop the genocide in Rwanda and fearful of the ethnic and religious nature of the Baltic wars, many humanitarians found themselves in support of military intervention in Bosnia (Weissman 186). For the UN in particular, its dual role of providing humanitarian assistance while also engaging in military peacekeeping and collaboration with NATO raised questions. While this had happened before, greater alignment between humanitarian and military goals and perspectives, along with the high profile and large scale of those operations, saw new ground broken in terms of civil military collaboration.

While some saw this collaboration as a successful step in the right direction, problems occurred and there were criticisms from both opponents and supporters of ‘integration’ – as the linking of humanitarian, military and political operations is sometimes called (Macdonald and Valenza 23-24). Some humanitarians, particularly those opposed to the changes of new humanitarianism, saw collaboration with the military as a violation of core humanitarian principles (Wheeler and Harmer 2). Conversely, those who saw such integration as logical or beneficial, decried the poor quality of the collaboration, the fractured nature of the UN’s command of its different arms, and the lack of cohesion across humanitarian, political and military strategies (Seybolt 1027).

Integration and the new millennium

Following a decade of unprecedented UN military and humanitarian action, then Secretary General ordered a review of UN peace operations in 2000. The subsequent report – known widely as the Brahimi Report after the review panel’s Chairman, Lakhdar Brahimi – provided a critical analysis of the UN’s political, military, humanitarian and development operations and concluded that, inter alia, more integration across these areas was needed for the UN to better pursue its goal in international peace and security (Brahimi). As a result, the UN began making changes in this direction and experimenting with different variations of such ‘integrated missions’ (Eide et al 5; Maus 108).
The 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and subsequent US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were also having an influence on civil military cooperation outside the UN. Faced with on-going guerrilla-style armed resistance and violence, US and other military actors began utilising counter-insurgency strategies aimed at ‘winning hearts and minds’ in the local populations where they were active (Macdonald and Valenza 24). In practice, this translated into military actors engaging in humanitarian, reconstruction and development activities (Seybolt 1043). This, combined with more integration in the UN contributed to considerable ‘blurring of the lines’ between humanitarian and military action to an extent not previously experienced (Eide et al 11; Macdonald and Valenza 24).

The result for humanitarian actors was a minefield of competing tensions and questions to address. These included, to name a few;

- a need to take into account, and perhaps coordinate with, the large scale activities in their areas of specialisation by new (military) actors (Seybolt 1043);
- a reliance on military and private security actors for security and transportation in dangerous environments (Wheeler and Harmer 16, 69);
- greater scrutiny and restrictions on their local partners and expenditure for fear of being linked to designated terrorist organisations or individuals (Macdonald and Valenza 25);
- a need not to be too closely associated with unpopular foreign military forces, often from the same countries as the international humanitarian staff themselves (Wheeler and Harmer 2);
- large amounts of funding being made available by governments with actively engaged military forces (Seybolt 1042); and,
- their own humanitarian principals demanding independence, impartiality and neutrality (Wheeler and Harmer 2).

There were no easy answers for humanitarian actors and pre-existing ideals and absolutes were – and still are – challenged by the reality of environments they had to work in. Even organisations as renowned for their ferocious independence and commitment to principles as Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) found that nothing was beyond compromise (Neuman and Leduc 77-92). Thus civil military coordination remained the central focus of coordination discussions for the better part of a decade to
2004. Though the issue would never disappear, it was soon to be overshadowed for a period.

*Tsunami – Disaster and response on a new scale*

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami eclipsed all the biggest disasters of the new humanitarian era, in terms of people and countries affected. The sheer scale of the disaster and the severity of the devastation in the worst hit areas drew an unprecedented amount of international attention and humanitarian assistance (Charles et al 158). The tsunami impacted on two significant non-international armed conflicts, in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, but subsequent cessation of conflict in both cases – temporary in one case, permanent in the other – meant that it was not civil military but humanitarian coordination that was in the spotlight.

The outcome, in terms of coordination, was not a positive one. Along with existing humanitarian actors forced to exponentially expand their programs in the affected countries, literally thousands of new local and international actors emerged with the so-called ‘second tsunami’ of humanitarian funding and workers (Cosgrave 16). This overwhelmed not only coordination capacity of the local governments involved, but any coordination mechanisms international humanitarian actors had conceived of to date. It was little surprise then that the subsequent evaluations called for improvements to be made (Cosgrave 22).

*Humanitarian Reform, One UN and Stabilisation*

Influenced by the response to the 2004 tsunami, the crisis in Darfur and an ERC commissioned review, the IASC launched what became known as its Humanitarian Reform Agenda (Charles et al 162; IASC-a 1; Jahre and Jensen 660; Stoddard et al 5). This agenda comprised of three pillars including improvements to CERF and humanitarian financing arrangements, and to humanitarian leadership arrangements – most specifically the role of the Humanitarian Coordinator (Charles et al 162-163). The third pillar was based on the idea of ensuring leadership, coordination and the filling of gaps at the sector-level by creating ‘clusters’ along thematic lines such as shelter, food and water, sanitation and hygiene (Charles et al 162; IASC-b 2). The cluster system was first applied in Pakistan in 2005 and has been a central coordination mechanism in major humanitarian emergencies ever since (Stoddard et al 5).
A noteworthy development extending beyond the humanitarian sphere around the same time as the Humanitarian Reform Agenda was the trend towards greater internal integration and collaboration among humanitarian and development organisations with fractured structures. The UN was the biggest and most obvious of these, with a reputation for internal incoherence. In 2006, the *Delivering As One* or One UN initiative was launched, aiming at “system-wide coherence in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment” (Aziz *et al* 2) and trialled in eight pilot countries. A number of federation-style international NGOs, such as Save the Children and Oxfam, also began taking steps towards harmonising their operations in countries where multiple member organisations were operating simultaneously, but separately. The fact that such significant steps to internal coordination and coherence were only being taken in the second half of the 2000s only serves to highlight the complexity and challenges of humanitarian coordination yet to be addressed.

Also in the latter half of that decade, continuing to the present, civil military coordination re-emerged as a dominant theme as various states and international organisations began to place greater emphasis on ‘stabilisation’ or ‘transition’ (Wheeler and Harmer 7). Continuing with the integration and ‘hearts and minds’ trends noted earlier, stabilisation and transition sought to deal with the problems of long-running violent conflict in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, where UN supported African Union forces were belligerents acting on the side of the Transitional Federal Government (Macdonald and Valenza 21; UNSC 2). Humanitarian actors hoping for peace and security after sometimes decades of conflict in these areas were once again faced with the question of how much they were willing to collaborate with such efforts (Macdonald and Valenza 21).

*Haiti and Beyond*

As in 2004, 2010 saw the next big push in terms of humanitarian coordination following yet another ‘mega-disaster’ in Haiti. The catastrophic earthquake which essentially demolished what limited capacity the Haitian Government previously had to coordinate such responses – not to mention the equally devastated UN country team – proved a challenge, perhaps even greater than the geographically dispersed impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami (OCHA-b 1-2). Once again, unprecedented levels of humanitarian action descended on the capital of what had already been dubbed the ‘Republic of NGOs’.
Implications of a Rights-Based Approach for Humanitarian Coordination

(Concannon and Lindstrom 1156). Humanitarian capacity was further stretched by massive floods in Pakistan the same year and the long-standing issues of coordination, resource allocation and accountability returned with force.

By this stage, the statement that there was a need for more effective coordination in humanitarian action was hardly a controversial one, though exactly how was another question. It was in this environment that the new Sphere coordination standard described in Box 1.1 was developed. The other major recent development in humanitarian coordination is the IASC’s Transformative Agenda (see Box 3.1 below), which seeks to learn the lessons from Haiti and complete the unfinished work of the previous Humanitarian Reform Agenda.

Box 3.1: The IASC Transformative Agenda

In late 2011 the IASC launched a review of inter-agency humanitarian response arrangements “[I]n light of the growing recognition of the weaknesses in the multilateral humanitarian response” (IASC-a 1). The process and subsequent Compendium of Agreed Actions (IASC-a 5) became known as the IASC ‘Transformative Agenda’ and aims to bring about significant improvements in humanitarian coordination with changes that have already begun to take place in 2012.

The Transformative Agenda focuses on the three key areas of leadership, coordination and accountability, while also seeking to address issues related to security constraints (IASC-a 2). Noteworthy in this process is the emphasis on the idea of “collective humanitarian response” (IASC-a 3) and accountability to those affected by emergencies, while giving far less attention to – though not ignoring – organisations as individual actors. Other notable aspects include;

- A primary focus on the first three months of response to ‘Level 3’ emergencies,
- Promoting “empowered leadership” (5) by more experienced Emergency Humanitarian Coordinators by improving recruitment, training and through enhanced authority in the initial response phase,
- Scaling back and re-focusing the use of clusters to address the perceived problems of the past six years, as well as improving management by Cluster Coordinators,
• Greater emphasis on time-bound and results oriented strategic frameworks or plans to enhance accountability and guide prioritization and resource allocation,
• Enhanced use of real-time evaluations and more frequent review meetings to address coordination problems quickly, and
• A stated intention to customize coordination and leadership arrangements to individual events and circumstances, including better use of sub-national coordination mechanisms.

Source: IASC-a

History and Evolution Conclusions

This brief overview of the history and developments in humanitarian coordination since the early 1990s shows at least one clear trend; easily identifiable ‘pushes’ for greater coordination following each in a series of large scale operations and their perceived failures. While this may be seen and criticised as slow and reactive, it is perhaps quite logical. Humanitarian action is traditionally quite a reactive field, dealing primarily with problems as they occur, but this is also due to the unpredictable nature of the work. The fact that donors and humanitarian actors have also been traditionally unable or unwilling to allocate significant resources to coordination and preparation, as opposed to direct response activities, no doubt contributes to this.

Equally, the bigger a disaster response – something not necessarily equivalent to the size of disaster itself or subsequent humanitarian requirements – the more coordination is going to be an issue. Hence it is only in these ‘mega-disasters’ that ideas and mechanisms for coordination can be fully put into practice and tested. In this sense, opportunities to trial and learn are infrequent and unpredictable, and when they do occur, mistakes have the potential to cost lives. An environment such as this can be expected to make innovation and improvement a difficult and disjointed process, just as it has been for humanitarian coordination.

Another key point to draw from the above summary is the dominance of the civil military coordination in this area of discourse. Coordination amongst humanitarian actors themselves has probably received less attention than it may seem, or than it deserves. After Zaire in 1994, standards and accountability dominated discussion relating to coordination (see Chapter 2). It was only then after the 2004 tsunami that
anything close to a sector-wide coordination system, in the cluster approach, emerged. From there, while it had been widely used, it was again only really the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods that enabled its successes and shortcomings to be fully assessed.

**LENS 2 – COORDINATION DECONSTRUCTED**

As highlighted previously, though coordination is extremely varied and complex, it is too often referred to as a single, two-dimensional consideration in humanitarian action. Such a miscategorisation does a disservice to meaningful discussion and analysis, rendering conclusions weak and over-generalised.

This section will seek to foster a more full and nuanced understanding of humanitarian coordination by deconstructing the concept, taking into account a wide range of current practices and opportunities. Here, coordination will be considered in terms of six basic questions: What, Who, Where, When, How and Why.

**What – Objects of Coordination**

Humanitarian coordination is typically aimed at coordinating one or more of the following.

*Information*

Information management and sharing are probably the most basic and common coordination activities. Accurate information tends to both be vital and difficult to obtain in the sometimes chaotic environment of humanitarian emergencies (Jahre and Jensen 662-663). The information being shared may relate to the details of the disaster and its impact – such as people and areas affected, damage to infrastructure and the specific needs of the population involved – as well as of the response activities underway – such as search and rescue efforts, food distribution, medical activities and psycho-social programs.

Information management, aimed at collecting, analysing and making use of data, is typically led by OCHA in major disasters and constitutes one of the office’s core tasks (IASC-b 12; Seybolt 1034). Clusters and other inter-agency networks also tend to play a key role (Jahre and Jensen 662-663), as does informal information sharing between
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humanitarian workers (Wild and Zhou 116). Importantly, information sharing has been identified as being a useful starting point for engaging different organisations in coordination mechanisms, particularly where the information in question is perceived as being valuable for humanitarian actors (Jahre and Jensen 663).

**Material**

Coordination of material generally falls under the humanitarian heading of logistics and is a growing area of research and practice in the sector (Chandes and Pache 322; Jahre *et al* 1009; Kovacs and Spens 5; Schulz and Blecken 637). This is evidenced by recent logistic service provider initiatives of the UN, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and ECHO (Schulz and Blecken 641-645), as well as numerous academic publications on coordination in humanitarian logistics (Chandes and Pache; Jahre *et al*; Jahre and Jensen; Schulz and Blecken; Wild and Zhou) – a trend likely to continue with the 2011 launch of the *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management* (Kovacs and Spens 6).

Logistical coordination is easily recognized as a highly practical enterprise in that benefits and savings are easier to measure and quantify than in other areas. Examples include organisations sharing supply chains and pre-positioned storage space for materials typically needed in response operations, as well as pre-planned relationship agreements and event specific activities, such as coordinated use of key infrastructure like airports (Chandes and Pache 323; Jahre *et al* 1013, 1016; Jahre and Jensen 662; Schulz and Blecken 642-644). Logistical coordination can cut down on on-going and fluctuating costs in storage and transportation while also improving response times (Schulz and Blecken 646). Importantly, establishing and utilising material coordination mechanisms prior to humanitarian emergencies seems to be of great benefit.

**Finance**

Coordination in humanitarian financing is a subject of regular discussion and often cited as being crucial to resolving on-going issues in the field (Jahre and Jensen 668; Macdonald and Valenza 14). Numerous well know examples exist including event-specific mechanisms, such as the CAP and ‘Flash Appeals’, and general emergency funds, such as CERF (Macdonald and Valenza 14-16; OCHA-c 1). These are mostly UN-led however non-UN financial coordination also exists, for example through the UK’s Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA - http://www.thecbha.org).
Financial coordination mechanisms such as these seek to improve predictability and availability of funding for emergency responses, as well as bring about a more strategic and efficient use of financial resources by ensuring equitable distribution.

Despite the prevalence of financial coordination mechanisms, many humanitarian organisations and practitioners have concerns (Macdonald and Valenza 17). Pooled funding allocation is often perceived to favour UN agencies and larger, better known NGOs (Macdonald and Valenza 15; Stoddard et al 5). The dominance of institutional donors, in particular wealthy states, also means funding commitments to event-specific coordinated mechanisms are heavily subject to variables, such as geopolitical strategic interests and international media attention, which have nothing to do with the humanitarian imperative (Macdonald and Valenza 16). Thus though significant financial coordination is taking place, it has yet to achieve all the potential benefits for humanitarian action.

Activities and Projects

Humanitarian action consists of a great deal more than distributing materials and funds. Many ‘service’ type activities such as hygiene promotion, medical treatment and education provision also take place and require at least some level of coordination to avoid overlap and ensure maximum impact. The reality is that many humanitarian projects include a combination of material, financial and service style activities, hence coordination on only one or two of these may be considered as incomplete. Project management activities such as preliminary assessments and post-intervention evaluations also present opportunities for coordination (Seybolt 1045; Stoddard et al 19).

Activities and projects are typically coordinated, once again, through clusters in large emergencies. Going one step further than sharing information about their projects, organisations may reach agreements about who will carry out what activities where. Project coordination can also be carried out at a deeper level with joint activities, such as joint needs assessments, and even jointly implemented projects (IASC-a 3). Some donors are also encouraging such behaviour through their funding mechanisms, demanding a minimum level of coordination with other humanitarian actors (Macdonald and Valenza 26).
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Who – Types of Actors and Coordination

This section, and indeed this paper, is focused on what are considered ‘humanitarian actors’ but it is worth noting that defining who is and isn’t a humanitarian actor is not clear cut. Military and business-minded actors may engage in activities that might be deemed humanitarian, as well as governments which have humanitarian responsibilities, but also other concerns such as those of a political or economic nature. For the purposes of this paper, humanitarian actors will be taken to be those whose activities and motivations are primarily humanitarian in nature. Military, government and private sector actors will be considered separately in the next section.

Before looking at inter-agency coordination, it is also worth noting that internal coordination within humanitarian organisations cannot be taken as a given. Individual organisations, particularly those that have grown large and have multiple departments or sections, are not immune to internal politics and miscommunication. This factor is even more significant in federation-style actors where multiple organisations work together. Examples include the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, Oxfam and MSF. The UN is another dominant example and one for which internal coordination has long been, and continues to be, an issue. Indeed it is often necessary to consider individual agencies and organisations such as these as separate actors despite their affiliations.

Horizontal Coordination

Horizontal coordination involves coordination among humanitarian actors of similar type and level, working in the same area, and is what is usually thought of when discussing coordination (Jahre and Jensen 664, 669; Schulz and Blecken 638). Whether NGOs, UN agencies or other actors, implementing agencies talking or working together in delivering their programs is the common example and typically takes place again through the cluster system (see Box 3.2 below). Numerous donor coordination mechanisms exist, such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative (http://www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org). Once again, this coordination is characterised by actors similar in nature, working together in some way and in search of some benefit, either individual or collective.

Horizontal coordination is not without its challenges. The sheer number of humanitarian actors in some emergencies makes comprehensive horizontal coordination impossible through a single mechanism. As such, organisations are typically broken up according
to sectors or issues, as with the cluster approach (IASC-b 2). This does however presents some challenges, such as achieving coordination between clusters and the level of commitment required for actors working in multiple sectors (Jahre and Jensen 661, 669). The fact that agencies may be working together at one level, such as project implementation in a humanitarian emergency, and be competing at another, such as in securing funding from private or institutional donors, can also present challenges (Chandes and Pache 337). Similar actors doing similar work may be on the one hand thought of as collaborators with a common goal, or on the other as competitors striving for survival or even dominance (Jahre and Jensen 664).

**Box 3.2: The Cluster Approach**

The Cluster Approach has been a central component of international humanitarian coordination since it was first implemented in Pakistan in 2005 (Stoddard et al 5). Following a fairly straightforward framework, humanitarian actors and activities are ‘clustered’ around key sectoral working groups (IASC-b 2). Horizontal coordination takes places first between actors working in the same sector in a given response operation, and then (in theory) between the various clusters to provide a coordinated and comprehensive response (IASC-a 3; Jahre and Jensen 661).

The table below shows the sectors for which clusters have been established at the global level. These clusters are not necessarily all activated in every humanitarian emergency, with some being (deliberately) omitted and others being merged or amalgamated (IASC-a 3). The table also includes the global lead agencies for each cluster and these organisations often – though not always – take on the same role at the national and local level (IASC-b 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector or Area of Activity</th>
<th>IDPs or Disaster situations?</th>
<th>Global cluster lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
<td>FAO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Coordination/Management</td>
<td>IDPs from conflict, Disaster situations</td>
<td>UNHCR, IOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Recovery</td>
<td></td>
<td>UNDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>UNICEF, Save the Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Shelter:</td>
<td>IDPs from conflict, Disaster situations</td>
<td>UNHCR, IFRC (Convener)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Telecommunications</td>
<td></td>
<td>OCHA/UNICEF/WFP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
<td>WHO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td></td>
<td>WFP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td></td>
<td>UNICEF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection</td>
<td>IDPs from conflict, Disasters/civilians affected by conflict (other than IDPs)</td>
<td>UNHCR, UNHCR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water, Sanitation and Hygiene</td>
<td></td>
<td>UNICEF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Source: NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (3)
The role of cluster lead brings with it not only a responsibility to take an active role in leading those actors in the sector involved, but also a responsibility as ‘provider of last resort’ (IASC-b 7; IASC-a 10). This means the cluster lead is (in theory) responsible for ensuring any gaps remaining after existing response efforts have been taken into account, are filled, ensuring a gap-free response (IASC-b 10). The resources and capacity necessary to fulfil this obligation, as well as to lead cluster coordination in general, mean the role of cluster lead is essentially beyond even the largest international NGOs. As a result, UN agencies dominate cluster leadership from global to local levels (Stoddard et al 15).

The cluster system has not been without its criticisms and many of these have been taken into account in the IASC’s recent Transformative Agenda (IASC-a 1; Jahre and Jensen 661). Along with numerous other initiatives, the Transformative Agenda seeks to address challenges the have emerged with the cluster approach’s implementation over its first six years. With many changes yet to be implemented, it remains to be seen how successful the IASC and the humanitarian community will be in this regard.

**Vertical Coordination**

Aside from coordination with similar actors doing similar work, potential exists for humanitarian actors to increase coordination with actors at different levels. Discussions and initiatives aimed at greater vertical coordination are already taking place in the area of logistics where enhanced relationships and arrangements are being made with suppliers and transportation providers – including commercial as well as humanitarian actors in those roles (Jahre et al 1019; Jahre and Jensen 665). Similarly in financing, donors and implementing agencies are engaging in more comprehensive agreements aimed at enhancing coordination of funding flows (Macdonald and Valenza 14). In most cases, enhanced vertical coordination with actors at different levels seems to involve building and expanding on relationships that already exist, so as to deepen the level of coordination if not actually increasing the number of actors coordinated.

One particular area of coordination with a different type of actor that has received ever-growing attention is partnerships with local actors. Recognition that the traditional dominance of international humanitarian actors can both have detrimental effects, and represent a failure to seize the potential benefits of strengthening capacity in local actors, has seen far greater emphasis being placed on this type of coordination (Oxfam-a
12). Enhanced coordination and partnership with local humanitarian actors, used as a way to both implement humanitarian programs and build capacity in areas affected by humanitarian emergencies, is seen as being a key strategy to building resilience in disaster affected communities (Oxfam-a 16). For international actors seeking to engage in this way, this presents a number of opportunities, but also challenges, not the least of which is a potential need to rethink their entire operating model and shift their role to one of primarily working with and through local actors (Oxfam-a 25).

Where – Geographic Dimensions of Coordination

Obviously humanitarian emergencies can happen anywhere, though some areas tend to be disproportionately affected for many different reasons. The location question of humanitarian action is instead, at which geographic level coordination is, or could be, taking place. Local coordination is the most common but depending on the size and scope of the emergency, ‘local’ may vary from community level to national. Coordination of larger geographic areas affected by the same event may be useful for pursuing a more strategic and holistic response, however this risks placing less emphasis on location and population specific needs and becoming an irrelevant exercise for smaller actors operating in a few small areas. As such, a combination of both national and community or area level coordination is typically used. In major emergencies where the cluster system is utilised, coordination will largely take place at the national level. Sub-national coordination levels are also used, as for example in Sudan and South Sudan, and have been highlighted as requiring greater attention in the Transformative Agenda (IASC-a 3,9), but supra-national or regional clusters have not been used in humanitarian responses.

Though clusters are not used, regional coordination relating to humanitarian action does take place. Humanitarian actors may coordinate in their use of regional logistical storage centres (Jahre et al 1015-16) and governments may establish agreements facilitating better humanitarian response in the event of an emergency – ASEAN provides a notable example in the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). As regional bodies and agreements appear to be growing in importance more generally in international relations, it is quite possible that humanitarian coordination at the regional level may also increase.
At the global level, a number of humanitarian coordination mechanisms exist but these tend to focus more on policy and other activities not directly involving humanitarian response for specific events. Indeed, and perhaps unsurprisingly so, it appears the further from the local level one looks, the less practical and response focused humanitarian coordination is – though CERF provides an obvious exception and others exist. One key global coordination mechanism is the IASC which provides the most widely recognized platform for coordination among humanitarian actors and generally sets the direction for changes in humanitarian action at the global level.

**When – Temporal Perspectives of Humanitarian Coordination**

While clear distinctions between time periods before, during and after a disaster tend not to exist in reality, these temporal dimensions still offer a useful way to consider different types of humanitarian coordination.

**Before**

Coordination before humanitarian emergencies occur, at ‘normal’ times, offers huge potential benefits and tends to be directed at one or more of the following (Chandes and Pache 323; Schulz and Blecken 639). Firstly, it may be aimed at enhancing preparedness (IASC-a 1) – that is, making arrangements for coordination activities that will take place in the event of a humanitarian emergency, such as vertical coordination establishing standby supply contracts (Schulz and Blecken 642-643). Secondly, coordination before humanitarian emergencies may be directed at actually avoiding potential events, such as through disaster risk reduction activities, early warning systems and pre-emptive actions (IASC-a 1). Finally, coordination before humanitarian emergencies may be normative and policy focused. Examples would include agreements among humanitarian actors regarding common technical standards, financing and the coordination mechanisms to be used in the event of an emergency.

Despite its widely recognised importance, coordination before humanitarian emergencies tends to face similar problems to disaster risk reduction in general. Interest and financing for humanitarian activities tends to be a function of political and media attention which is far greater during times of emergency (Charles *et al* 163; Macdonald and Valenza 16). This means response is disproportionately favoured over other actions prior to emergencies. Related to this is the fact that coordination requires an investment
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of staff time and resources many organisations, particularly smaller ones, may be unable or unwilling to justify outside an emergency setting (Schulz and Blecken 650). As a result, many of those organisations acting during an emergency may be absent from discussions in non-emergency times or forums. While considerable progress has been made in this area over the past two decades – particularly with the work of the IASC – it has arguably been insufficient, resulting in problems when emergencies do happen, as they inevitably will.

During
Emphasis on coordination is clearly greatest during times of response to humanitarian emergencies and it is here that donors, the media, humanitarian actors themselves and the people affected by the emergency are most likely to identify and criticise examples that show coordination is lacking. Coordination during an emergency is also what is typically thought of when using the term, tending to focus on local level horizontal coordination activities, such as the work of clusters. Activities may include joint needs assessments, consolidated funding appeals, shared logistical and transportation infrastructure and information sharing.

While coordination during a humanitarian emergency may be seen as most relevant and important, it is also the worst and most difficult time to try to establish coordination mechanisms and conduct even the most basic activities such as meetings. Humanitarian emergencies typically involve large numbers of humanitarian actors working beyond their limited resources in an environment of imperfect information, inadequate regulation and practical challenges. Time pressures and the necessity for fast action also may make the potential difficulties of coordination seem excessive and irrelevant to humanitarian work. Hence it can be said that coordination during humanitarian emergencies is when it is most important, but that it is only likely to be successful if arrangements are in place prior to a given event (Chandes and Pache 334).

After
Coordination after humanitarian emergencies is in many ways similar to coordination before emergencies, and indeed the two may be thought of as linked or even being one and the same thing. With essentially the same aims as coordination before emergencies, coordination after events reflects on what actually did happen and how it can be improved in the future. This potential as a basis for improvement has sparked
considerable interest, particularly after large scale humanitarian emergencies. Examples such as joint evaluation reports following the 1994 Rwandan genocide and 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami are most prominent (Cosgrave; ODI), though less high profile reviews of specific coordination arrangements and mechanisms are common. Importantly, a coordinated approach to post-event reflection has helped lay the foundation for most of the major shifts in coordination of the last two decades, as evidenced in Lens 1 above.

As suggested above, in reality there is no ‘before’ or ‘after’ humanitarian emergencies but rather an ongoing cycle with most of the major humanitarian actors perpetually involved in at least one humanitarian emergency somewhere in the world. While coordination during emergencies may be the most high profile and practical part of this cycle, and perhaps even its objective, it appears that most change and the greatest opportunities for improvement are offered in the under-resourced coordination work taking place outside of the direct response context.

**How – Approaches to Coordination**

While most actors and stakeholders would acknowledge that current humanitarian coordination is less than ideal, this does not extend to a common agreement about how improvements can be made. Aside from the diversity of coordination options already described above, there are several different approaches that can be taken to coordination in any situation.

*Authority*

There appears to be a somewhat automatic tendency in much of the discourse surrounding humanitarian coordination to assume that enhanced coordination requires authority-based solutions (Stephenson 50). Calls have been made – as well as strongly resisted – for a single body to be given authority over humanitarian activities in order to bring about coordination (Stephenson 45; Stephenson and Schnitzer 922). Whether in the form of an individual, such as the Humanitarian Coordinator, or a body, such as OCHA, the assumption seems to be that humanitarian actors must be compelled to coordinate effectively and that this would be the only way to ensure cohesion and accountability.
Setting aside the certain resistance that would be put up by humanitarian actors in the event of such a move – and that it runs directly counter to the humanitarian principle of independence – there are a number of problems with this approach and the assumptions that underpin it. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that there already is a body authorised to manage humanitarian activities in the event of an emergency – that being, the state or controlling party of the territory involved (Spieker 21). While humanitarian actors may claim a right to independence, they must ultimately comply with the rules and regulations of the sovereign power. Granting of authority to any other body could only be supplemental to this and would presumably only apply where the state in question is unwilling or unable to coordinate humanitarian action.

Secondly, current international law does not really grant any body the power to bestow such authority over independent organisations. The UN Security Council could attempt to pass a resolution to such effect but it is beyond the scope of this paper to ascertain whether such a move would be legally valid or enforceable. At the very least resistance from local and international NGOs can be assumed and a potential clash with the independent status of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, recognised under international law, seems likely (IASC-b 3).

Even if it is assumed that authority could legally be granted to a controlling individual or body, the presumption that this would solve coordination problems is far from easily justified. Evidence for this can be found in the example of most (if not every) government’s domestic activities and the prevalence of ‘friendly fire’ incidents in militaries utilising highly authoritarian structures. The reality is that, despite the underlying assumptions common in debates around improved coordination, authority-based solutions are almost certainly not viable or appropriate for humanitarian action (Stephenson and Schnitzer 922) – a point acknowledge by the IASC in its Transformative Agenda Compendium of Agreed Actions (IASC-a 5).

**Leadership**

One of the questions of humanitarian coordination that has received the most attention since its emergence in prominence has been that of leadership. A leadership focused approach to humanitarian coordination entails utilising a mixture of authority-based and ‘soft’ power to unite numerous humanitarian actors as working towards a common goal. This approach has typically focused on the role of the Humanitarian Coordinator and
their status as, or relation with, the UN Resident Coordinator and Special Representatives of the Secretary General where they are present.

The Humanitarian Coordinator role has faced challenges since it was created and is far from a comprehensive solution to coordination (Adinolfi et al 48-49). Firstly, it must be acknowledged that it is a UN appointment and while recruits may potentially be drawn from NGO staff (IASC-a 6), the position’s relevance to non-UN agencies is questionable. Secondly, the ability of the Humanitarian Coordinator to influence factors beyond the region they are responsible for, but which significantly impact on their operations, such as donor funding, is severely limited. Questions have also been raised as to the capacity and availability of high quality staff to fill the Humanitarian Coordinator role (Adinolfi et al 49).

As mentioned above (see Box 3.1), recent changes with the Transformative Agenda are very much directed at addressing these issues. While there are no doubt many that hope these will lead to significant improvements, it remains to be seen how effectual a model based on individual leadership with limited authority will be in the humanitarian context. At best, high quality humanitarian leadership in the form of a Humanitarian Coordinator seems only part of the answer.

**Structural**

Another approach to humanitarian coordination, and perhaps the most wide-spread one, is the structural approach. Structural approaches seek to use institutions and formal relationships to establish and enhance humanitarian coordination. The cluster system is the most obvious example of this in that it provides a structural framework for coordination across a number of different areas. Other common structural coordination mechanisms include partnership arrangements, advocacy alliances and joint service provision bodies (Schulz and Bleckon 640). A structural perspective can also be seen in the more general coordination question of whether to seek greater centralisation or decentralisation in humanitarian action (Jahre et al 1013; Seybolt 1034).

Structural solutions can be quite varied and may draw on elements of formal authority and leadership, for example with the designation of cluster lead agencies. One of their major advantages is their institutional nature and the consistency and reliability this may bring. Structural solutions are however typically limited as coordination mechanisms by
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the degree to which organisations choose to engage with them and can increase distinctions between actors inside and outside of those structures. Relationships between different structural bodies has also been shown to be an issue, as evidenced by challenges in inter-cluster coordination and criticisms that it leads to a more ‘silohed’ approach (Jahre and Jensen 661) – once again, something the Transformative Agenda seeks to address (IASC-a 3). It can be argued that structural solutions are useful for addressing specific issues and groups of actors in a somewhat predictable way, but that they are less flexible and dynamic, and hence of limited benefit in unpredictable and changing environments such as humanitarian emergencies.

**Strategic**

Strategic approaches to coordination are those that seek to bring unity and cohesiveness to humanitarian action through the development of common goals, objectives and plans. The Coordinated Humanitarian Action Plans of the CAP are a clear example of attempts at this. Strategic approaches have the advantage of being able to be quite flexible in terms of their scope and their willingness to adapt to a situation. They also can focus on areas of commonality and agreement among different actors while consciously avoiding areas of contention. Perhaps most significantly, these approaches are highly compatible with the dominant lexicon and paradigm of the humanitarian and development fields making them appealing to organisations, even if at times attracting the scorn of more cynical practitioners.

Probably the biggest issues relating to strategic approaches are questions around inclusiveness and compliance. The development of strategic plans and agreements may be dominated by a few agencies while smaller and more peripheral actors have little say in the decisions that are made. This can lead to situations where theoretically ‘comprehensive’ plans ignore, or are ignored by, many organisations and their programming. The fact that funding may be linked to these plans, as it is with the CAP, can also serve to exacerbate questions around inclusiveness and inter-organisational politics. Aside from the challenges in actually formulating common strategic plans, without formal structures or authorities, implementation and compliance with agreements may not be enforced, undercutting the value of such approaches.
Standardisation

Slightly different to the approaches outlined above, standardisation is less concerned with coordination of activities at the local level and more focused on achieving coordination through the establishment of common standards and approaches (Chandes and Pache 323-324). Examples can be found in materials when organisations share suppliers and supply chains and in information when they submit data to shared databases and reports (Chandes and Pache 323-324). The most obvious example however can be found in the Sphere Minimum Standards described in more detail in the previous chapter. Standardisation has the benefit in that organisations with similar goals may have much less difficulty agreeing on common standards, particularly technical standards, than submitting to external authority and plans, or engaging in on-going coordination structures.

The goal of standardisation is to achieve cohesion and consistency through the institutionalisation of common practice, rather than focus on context specific activities and issues (Chandes and Pache 323-324). One of the biggest criticisms of this approach is again the lack of capacity to hold organisations and practitioners to account if they fail to adhere to such standards. This in turn leads to questions around oversight and accreditation and risks becoming overly bureaucratic, which again may not be an appropriate basis for coordination in complex humanitarian environments. Further to this is the fact that some things are easier to standardise than others. This has led to criticisms that standardisation approaches are overly technical in their focus while ignoring other critical components of humanitarian action (see Chapter 2).

Network

Network approaches to coordination conceive the issue in entirely different terms to those described above. Rather than viewing the humanitarian ‘system’ as an entity or organisation, some more recent approaches recognise the fact that it is made up of large numbers of individual actors, with differing characteristics and agendas, linked together by a complex and dynamic network of relationships and behaviours (Ngamassi et al 2; Seybolt 1029; Stephenson 44). From this perspective, influencing collective action and outcomes requires understanding and shaping the networks and relationships involved without trying to impose a formal structure (Stephenson and Schnitzer 925).
What makes the emerging network approaches so interesting is, firstly, that they accept the reality that independent humanitarian organisations are unlikely to submit to external authority or hierarchy (Stephenson 45; Stephenson and Schnitzer 922). Instead of seeking to develop traditional coordination mechanisms based on unrealistic assumptions, they acknowledge reality and try to work with what actually exists.

The other major attraction of network approaches is their ability to see the bigger picture. Different types of networks and relationships have different characteristics and affects, including beyond the degree of order and cohesion of the actors involved. In other words, networks with high levels of effective coordination may have other undesirable characteristics, such as not being flexible or conducive to innovation (Seybolt 1035; Stephenson and Schnitzer 926-928). In seeking network based solutions to coordination problems these other impacts are more easily recognised and taken into account.

In the humanitarian context this suggests that ‘perfect’ coordination may actually be undesirable if it has negative side effects. Instead, efforts to improve coordination could examine ways to make networks more effective in terms of their final outcomes for those affected by disasters without actually seeking structural order or unified action.

**Why – Motivations for Coordination**

The reasons why organisations might engage in coordination are difficult to identify with any certainty and multiple motivations may drive any given action. This makes empirical claims regarding motivations for coordination difficult to justify and may explain the lack of research in this area. Despite this, a few general categories of motivations can be conceived which offer some insight into the practical implications of such factors.

**Forced Coordination**

Though humanitarian organisations may consider themselves independent, and may indeed operate in an independent manner, under certain situations coordination with other actors may be a prerequisite for humanitarian action to take place. National governments in countries affected by humanitarian emergencies may make coordination with government or military activities a condition of authorisation to action (Macdonald and Valenza 26). Donor governments and agencies seeking to promote enhanced
coordination have also been known to make funding of projects conditional on engagement in cooperative activities with other NGOs in some instances (Macdonald and Valenza 26). While some humanitarian actors may choose not to act where they consider such requirements to be unacceptable, many will engage in order to comply (Macdonald and Valenza 27).

Where coordination is forced and beyond what an organisation would otherwise chose to participate in, it is not difficult to see potential problems. Lack of genuine commitment and trust would be highly likely. It could also be expected that coordination would be strictly limited to the minimum amount and type required for compliance, as opposed to organisations actively seeking out new or less obvious opportunities.

Similar arguments could be made in regard to more subtle attempts to ‘incentivize’ coordination, particularly where the nature and extent of the coordination being incentivised is predetermined and fixed. Furthermore, if coordination is based on coercion or incentive forces, the question must be asked as to how sustainable such an approach is and what would happen if the coercive or incentive factors were removed.

As with the broader lesson learnt throughout much of development and humanitarian work in recent decades, genuine and sustainable coordination is only likely to be achieved when the process is open and participatory. Organisations, particularly those humanitarian actors who guard their independence closely, are far more likely to embrace cooperative approaches if they are able to make the choice to engage themselves, and if they have an opportunity to influence decisions regarding the mechanisms chosen (Jahre and Jensen 662; Stephenson 45).

Self-Interest
It may seem counter-intuitive to state that independent humanitarian organisations would pursue coordination in their own self-interest, but it isn’t difficult to identify numerous examples of ways in which they may benefit. To name just a few, engagement with coordination mechanisms has the potential to bring increased access to funding, give increased weight to advocacy efforts, enhance perceptions of legitimacy by association – particularly for lesser known organisations –, lower costs and increase access to information and networks of value (Jahre and Jensen 662; Schulz and Blecken
646; Wild and Zhou 117). The fact that many private and institutional donors perceive coordination in humanitarian action to be a significant problem may also mean that simply being able to publicly declare a commitment to and on-going participation in coordination processes may be beneficial for an organisation’s image and funding streams. Given some of the costs associated with coordination – discussed in more detail below – and the considerable pressure on humanitarian organisations to justify every action and expenditure, many organisations are forced to at least give consideration to a ‘cost versus benefits’ style calculation.

The problems with self-interest as a driving force for coordination are equally easy to identify, the most obvious being that coordination will only continue to occur where that self-interest is adequately served. Strict, cold self-interest calculations do not take into account, inter alia, what is best for the affected population. Even more disconcerting is the likely impact self-interest driven coordination would have on the quality of the coordination achieved. Organisations engaging coordination mechanisms primarily for their own benefit are likely to participate in a way that seeks maximize that benefit and minimize any potential costs, regardless of impact on others. Under such circumstances, coordination mechanisms are more likely to become political forums of competing interests, rather than platforms for increasing cohesion and positive impact in humanitarian action.

In reality many practitioners – perhaps a majority – would argue the previous paragraph accurately describes, in part or in full, the current status of coordination. It would be difficult and somewhat naive to deny that self-interest is not at least a contributing motivation for coordination in many organisations. Equally however, it would be overly cynical to suggest that self-interest is the only motive. The real question is to what degree self-interest drives participation in coordination as opposed to other motives, and what are the implications of this particular configuration. This point will be returned to in Chapter 4 when the implications of a RBA on coordination are considered.

**Impact**

The third main category of motivations for engaging in coordination is that of impact, which in this context may be taken to mean benefits beyond the organisation making the choice. An impact-based decision to engage in coordination is based on the assumption or judgement that such participation will in turn benefit those affected by the
humanitarian emergency, the situation in question, other humanitarian organisations – or the ‘humanitarian community’ as a whole – or donors (Ngamassi et al 2). Where such benefits materialise, the decision to participate in coordination can be said to have had a positive impact.

Impact cannot be entirely divorced from self-interest as greater positive impacts may be in line with an organisation’s goals or simply good for its reputation. The fact that causality is often difficult to establish in such situations however, may mean neither the organisation itself, nor the public, can be certain to what degree their involvement contributed that impact (Ngamassi et al 2).

If participating actors are engaging in coordination based on a motivation to have a greater positive impact, it follows that they will be more interested in pursuing meaningful actions to that end. Of course even within this category, differences can be seen between activities pursuing potential benefits for donors, other humanitarian actors and the people affected by an emergency. Strategies seeking to have a greater impact in terms of benefits for donors may run in line with or against those seeking to have a greater impact in terms of benefits for affected populations and vice versa.

While impact-based motivations are probably going to lead to higher quality and more sustainable coordination – coordination would only be limited by the extent to which it has a positive impact – it must be recognised that different actors define and measure impact in different ways. There is certainly some commonality to the extent that humanitarian actors of all types share the same goals and principles, but in the absence of unanimity on these points, some differences and tensions will remain.

**Humanitarian Coordination Deconstructed Conclusions**

The above deconstruction of humanitarian coordination provides several notable points of value to this paper’s analysis. The first is further validation and elaboration on the obvious point that coordination is complex. Despite much criticism in regards to this issue, the reality is that there is a great deal of coordination already taking place and a wide variety of approaches and practices in use.

This overview makes it clear that it coordination is not two dimensional and it is both simplistic and unhelpful to conceptualise the issue as one of ‘more’ or ‘less’
coordination. The quantity of coordination activity taking place may be of far less importance than its nature and quality. Different approaches and mechanisms for humanitarian coordination have different strengths and weaknesses in different settings and will ultimately produce different results, not all of which can be considered positive.

Directly related to this is the second point that humanitarian coordination is more than horizontal coordination, through clusters, that is entirely event and response focused (Jahre and Jensen 668). This narrow, but common, conception of coordination is inaccurate and there is much that can be gained by looking beyond this limited interpretation. Equally, there are more approaches to coordination than ones based on authority. Given that authority-based solutions may be unrealistic and unhelpful in the current environment, those examining the issue of coordination would do well to look beyond the use of authoritative power and structures.

It is also worth noting that this limited perception of coordination is changing with increasing interest and research in the areas of logistics chains, coordination mechanisms outside the ‘during an emergency’ context, network approaches and partnership arrangements – particularly with local actors. These initiatives largely fall outside traditional coordination stereotypes and the above examination shows that even more possibilities exist, using different combinations and approaches to humanitarian coordination.

One final point is that motivations matter. The reasons why humanitarian actors choose to engage coordination mechanisms and activities has received little to no attention in the past but can be seen to be a potentially important factor (Ngamassi et al 2). Motivations may be critical to fostering quality and sustainability in humanitarian coordination and further research is needed to investigate this hypothesis.

**Lens 3 – Key Issues and Tensions**

Widespread recognition of coordination as a central issue for humanitarian action does not make it any less contested. Indeed some areas of coordination represent the most divisive questions in the field today. It is only through an understanding of humanitarian
coordination’s criticisms and challenges that a complete picture can be formed and used as a basis for further analysis.

This section will examine key issues and tensions with the aim of providing an overview of some of the critical discussions which shape modern humanitarian coordination. Four broad headings provide the framework with this analysis; coordination with non-humanitarian actors, tensions with humanitarian principles, the cost of coordination and the goal of coordination. In reviewing the debate in these areas depth will be added to the historical and structural discussions of coordination provided above, so as to enable a stronger analysis in the following chapter.

**Non-Humanitarian Actors**

Despite the notion of ‘humanitarian space’, humanitarian action does not exist in a vacuum and it is understood that at least some level of engagement with non-humanitarian actors is necessary and acceptable. The question of coordination with actors of a different nature and with different objectives does however present some potential dilemmas and challenges for humanitarians. Four groups in particular have been the subject of much discussion in recent years.

*Military/Armed Actors*

Resistance to excessive coordination with military actors is nothing new in the humanitarian world, but trends towards ‘integration’ and comprehensive approaches, described in Lens 1 above, have returned the issue to prominence in recent times (Macdonald and Valenza 23-24). Indeed when discussing and developing the addition of a specific Coordination Standard to the 2011 edition of the Sphere Handbook, civil military coordination received considerable attention (Sandison). It should also be noted that the term ‘military actors’ may be somewhat out-dated. Armed actors with which humanitarians may need to engage or coordinate may include government and rebel armies, paramilitary groups and militias, criminal groups and urban gangs, insurgents and ‘terrorist organisations,’ and private security forces (Macdonald and Valenza 9). Each will have different characteristics and agendas, but many of the same issues emerge in relationships with these actors.

The challenges and issues for humanitarians coordinating with military or armed actors have been extensively documented and debated and will not be reviewed in detail
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One point that is particularly relevant however is the degree to which rights-based humanitarianism may imply at least some level of coordination with military actors. As humanitarian action alone is insufficient to ensure the realisation of rights – particularly those relating to protection – some humanitarian actors have felt compelled to not only work with military counterparts, but even to support so-called ‘humanitarian interventions’ by armed actors where gross human rights violations are taking place (Weissman 186).

Universal and absolutist points of view have sometimes painted this issue as essentially dichotomous; actors are either committed to ensure human rights are fulfilled and therefore must recognise that sometimes military force is necessary, or they oppose armed humanitarian intervention and therefore see no place for human rights in humanitarian action (Bricmont 10-11). Such a characterisation of the discussion has several problems, not the least of which is the assumption that armed humanitarian intervention is, or at least can be, carried out without violating human rights. This assumption is highly questionable and highlights the unrealistic simplicity of framing the discussion in this way (Bricmont 66-72, 82-83).

The potential links between an RBA and coordination with armed actors go far beyond the question of support for military interventions. In fact, civil military coordination is probably the one aspect of coordination that has been seriously considered with an RBA in mind so far. As it largely falls outside the scope of this paper which is focused primarily on humanitarian actors, the discussion will be left for others to research and debate further. It has however, been kept in mind in the analysis presented in this paper.

Government

Coordination with government is something of a two-edged sword for humanitarian agencies and is fraught with risks and opportunities. At least some level of contact is essential if only to arrange access (Macdonald and Valenza 9), but beyond this point different humanitarian organisations vary greatly from NGOs that are fiercely independent to the point of refusing government funding, to humanitarian actors that are themselves government or inter-government bodies (Charles et al 159). It is common for organisations to try to minimise potential government influence on their work, while simultaneously trying to maximise the influence they can have on government.

See, for example, Wheeler and Harmer, and Collinson and Elhawary
The advantages to coordinating with government actors largely stem from their role and power, or put another way, their ability to influence the humanitarian context. This is particularly attractive for organisations with a ‘new humanitarianism’ type of approach because the changes and solutions to root causes they pursue often require government input and commitment (Macdonald and Valenza 22). Furthermore, where humanitarian action takes on roles traditionally filled by government, for example as health care, infrastructure or education provider, the sustainability of program activities may also depend on working with government (Macdonald and Valenza 22). The fact that government sources account for a massive amount of humanitarian funding presents another, and some would argue the most significant, reason for collaboration (Seybolt 1032).

The argument against is largely concerned with the fact that access to the money, power and institutional relationships of government comes at a cost. Governments are political actors and their actions are necessarily political (Seybolt 1031). Whether overtly or otherwise, the fear is that closer coordination with government will see humanitarian action used as a tool for political purposes. This then risks subverting the humanitarian imperative and other key principles. For example, only funding or authorising humanitarian programs for sympathetic populations or where strategic interests are involved and ignoring other areas with equal or greater need (Macdonald and Valenza 16).

The reality is that, whether as belligerent, donor or host nations, governments are both agenda driven political actors and part of the environment within which humanitarians must work (Macdonald and Valenza 22). They cannot be ignored or dismissed, and indeed may possess more legal authority, legitimacy and accountability than other humanitarian actors – though this is by no means the rule. Some level of coordination with government is essential and may be mandated (Macdonald and Valenza 9), but ultimately the extent and nature of coordination pursued by individual humanitarian actors will depend on their own principles and perceptions of risks and benefits.

**Business/Private Sector**

Though some remain wary, business and private sector coordination has become increasingly popular over the past decade and is actively encouraged by some humanitarian actors, such as UN agencies (OCHA-d 1; WEF and OCHA 1).
perceived success of the capitalist-style private sector in driving socio-economic development, wealth creation and generally achieving its goals and objectives has been coveted by many in both the government and non-government public sector. Seemingly based on the assumption that ‘business does it better’, public sector and civil society organisations – including some humanitarian actors – have moved beyond seeking funding and adopting private sector practices and business models (Stephenson and Schnitzer 928). Humanitarian organisations are more and more seeking partnerships with the private sector, which itself is largely responsible for the shift having shown little interest in simply being another financial donor (Binder and Martin 9, 25).

In theory, humanitarian-private sector partnerships should be developed in a strategic manner based on an identified need or opportunity (WEF and OCHA 2). Ideally benefiting all parties, as a bare minimum it is understood that such partnerships must be first and foremost directed at delivering positive outcomes for humanitarian action. Examples include logistics companies such as DHL providing technical assistance and actual services in the delivery of humanitarian response (Binder and Martin 38) and telecommunications companies such as Ericson providing equipment and network access for use in humanitarian action (OCHA-d 1).

In reality, policy and practice varies considerably and many humanitarian organisations are far more reactive in their stance to business partnerships – only responding when approached – or overly focused on financial contributions. Arrangements that move beyond financial or ‘in kind’ support and actually entail humanitarian organisations paying for services are ethically questionable. On the one hand it may be argued that private sector efficiency can lead to cost savings for humanitarian actors. On the other, it could be argued that it is entirely inappropriate for third parties to profit from humanitarian crises (WEF and OCHA 3) – assuming some profit is being made.

For the moment it seems humanitarian actors are most comfortable accepting financial and in kind support that presents minimal risk and requires nothing on their part. More advanced arrangements, such as those aimed at building capacity with the help of private sector expertise and pursuing cost reductions and faster response through standby partnerships, exist but are not necessarily prevalent. This is no doubt at least in part due to a type of cross-cultural gap between the for-profit and not-for-profit worlds,
and a degree of distrust of private sector organisations and employees among humanitarian workers (Schulz and Blecken 650).

Other Civil Society Actors
In addition to military, government and private sector actors, humanitarian organisations must also increasingly interact with their fellow NGOs working in the areas of human rights and development. While many humanitarian actors actually engage in these areas themselves, NGOs specialising in these areas such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also exist and frequently become active participants in a given context. For international civil society organisations this will often mean engagement from a distance, but their local counter-parts may actually be physically present in areas experiencing humanitarian emergencies.

For the most part, humanitarian actors have traditionally had few objections to working with such organisations as they often share similar values and goals. In some contexts however, alignment with non-humanitarian civil society actors can present significant problems, particularly where public advocacy is involved (Wild and Zhou 117). Humanitarian actors often require the express consent of the subjects of their counter-parts advocacy campaigns in order to carry out their work. As such, being seen to be too closely associated with antagonistic civil society actors can have a serious operational consequences. This means humanitarian organisations need to take care with the nature and level of their coordination with these actors, as well as how such coordination may be perceived by others.

Tensions with Humanitarian Principles
The humanitarian principles were formulated and accepted at a time with far fewer actors than today and when coordination was largely a non-issue (Macdonald and Valenza 4). Since then, the context for humanitarian action has changed considerably. Both the operating environment and the desires of the humanitarians themselves have driven change to such a degree that the appropriateness of those humanitarian principles can no longer be taken for granted. This is particularly true for the central issue of coordination.
**Humanity**

It is difficult to identify any inherent tension between coordination and the humanitarian principle of humanity. It is possible that coordination may lead to situations where other factors influence or overpower the humanitarian imperative as driver of decisions in a given organisation (Stephenson 48). In such cases however, it is not that coordination itself is the issue, but rather the nature or extent of the specific coordination in question.

Interestingly, it may actually be possible to make the counter argument – that is that, to the extent that coordination enables more human suffering to be addressed and more people to benefit, the principle of humanity may in fact compel coordination. Of course such an argument has its limitation and would clearly work in reverse where a particular coordination mechanism or practice impinges on an organisation’s capacity to have a positive impact.

Generally speaking there appears to be no significant issues here except to say that coordination is necessary to the extent that it is beneficial. The bigger question is beneficial for whom and in what ways? A simple scenario highlights the issue; consider a situation where engaging in coordination is in the best interests of those affected by an emergency, but considered to be disadvantageous for an individual organisation, for example due to the associated costs (see Costs of Coordination below). The organisation may implement its programs in this situation without participating in coordination and argue that avoiding such costs also enables it address more suffering elsewhere, in line with the humanitarian imperative. This point will be returned to in the following chapter when considering the implications of the RBA.

**Impartiality**

It is far less certain that coordination and impartiality are not inherently contradictory. Some types of coordination, particularly those that involve deep relationships and shared decision making, ultimately open the door for factors other than need to influence where humanitarian action takes place, and which people affected by emergencies it will seek to work with and assist. This may be in the form of restrictions included in institutional funding arrangements or significant objections from partner organisations to activities working with certain groups or populations (Macdonald and Valenza 17). Equally however, there are other coordination activities, such as information sharing, which present no real threat to impartiality.
In some ways coordination may present a solution to a central challenge of impartiality – how to work with and support all people with comparable needs when to do so would require more resources than an organisation has available. Contrary to the way this discussion is often framed, needs cannot be measure on a simple two dimensional scale, and even if they could, more people may share equal needs than an organisation can assist. Acting alone, an organisation is forced to make decisions about allocating resources based on factors other than need. Through coordination, humanitarian actors have the potential to work together to ensure the needs of an entire group of people in a similar situation are met. Obviously this is not guaranteed and even combined resources may still be insufficient. Nevertheless, coordination may lessen the degree to which non-needs based factors become a determinant for humanitarian action, thus contributing to fulfilling the principle of impartiality.

This argument does not negate the potential problems coordination can present for impartiality mentioned above. Instead it shows that coordination can both positively and negatively influence impartiality and the degree to which it does either will primarily depend on the specifics of the coordination and environment in question.

*Neutrality*

There is clearly potential for tensions between coordination and the principle of neutrality, though unlike the previous two, it may matter more *who* and organisation coordinates with than *how* they go about it. This relates to a recognition that perceived neutrality can be just as, or more, important than actual neutrality (Macdonald and Valenza 8). Obviously, certain types of coordination arrangements may objectively be seen to violate the principle of neutrality, but again, limitations and precautions could theoretically be put in place to ensure such a violation does not occur (Macdonald and Valenza 26).

In some areas affected by conflict however, the perceptions of the public, other combatants and indeed other humanitarian actors, in regards to neutrality may be more significant (Macdonald and Valenza 8,12). The very basic act of attending a meeting where other actors are present may be enough to shift perceptions of an organisation’s neutrality (Barnett and Weiss 110). In such environments, it is not clear that any type of coordination, even at a minimal level, can occur without compromising perceived neutrality (Macdonald and Valenza 8). On the other hand, sometimes simply having
expatriate staff from a particular country or driving vehicles typically associated with other actors may have the same affect even without any coordination taking place. In such cases it could be argued that avoiding coordination mechanisms would make little difference.

At very least, great caution needs to be taken with regards to coordination and neutrality to avoid tensions arising. This may be largely irrelevant outside of conflict zones and of limited consequence where humanitarians are seen as benign or separate. Still, in a time of large international organisations and federations with global reach, exposed to global media attention and working with populations aware of their actions in other parts of the world, adjusting one’s stance on coordination on a country-by-country basis is becoming increasingly problematic when it comes to neutrality (Macdonald and Valenza 25).

**Independence**

Strictly speaking, coordination by definition compromises an organisation’s independence. Working with others, even at a very basic level, is not being entirely independent but by this definition there are no independent humanitarian organisations as they all must maintain at least some contact with other actors such as government (Macdonald and Valenza 9). In practice, humanitarian independence is the degree to which an organisation is able to make its own choices and implement its plans free from the influence of others. Using this more flexible definition, coordination remains a potential limitation on independence, but it need not be fundamentally opposed.

Relatively passive activities, such as information sharing, don’t automatically compromise independence. Even for those practices that pose more significant threats, such as institutional linkages and funding relationships, some actors have put in place safeguards and other mechanisms to help neutralise any unwanted influence on their independence (Macdonald and Valenza 26; Seybolt 1032). Examples of these would include self-imposed limits on institutional funding and specific clauses in contractual agreements protecting an organisation’s right to speak out (Barnett and Weiss 109-110; Macdonald and Valenza 26).

Despite these points, it is difficult for humanitarian organisations to engage in coordination beyond a certain level and scope, without some reduction in independence.
It is worth noting however that this need not be seen as entirely negative and advantages can be gained from increased inter-dependence through coordination. Examples include partnerships with local actors which potentially increase access to funding, resources and local knowledge for those involved, and shared logistical arrangements which enable cost sharing and faster response times (Charles et al 160; Schulz and Blecken 646). Indeed some organisations consider establishing long-term inter-dependent relationships as central to their model and plans.

Independence may be a humanitarian principle – and a closely guarded one at that – but careful selection in regards to coordination opportunities, the use of appropriate counter measures and a recognition that independence need not necessarily be absolute, may mean that tensions with coordination can be avoided. The real challenge for organisations for which it is a priority is to maintain a heightened awareness of when their independence might be compromised beyond acceptable levels and to be able to resist accordingly.

For the most part, coordination need not be considered in opposition to the humanitarian principles, though the old adage ‘the devil is in the detail’ seems appropriate here. The specific context – particularly where neutrality is a concern – and the nature and extent of coordination proposed will be the deciding factors in this regard. There is no universally sound conclusion except to say that it is up to each humanitarian actor to decide for themselves where they choose to draw the lines and what positive and negative implications they are willing to accept.

**The Cost of Coordination**

Aside from questions of ethics and principles, the actual value of coordination is something that must not go unchallenged. There is clear evidence that some types and levels of coordination add value in certain contexts (Ngamassi et al 2; Schulz and Blecken 646). It may even be valid to say that at least some level of humanitarian coordination will always provide some positive benefits either to the people affected, or to the organisations involved – though justifying such an assertion is far more problematic and open to dispute. Even if taken as true, it does not necessarily mean that
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coordination is always desirable on balance if only for one simple fact – with coordination, comes costs (Ngamassi et al 2).

The costs of coordination may be minimal and insignificant, or they may be substantial and lead to genuine questions of whether coordination is worthwhile. Typical costs for an organisation engaging in coordination include staff time and resources, transportation and communication expenses, and a need to alter program plans and policies (Ngamassi et al 2). Purely from a financial perspective, it may not be clear that these investments – for example in the form of salaries of staff spending time on coordination activities – will bring returns – for example in cost savings through shared activities – that justify the decision to engage. Adding the assumption that the money and resources saved by not participating in coordination activities will be used to enhance or expand that organisation’s humanitarian programs, it can also be argued that those affected by emergencies would also be better off under non-coordination where the costs outweigh the benefits.

When combining this raw cost-benefit analysis with other costs such as ethical problems, necessity for compromise and numerous risks, the potential negative side of coordination cannot be ignored. Working with other organisations that are driven by different principles, goals and underlying values can be complicated and draining (Schulz and Blecken 650; Wild and Zhou 117). When the number of other actors increases exponentially following a large-scale disaster it can become a major obstruction to effective implementation as agencies spend countless hours and sometimes compromise their own programs and standards in search of the proverbial ‘lowest common denominator’. It is unsurprising then to see so many practitioners champion the need for coordination while simultaneously complaining about and resisting it in practice.

Whether based on a financial assessment or other less tangible costs and benefits, organisations are regularly forced to make judgements on the type and extent of coordination they are willing to engage in. This fact is embodied in the oft-repeated question asked by humanitarian actors – ‘What’s the added value?’ Of course the added value of an activity may differ considerably based on who you are and what you aim to achieve through coordination, as discussed in the previous section on motivations. For example, a particular coordination activity may, on balance, come at a financial cost to
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an organisation while also being in the best interest of the population involved (Ngamassi et al 2). This then leads to the bigger questions of who coordination is supposed to benefit and what it’s meant to achieve?

What is the Goal of Coordination?

Just as the motivation of an individual organisation can have a significant influence on its decisions to engage in coordination and the stance it takes once there, when taken to the inter-agency level, the question of what coordination is supposed to achieve is important and consequential. Obviously these two ideas are linked in that the motivations of the participating organisations will influence the goal of the coordination initiative as a whole. Once again, it is also clear that not all coordination activities and mechanisms will have the same goal, and within a given initiative there may well be disagreement over this point. Where there is consensus, it is typically recorded in the specific objectives or terms of reference involved, but it cannot be taken for granted that what is written down accurately represents what individuals and organisations really want.

Efficiency is often the driving force. Organisations, and in particular donors, place great emphasis – at least publically – on the need for efficient use of resources in humanitarian action (Schulz and Blecken 637). The theory here is that through enhanced coordination, implementing agencies can cut down on expenses, achieve economies of scale and reduce overlap or waste (Schulz and Blecken 637, 646). This is seen as in everyone’s best interests as donors get maximum value for money, organisations can expand humanitarian operations and this in turn benefits the people affected by emergencies. The problem with efficiency as the sole goal of coordination is that activities which have other benefits, but are neutral or even reduce efficiency are likely to be ignored or outright rejected. This will naturally skew the humanitarian and coordination activities taking place.

An alternative might be effectiveness in the form of the overall quality and outcomes of humanitarian action. Efficiency could conceivably be included in this objective, but effectiveness also extends much further. A key problem here is that quality and outcomes are not always easy to measure or assess in a way that can demonstrate change or improvement. Water quality and the nutritional value of food aid may be
quantifiable, as may be outcomes in terms of the number of people reached or the number of vaccinations given. Other more intangible programs and objectives are much harder to measure and represent a recurring monitoring and evaluation problem for humanitarian actors individually, as well as in coordination mechanisms. The difficulty in being able to attribute improvements in quality to specific interventions only complicates this further (Ngamassi et al 2). There are limits to measuring improved effectiveness and this makes weighing the costs and assessing the overall value of humanitarian coordination difficult.

Perhaps most significant of all is the simple fact that some people and groups will see quality and value differently to others, in particular those affected by humanitarian emergencies. A donor or implementing agency’s perception of quality in humanitarian programming can, and often does, differ significantly from those they seek to work with and assist. If enhanced effectiveness and quality are to be the goal of humanitarian coordination, from whose point of view will that be measured? If there is clash between potential coordination options where one will deliver more benefits to the organisations and another will be in the best interests of the population involved, which should be chosen?

This may sound like an abstract hypothetical but it is not difficult to think of examples. Joint distribution operations may save organisations money while reducing employment opportunities for the local community. Consolidating the medical clinics of different actors may mean patients face longer waiting times or have to travel further to access facilities. Agencies uniting in protest against a military or government actor may gain greater media exposure for their action and draw attention to their cause, but cause an expulsion of all humanitarian service providers in an area, rather than just a few.

The simple reality is this – the people affected by humanitarian emergencies have no say in whether or not organisations choose to coordinate and the goals of whatever coordination does take place. At best, the humanitarian actors themselves may make these decisions with what they perceive to be the best interest of the people in mind. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect any more than this, but it is worth asking the question who and what purpose coordination is supposed to serve. It cannot be assumed that the interests of humanitarian organisations and affected populations always coincide and yet
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the interests that dominate will ultimately shape the nature and extent of coordination that does take place.

CONCLUSIONS – CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

This chapter has presented an analysis of humanitarian coordination that enables a more advanced understanding of a topic too often over-simplified. Utilising a historical perspective of coordination, an analytical breakdown of its different aspects, and the lens of its major issues and tensions, a set of conclusions regarding the current state and trends of humanitarian coordination can be formulated. These conclusions are outlined below and will be used in conjunction with those of the previous chapter to carry out the central analysis of this paper.

1. **Coordination is complex and varied with different activities having different impacts**

Coordination is not a single activity or approach and it cannot be meaningfully measured on a two dimensional scale of ‘more’ or ‘less’. There is a huge range of coordination possibilities utilising different approaches, levels, types of actors and temporal components and each comes with its own strengths and weaknesses, costs and benefits. Not only that, but a great deal of coordination is already taking place and – though it is often forgotten – it should not be dismissed. Despite this, there remains enormous potential and numerous opportunities for testing new coordination mechanisms and characteristics, with considerable change already taking place as practitioners and academics move beyond traditional thinking on coordination.

2. **Change in humanitarian coordination tends to be slow, irregular and reactive**

History shows that change in humanitarian coordination tends to come in bursts after large emergency response operations and evaluations of their shortcomings. To some extent this can be seen as inherent or at least to be expected given the nature of humanitarian coordination and the limited and unpredictable opportunities for innovation and testing. This is however, only part of the story. A lack of willingness, on the part of both donors and implementing agencies, to allocate resources to coordination...
outside of the response phase of major emergencies is also a contributing factor and perhaps a critical one given the huge potential benefits of such investment.

3. Authority is not the answer
There are many different approaches to coordination and, though sometimes the default reaction, solutions based solely on authority are neither appropriate nor ideal in most situations. Over the last fifteen years significant progress has been made in leadership, structural, standardisation and strategic approaches to coordination with varying degrees of success. Notably, lack of accountability remains a persistent issue. Emerging interest in network approaches has the potential to bring with it innovative solutions but is unlikely to lead to high levels of certainty or predictability. It may however, have other benefits that may in turn be of more value than rigid systems and order. This is clearly not certain and seems unlikely to be dramatically more successful when it comes to addressing accountability.

4. Motivations matter
The reasons individual organisations choose to engage in coordination activities have implications for the type and quality of coordination pursued. Self-interest driven, incentivised or forced coordination is unlikely to be sustainable or focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for those affected by humanitarian emergencies. Though perhaps seeming irrelevant, motivations for coordination do matter and warrant further investigation. They also impact on the collective goal of humanitarian coordination efforts (see point 7 below).

5. Engagement with non-humanitarian actors is generally necessary and potentially beneficial
Humanitarian action cannot exist in a bubble and even fiercely independent actors acknowledge this. Whether to coordinate with these actors beyond the bare minimum required to deliver programs, and the nature and extent to which this occurs, is a more complicated question. There are clear benefits to be had from greater coordination in this direction – for organisations and the people affected by humanitarian emergencies – but these must be weighed against the costs that come with it.

6. Situation specific approaches offer the most opportunities for dealing with complexity
Individual organisations are increasingly tailoring their approaches to coordination according to the specific context and mechanisms on offer, as well as their own organisational principles and priorities. This situational approach offers the most flexibility and adaptability, and in turn seems to offer the greatest potential for dealing with an increasingly complex humanitarian world. This inconsistency presents challenges in making universal policies and statements, and can have significant consequences in a world where people affected by humanitarian emergencies are aware of an organisation’s practices in other parts of the world. Pure principle is unhelpful in dealing with complexity, but pragmatism comes at a cost.

7. Understanding of the goals and costs of coordination is essential

Virtually all forms of humanitarian coordination come with some costs or negative impacts that must be considered along with the expected benefits. However, as these costs and benefits are varied and complex, and hence cannot be easily quantified and compared, some sense of the goals of coordination is necessary in order to make the ‘best’ coordination decisions. If cost effectiveness is the dominant paradigm and goal, coordination will primarily concern itself with ways to save money, but is this really what humanitarian action should focus on? Order, cohesion and efficiency may be beneficial but should not be seen as the ultimate goal of coordination – they are means to an end.

High quality humanitarian action may serve as a better objective, but quality is subjective. Humanitarian actors must therefore ask themselves who their activities are intended to serve, and from whose point of view the costs and benefits of coordination must be assessed. Abstract and theoretical though these issues may be, different answers lead to different perceptions of value and ultimately different coordination practices and outcomes for those affected by humanitarian emergencies.
Chapter 4 - Implications

Introduction

Based on the foundations established by the previous two chapters, this chapter will analyse the common ground between humanitarian coordination and the RBA. Several key issues and themes will be examined to identify areas of commonality and tension between the two. More specifically, three guiding principles have been identified to both inform this analysis and the application of the RBA on humanitarian coordination more generally. Five common themes will then be analysed in more detail in light of the understanding developed so far.

Before proceeding with this analysis however, it is necessary to clarify a few points regarding the nature of the analysis itself. Firstly, based on the evidence presented in Chapter 2, this analysis proceeds from the starting assumption that the RBA, as it is understood and implemented today, is incomplete. The RBA, as well as coordination and much of the humanitarian enterprise, is defined by a reactive history where change is driven by (often negative) past experience. As such, the RBA has not been applied to numerous areas of importance – among them, coordination. Given this fact and the importance of humanitarian coordination, it is concluded that expanding current understanding of the RBA into its implications for coordination is necessary and useful.

Secondly, it must be clear that this analysis is not constructed from a legal perspective or with a heavy emphasis on legal issues. As was made clear in Chapter 2, though the RBA utilises some legal language and frames, it has not been developed and is not generally implemented in a legalistic manner. Though arguments have been made that this should change, this paper has attempted to maintain a realistic and practical approach, which in turn implies the need for an analysis consistent with current interpretations of the RBA. As such, this analysis recognises and is guided by the relatively non-legal perspective of the RBA.

Finally, this analysis is faced with a topic and context characterised by complexity, ambiguity and variation. RBA interpretations, coordination practices and humanitarian operating environments are dynamic and diverse. As such, definitive and universal statements are difficult to make and justify. In the interests of avoiding the excessively
vague and meaningless conclusions that such a situation may easily lead to, some distinctions will be made according to different styles of RBAs. Statements considered fundamental and applicable to any context or RBA variation will be highlighted as such. Other findings that would generally only apply to fairly strict interpretations of an RBA or in certain contexts will be presented with the necessary qualifications.

Having clarified then the basis of this analysis, attention can now be turned to its core guiding principles.

**Guiding Principles**

In the course of this research, three key concepts emerged as fundamental to formulating an understanding of the implications of a RBA on humanitarian coordination. These were the idea of people centred humanitarian action; the need to address complexity, variation and ambiguity; and the importance of motivations and goals.

Each of these concepts has implications for every aspect of humanitarian action and the issues of coordination and the RBA in particular. This, along with their fundamental nature and pre-dominance in the analysis of the topics in question, led to a natural decision to elevate them to the level of guiding principles. As such, they will shape analysis in each of the areas discussed below and must form the core of any understanding of an RBA to humanitarian coordination.

**People Centred Humanitarian Action**

Regardless of which interpretation of the RBA an organisation or individual chooses to adopt, it must be recognised that the idea of people centred humanitarian action lies at its core. As outlined in Chapter 2, the decision to use the ‘rights frame’ and the historical context within which it emerged make it clear that a central objective of the RBA is to make humanitarian action more people centred.

This fact has significant implications for the issue of coordination. Humanitarian coordination can be viewed from a number of different perspectives, each of which will bring about different attitudes, activities and results. On the one hand, humanitarian coordination can be thought of as a way to ensure the organisations involved implement an orderly and effective response to any given emergency. Another way to look at it
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however, is to see coordination as a mechanism for ensuring that response activities engage those affected by humanitarian emergencies in a logical and coherent way. Obviously these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but the significance of the subtle difference involved should not be underestimated.

Clearly the idea of people centred humanitarian action inherent in the RBA compels those pursuing any variation of the approach to think of coordination in terms of the second perspective above. Individual people and communities affected by a humanitarian emergency must serve as the specific reference point for coordination efforts. An RBA to humanitarian action demands that priority be given to ensuring a coordinated response from the point of view of those affected. Coordination of the humanitarian organisations involved becomes a secondary concern – effectively a means to an end – and coordination decisions and mechanisms should be directed accordingly.

addressing complexity, variation and ambiguity

Complex, dynamic and often chaotic operating environments are nothing new for humanitarian actors, as is ambiguity in terms of on-going funding, access, impact and any number of other factors. There never has been, nor likely ever will be, a stable and predictable humanitarian context and as such, any theoretical approach or common practice must take this into account.

For the RBA this complexity, variation and ambiguity is present in terms of the differing approaches of different organisations and even in the way in which the same approach is applied in different situations. Ambiguity also remains in how easily the RBA can be reconciled with practical considerations and fundamental ideals, such as the humanitarian principles. For coordination, the simple fact that every situation brings with it a different body of actors and agendas in a different context means complexity, variation and ambiguity is the norm. As such, the appropriateness of a particular coordination stance or mechanism will constantly change – a fact that humanitarian actors must reconcile themselves with.

There are positives and negatives, or costs and benefits, to be drawn from this state of affairs. It must be acknowledged that not only can ambiguity, for example, benefit an organisation, but that sometimes it is intentionally crafted to avoid problems or
challenges. Given this fact, and the understanding that this situation is unlikely to ever change, humanitarian actors are left with little choice but to embrace complexity, variation and ambiguity, and the advantages and disadvantages that come with it.

This is no less true when one considers applying the RBA to humanitarian coordination. Any interpretation of the RBA must, in some way, address the issue of complexity, variation and ambiguity. Exactly how an individual organisation chooses to do this will depend a lot on its own distinctive brand of RBA with some more likely to seek broad principles, processes or guidelines for dealing with complexity, while others opt for an overtly situational approach where their stance is dynamic and always dependent on context. There are costs and benefits associated with each of these approaches, and others in between. The fundamental and consistent point however, is that complexity, variation and ambiguity must be addressed in one way or another.

Importance of motivation and goals
Chapter 3 highlighted the importance of individual organisational motivations and combined goals in humanitarian coordination. Both of these factors were shown to significantly influence decisions, and therefore ultimate practices, regarding the type and extent of coordination. In particular it was highlighted that these motivations and goals were important in weighing the respective costs and benefits of different coordination options – including the option not to coordinate at all.

In applying the RBA to these questions a number of points become clear. The first is that, following the guiding principle of people centred humanitarian action outlined above, an RBA means that an organisation should approach coordination decisions from the point of view of what would be in the best interest of the affected population.\(^8\) This means that if the overall goal of coordination is high quality humanitarian action (see Quality below), it should be quality from the perspective of the people affected. It follows that the costs and benefits of different coordination options would also be measured from this perspective.

\(^8\) Note this does not imply that organisations should make assumptions about what’s in the best interest of the affected population but rather that this should be their point of reference. Ideally, this will be informed by high levels of meaningful participation from that population (see Participation, Capacity Building and Empowerment below.)
This raises an extremely important point – if the ultimate goal of coordination is high quality humanitarian action from the perspective of the affected population, then whether or not coordination leads to order, efficiency or easier implementation from an organisation’s point of view is a secondary concern that must be weighed against its impact on quality. Obviously in many cases order, ease and efficiency will enhance the quality of response, but were it does not – where the costs to quality outweigh the benefits – the option in question should be rejected. As an example, consider the possibility of an overly bureaucratic, authority-based coordination mechanism which increased order, ease of implementation and efficiency from an organisational perspective, but reduced the quality of response from the perspective of the people affected. An RBA would imply this option would be less preferable to a looser, ‘messier’ coordination system that allowed, for example, greater creativity and innovation leading to enhanced overall quality of response from the affected population’s point of view.

This conclusion comes with at least two caveats. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, quality in this wider sense is extremely difficult to measure and even harder to attribute causality to. Hence making accurate judgements about the costs and benefits of coordination from the point of view of the affected population is also extremely difficult. Nevertheless, all humanitarian action comes with challenges and the fact that something is difficult does not mean it is not worthwhile or should not be attempted. Though presenting problems for execution, this caveat does not challenge the conclusion that organisations utilising an RBA should aim to act in this way.

The second caveat relates to the variation in RBAs being used. The question of the extent to which an organisation should subjugate their own priorities and needs to those of the affected populations would be answered by different organisations with different RBAs. As such, this conclusion cannot be said to be universal, though it does provide an indication as to how those with ‘stricter’ RBAs should act, while also suggesting the general perspective others should at least be considering.

As a final point, given the importance of motivations and goals to directing coordination efforts, it suggests that organisations adhering to an RBA should be clear and overt in identifying it as a guiding principle for their engagement with coordination mechanisms and initiative. It also suggests that, at the sector level, there is considerable value in
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widely discussed and agreed on the links between an RBA and humanitarian coordination. The more this occurs, the more likely it is that agreement will be reached on the ultimate goal of coordination being high quality humanitarian response from the perspective of those affected.

common themes

following on from the three guiding principles outlined above, five key areas or common themes are evident when looking at the RBA and humanitarian coordination: participation, capacity building and empowerment; quality; accountability; fostering innovation; and looking beyond humanitarian action. Each of these will be considered below to understand the implications of applying an RBA to coordination.

participation, capacity building and empowerment

chapter 2 makes clear that any genuine RBA needs to include a focus on participation, capacity building and empowerment. People centred humanitarianism demands that those affected by a humanitarian emergency have the opportunity to actively participate in response activities and decision making. A basis in rights also implies the need to work with rights-holders to develop their ability to claim those rights and hold duty bearers to account – a process commonly known as empowerment. Equally, along with building this capacity in citizens, a rights basis calls on humanitarian actors to work with duty-bearers – typically affected states, controlling combatants and, to a lesser extent, third party states choosing to engage – and build their capacity to fulfill their obligations.

in terms of coordination, this means that organisations utilising an RBA must extend their coordination activities to include working with local people, civil society organisations and the population’s representatives, as well as other duty-bearing actors. Humanitarian actors may dislike the representative bodies or individuals of an affected population, and even disagree with the way in which their status as representatives is decided, but commitment to an RBA would still imply the need to actively engage with them. Ideally, this would include coordinating activities with them and seeking their participation in decision making processes. The same could be said of any other actor, such as foreign military forces, in the position of a duty-bearer.
This is clearly an area where individual actors will take different stances and their own specific type of RBA will be of great relevance. For some who consider the humanitarian principles such as independence and neutrality to supersede the implications of the RBA, this requirement may be ignored. For other organisations choosing rights as the fundamental basis of their work, they may be willing to make such a compromise. Thus while variability and ambiguity in the modern RBA make it difficult to reach a universally applicable conclusion here, the point remains that RBA driven organisations should at least be giving conscious consideration to their own RBA policy’s implications in making that decision.

It should also be noted that, even with a strict interpretation of the RBA and a commitment to participation and capacity building for duty-bearers, the decision may still not be clear cut. This is because the imperative for supporting empowerment and building the capacity of affected people to claim their rights is also present. In complex political environments, it is often difficult to isolate the potential benefits of coordinating with and building the capacity of duty-bearers from the potential negative impacts this can have, particularly on the empowerment of right’s-holders. In such situations, the RBA does not provide clear instruction on the best course of action.

**Quality**

The development of the RBA and coordination in humanitarian action has been driven by a pursuit of quality. Humanitarian actors themselves – as well as under pressure from both institutional and private donors – have sought to address the problems of humanitarian action as they perceived them and the intention of most of the major trends and initiatives in the field over the past two decades has been to improve the quality of humanitarian response to emergencies.

It follows naturally that any interpretation of the application of the RBA to humanitarian coordination must have as its primary goal quality improvement. When combined with people centred humanitarianism as a guiding principle it can be said that under an RBA, the ultimate goal of coordination is high quality humanitarian action from the perspective of those affected – hence its use as a premise in the example provided above where the importance of goals and motivations were demonstrated.
To expand further, the value of coordination mechanisms, partnerships, joint project implementation and virtually all inter-agency interaction must be measured with this understanding of quality in mind. This presents a major challenge for humanitarian actors which have adopted western business oriented management practices and cultures as their general paradigm. This is because such a mindset can be said to position the organisation itself at the centre of its values and decision making frames of reference. An organisation is driven by a purpose, yet regardless of what that purpose is, the organisation’s best interests and very existence must take precedence. It could be argued that an RBA to humanitarian action subverts this paradigm and calls on organisations to put quality humanitarian action – as measured from the perspective of the affected population – ahead of their own best interests, and perhaps even their own existence.

In coordination terms, this may mean that humanitarian actors, offering little added value themselves and considering entering into a high profile emergency context characterised by an excess of response organisations, may decide the best thing to do is to make their own funding and resources available to another actor in a better position. Such a decision would no doubt come at a cost in terms of missing out on institutional funding opportunities and public relations benefits that would have granted the organisation more legitimacy and fund-raising potential. This may seem idealistic and far-fetched, but examples are not as uncommon as you might think.

Following the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, Oxfam offered its resources to the New Zealand Government and handed over some initial work to the New Zealand Red Cross (Oxfam-b). Perhaps even more startling, Oxfam Australia even went as far as encouraging its supporters to make financial donations to the New Zealand Red Cross on their website (Oxfam-b). There are, no doubt, more examples such as this, as well as the regular practice of international NGOs passing on expertise and funding to local partner organisations. Even outside the non-profit world, alliances involving supposed competitors passing on customers to each other – for example in the airline industry – exist and are seen to not only benefit the organisations involved, but their clients as well (Schulz and Blecken 639).

Once again, the type of RBA adopted by an organisation and the way in which it is implemented will directly influence the degree to which the above conclusion is seen as relevant and appropriate for that organisation. It is an area of considerable interest and,
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though perhaps uncomfortable for many organisations, warrants discussion in the context of their commitment to an RBA.

Accountability
There can be no doubt that the RBA emerged as part of a wider push for greater accountability in humanitarian action, or that accountability is one of its primary objectives. Similarly many attempted coordination mechanisms have sought to include components specifically aimed at improving accountability. Yet despite its crucial role in these two dominant issues and trends in humanitarian action, a considerable accountability gap remains.

According to the common understanding of the modern RBA, humanitarian actors are first and foremost accountable to the people they are trying to assist. Indeed this maxim has become something of a cliché in the humanitarian world, despite the fact that it is so distant from the current reality. Humanitarian accountability to date has been heavily skewed in the direction of accountability to donors and, to a lesser extent, other actors with whom they coordinate. Numerous initiatives exist which are trying to effect change in this area towards great accountability to affected people and, while progress is being made, it is evidently slow.

One noteworthy practical point is of interest here and that is the potential benefit – and in some contexts, necessity – of utilising coordination to enhance accountability towards affected people. Genuine accountability is only possible if a number of prerequisites are met; among them a high degree of transparency, a well-informed constituency and adequate participation or opportunities for humanitarian actors to obtain input and feedback. While this process always presents some challenges, it should not present insurmountable obstacles for capable humanitarian actors in ‘normal’ circumstances (to the extent they ever exist in humanitarian contexts). In large scale emergencies however, or other environments with very large numbers of humanitarian actors, meaningful communication, participation, and hence accountability is essentially impossible if the people affected need to engage with each organisation or project individually.

If the organisations involved want to move beyond tokenism and achieve the meaningful participation and levels of awareness necessary to ensure accountability
towards affected populations, their engagement with those people must be coordinated in some way. The same could be said for the capacity building and empowerment discussed above. If in no other aspect of their work, the RBA demands coordination by humanitarian actors in their engagement with the affected communities. Once again, to some extent this is already taking place in so far as joint needs assessments are becoming more commonplace. While encouraging, combined data collection is not enough. The same mentality, and perhaps the same practical mechanisms, needs to be extended to participation and accountability in general – at least in situations where a large number of humanitarian actors are present.

While the RBA clearly strives for greater accountability towards affected populations, and coordination has great potential to be used in this way, neither are sufficient to address this critical issue on their own. Accountability seems destined to remain a central issue for humanitarian action for some time to come and even the perceived positives of the RBA in this regard can only be considered a step in this direction.

*Fostering Innovation*

One thing that has become evident throughout the course of this research is the need for humanitarian action to continue to evolve and look beyond traditional assumptions and solutions to problems. Indeed the RBA was in large part an attempt to do just that – to reframe the humanitarian enterprise in terms of rights and in the process improve quality, accountability and extend into more political activities aimed at addressing root causes. In terms of coordination, this can be seen in the need to look beyond hierarchy and authority based solutions.

As explained above, applying the RBA to coordination implies the need to make high quality humanitarian action from the point of view of affected populations a central goal for all to work towards. The fact that this is not yet the norm, especially in terms of achieving genuine accountability to affected people, means that further change is needed. New or further developed ideas, policies, project models and ways of working are needed to advance humanitarian action and reach this target. Add to this the ever-changing humanitarian context and the need for organisations to be dynamic, constantly adapting entities and this need becomes even clearer. Innovation and creative solutions to the challenges humanitarians face are essential and must be both enabled and actively pursued.
In this context, and in light of the discussion of the importance of goals and motivations above, it is worth asking the question of whether current or proposed policies and institutional structures foster the innovation needed. Where humanitarian organisations are funded and judged on the basis of their ability to eliminate wastage and get maximum impact from every dollar spent, is the creativity and risk-taking necessary for innovation possible? Where accountability and impact is understood in terms of predominantly quantitative indicators, are initiatives aimed at transformational change encouraged?

Returning to the issue of coordination and the different approaches and mechanisms that are utilised, an RBA would imply the need to factor in these questions and re-assess the coordination decisions taken by humanitarian actors, taking into account the degree to which they foster or restrict innovation. Some level of flexibility and room to experiment is needed if humanitarian action is to continue to evolve and improve. Of course this must be weighed against the need for some degree of cohesion and the fact that mistakes and wastage in humanitarian response can cost lives. Some balance is needed and it seems likely that a healthy middle ground can be found. This will however, only happen through a relatively high level of awareness and conscious decision making by humanitarian actors with this in mind, preferably in consultation with the people they seek to assist.

**Looking beyond humanitarian action**

From the outset, the RBA sought to provide a more holistic framework extending beyond the limits of traditional humanitarianism. It provided links with human rights and development activities, as well as the organisations that engaged in them, which increasingly were the same humanitarian actors. Similarly, coordination in recent years has increasingly been drawn towards greater engagement with ‘non-humanitarian’ actors including, among others, military and business actors. With this expanded engagement has come problems and challenges, as well as advantages and opportunities – all of which need to be considered and managed.

For all the real and perceived disadvantages of abandoning a more restricted and isolated humanitarian model, it is fairly clear that the RBA encourages greater, not less, interactions in this directions. Obviously, such engagement must be strategic and conscious of its ultimate impact on the quality of humanitarian action as perceived by
those affect by emergencies. As such, it seems a more situational approach would be preferable to blanket commitments to work with specific types of actors. Furthermore, this is another area in which the specific nature of the RBA being utilised will significantly influence the final outcome.

Nevertheless, the general support for greater engagement with non-humanitarian actors is evident. For those organisations that have not already done so, this would entail a need to re-evaluate their interpretation of traditional humanitarian principles and their own coordination policies. In doing so, the guiding principles identified above – people centred humanitarian action, an ability to deal with complexity and ambiguity, and the importance of motivations and goals – should prove a valuable reference point. They will also need to bear in mind the need to manage the consequences of their decisions, including impacts on the perceptions of stakeholders with whom they must work in other countries and contexts far removed from that in which the decisions were made. So complexity is ubiquitous and there are no easy answers, but then this is nothing new for humanitarian actors.

**Conclusion – Implications**

The analysis presented above demonstrates clear common ground and linkages between the RBA and humanitarian coordination. It is also notable that several of the key themes in question represent the preeminent issues of modern humanitarian discourse, meaning a better understanding of the implications of an RBA on humanitarian coordination can make a major contribution to these discussions. Furthermore, the guiding principles developed and explained here have the potential to be a useful tool in working through the more complex issues involved.

While some of the points raised can be seen to apply to any interpretation or variation on the RBA, others are far more conditional. Regardless, the dynamic and complex context in which humanitarian organisations operate means that prescriptive statements are difficult to justify and of little value. Far more important for those organisations professing a commitment to rights-based humanitarianism is the need to develop a much more advanced understanding of its implications for coordination and a conscious attempt to incorporate it into their policies, practices and decision making processes.
Chapter 5 – Conclusions

This paper sought to identify the implications of an RBA to humanitarian action for inter-agency coordination. A literature review of the two main topics – the RBA and coordination – was used to conduct an initial analysis and distil the core characteristics of both as concepts and dynamic trends in humanitarian action. Using the outputs of that analysis, the RBA, as it is understood today, was applied to the issue of coordination.

The research and analysis found a series of clear implications. Three guiding principles were identified for use here and in approaching coordination from an RBA point of view in the future. These were the idea of people centred humanitarian action; the need to address complexity, variation and ambiguity; and the importance of motivations and goals. In addition to the three guiding principles, five common themes were identified with clear implications of applying the RBA to humanitarian coordination. These were participation, capacity building and empowerment; quality; accountability; fostering innovation; and looking beyond humanitarian action.

As outlined in Chapter 1, there are limitations to this research based on the methodology chosen and the potential for author bias. These limitations, particularly the exploratory nature of this paper, highlight a clear need for further research to demonstrate (or challenge) the validity of the conclusions made here. In addition, some specific issues and themes were identified as areas for future research. In particular, research into the motivations of humanitarian organisations engaging in coordination, and the implicit or explicit goals of coordination mechanisms would potentially be of great significance and value. It is also necessary to test the contention put forward in this paper that these motivations and goals significantly influence the type and extent of coordination undertaken.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the humanitarian field – especially in relation to the RBA and coordination – means there is need to continue research in this area to understand and assess the impact of the changes that do take place. The extent to which the new Sphere standard is implemented and its impact would be of considerable interest, as would further developments in the areas of network-based humanitarian coordination, coordinated assessments, the Transformative Agenda, and accountability towards and communication with affected populations. The degree to which the RBA
plays a role in these areas will go a long way towards answering the question of whether or not it represents a true paradigm shift or is simply the next in a long line of fads.

In reviewing the findings of this research it is noticeable that the nuances involved are of far greater significance than the more general points. To state that the RBA compels adherent organisations towards greater engagement with humanitarian coordination mechanisms is both overly simplistic and of little consequence. Such a conclusion should rightly be accompanied by a series of qualifying statements and will have little impact on the near universal acceptance of the need for better coordination or the system-wide trend in that direction.

What is of value are some of the more specific conclusions that can be taken from this analysis about the way coordination should be viewed or implemented. Of particular note is the conclusion that the meaningful accountability, as well as participation and empowerment, called for by the RBA, requires a coordinate approach to communication and engagement with communities. Regardless of what other coordination practices an organisation utilising an RBA undertakes – and even of their interpretation of the RBA – an obligation to coordinate in terms of engagement is inescapable.

The practical consequences of this include the need to cooperate in coordinated assessments, information campaigns and general communications with affected populations, and accountability driven monitoring and evaluation activities. Given the wide-spread acceptance and support of the RBA, it may be time to consider putting more emphasis and resources into coordination in the area of communication and engagement with affected populations. Whether driven by this understanding of the implications of the RBA or not, new initiatives in this area are emerging, such as the Communications with Disaster Affected Communities Network (CDAC - http://www.cdacnetwork.org). This research supports the idea that investment and coordination in this area need to be made a priority.

Another example of the importance of the nuances can be seen in the comparison of this paper’s findings with the most recent changes and additions to the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards. Many of the conclusions identified here directly align with the content of Sphere’s 2011 Handbook. Just some of the examples include;

- A core standard on people-centred humanitarian response (55)
- The need for coordinated inter-agency assessments to reduce the burden on affected people (59)
- The recognition that participation in coordination mechanisms outside of times of emergency enhances coordination in response (59)
- The importance of addressing an affected people’s needs as a whole, rather than in isolation (59)
- The recognition that increased military engagement in humanitarian action requires, at minimum, consideration to be given to their efforts, even if not actually involving close coordination (60)

On the surface then, this research could be dismissed as somewhat redundant – but to do so would miss an important point. Though reaching some of the same conclusions, this paper and Sphere have done so from completely different perspectives.

As noted earlier, despite Sphere’s theoretical basis in rights-based humanitarianism, the development of the new coordination standard did not stem from an interpretation of the RBA. As such, the underlying motivation for its development and the goal of the standard itself is grounded not in the RBA’s interpretation of the rights of affected populations, but rather in a desire for greater efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed the standard itself makes this point explicitly:

“Humanitarian response is planned and implemented in coordination with the relevant authorities, humanitarian agencies and civil society organisations engaged in impartial humanitarian action, working together for maximum efficiency, coverage and effectiveness.” (Sphere Project 58, emphasis added)

One of the central findings of this research is that the goals and motivations of coordination matter. Humanitarian coordination mechanisms and practices driven purely by ‘efficiency, coverage and effectiveness’ will not necessarily act in the best interests of the people affected by emergencies. Though these are no doubt desirable to the extent that they improve the quality of humanitarian action from the perspective of affected populations, they are means to an end and typically agency rather than people-centred.

As the Sphere coordination standard, and many common arguments for coordination, stem from a desire for efficiency and effectiveness, the question must be asked – what
happens when coordination practices delivering quality humanitarian action from perspective of the affected population are neither efficient nor effective from the perspective of the organisations involved? From whose perspective will quality, including efficiency and effectiveness, be measured?

These discussions may seem academic, but their outcomes have consequences, as does the failure to have them at all. If the RBA is to have any substance, and if coordination is to benefit those affected by humanitarian emergencies, there is a need for conscious consideration of these issues. The actors involved, both internally and among their peers, need to make an effort to engage in these debates and make conscious decisions, based on a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the issues. It should be noted too that this need is not restricted to implementing agencies, but also includes donor governments and organisations, and other actors engaging in humanitarian activities.

For some, this process may involve a degree of soul searching. Taken to its extreme, humanitarian actors may need to answer the question of whether they are willing put the rights of the affect people to quality humanitarian response ahead of their own desire to engage or even exist. It may be that sometimes the best thing an organisation can do, from the perspective of the affected population, is pass on its resources to another organisation and forego the publicity and funding benefits that come with direct action.

Based on the findings of this research it can also be argued that, as the RBA does require at least some engagement in certain types of coordination activities, rights-based organisations without the resources or capacity necessary to engage in that coordination should not engage at all. Thus a minimum standard along the lines of Sphere’s new addition is justified and should be viewed as a genuine pre-requisite for action and not simply as something to aim for. Organisations unable or unwilling to make that investment, need to seriously consider whether their presence is really justified.

As a final point, a caveat should be added lest the previous paragraph be taken in isolation as another argument in favour of stricter regulation and accreditation requirements. Humanitarian action is undeniably imperfect and far from reaching a goal of consistent, high quality action from the perspective of affected populations. In seeking to address specific issues such as coordination, consideration must be given to the potential impact proposed initiatives would have on this bigger picture goal.
Accreditation or improved coordination may be beneficial, but those benefits must be weighed against other consequences in terms of fostering innovation and allowing space for new actors and ideas to enter the field – both of which may be of even more value.

This point highlights the fact that humanitarian action is, by necessity, a practical and pragmatic endeavour that will ultimately be judged by outcomes and impact. Though often characterised as being overly idealistic, it is, at its core, simply trying to make the best out of bad situations. Many in the field consider this one of humanitarianism’s defining virtues and what separates it from its close cousins of international development and human rights.

Given this, it is unclear whether the necessity to engage with debate around more philosophical points, such as the importance of underlying goals and motivations or the need to discuss potential incompatibilities of principles and new approaches, will have much traction with practitioners themselves. Though senior management, policy specialist and academics may find these issues engaging, they appear a long way removed from realities on the ground.

This paper highlights the real and practical implications of such subtleties, linking them with many of the central issues of modern humanitarianism which do have more direct impacts on people affected by emergencies. Indeed the research shows that the philosophical and strategic approaches of today are grounded in the unsatisfactory performance of the past, just as they will inevitably influence the humanitarian outcomes of tomorrow.

Humanitarian action must be real, impactful and genuinely humane. In their pursuit of higher quality and standards, the practitioners of today are seeking to achieve what has never been done, on an unprecedented scale, in a context that is more dynamic and complex than ever before. They must retain their necessary pragmatism, but accompany it with a foundation in sound, evidence and research based understanding of the issues involved, as well as conscious contemplation and discussion of the philosophies, strategies and approaches they utilise. Only then can they be fully equipped to navigate the challenges they face, and ultimately implement humanitarian action of the highest quality and of the greatest benefit to the people most affected.
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