Building Partnerships

A reminder of the “Principles of Partnership”

The full text of the globally agreed principles for humanitarian action is available elsewhere in this toolkit. As a reminder, below are the headings:

1. Equality
2. Transparency
3. Result-oriented approach
4. Responsibility
5. Complementarity

Experienced coordinators should review them and new coordinators should learn them.

Practical Tips for Supporting and Respecting Partnership

A former humanitarian seasoned in inter-agency coordination and collaboration drafted these suggestions.¹

1. Represent the group: Coordinators serve the response not their agencies. Stay neutral.

2. Focus on impact: We coordinate to assist. Whether in the scramble to get control of an emergency or during slower periods where groups start to drift, it’s easy to lose sight of this. Coordination to meet needs can become coordination for its own sake or, even worse, coordination for an agency’s sake. Unless they are directly relevant to the topic of the discussion, try not to bog down in structures, agencies, mandates, etc. Focus on the impact your work has on the daily lives of persons of concern.

3. Coordinate don’t control: The effective coordinator guides a group by establishing known boundaries but leaving partners much latitude to work within them. Try to accommodate all reasonable requests from agencies during the planning and implementation stages (e.g. regarding meeting schedules, composition of agenda’s, etc.). Generosity provides more benefits than control. Resist the instinct to control rather than coordinate.

4. Be informed: Learn the basics about your partners’ programs. Get program documents and briefing materials from all agencies. Study them. Demonstrate to your partners that you know, understand and appreciate their work. Coordinators need to know with whom and with what they are working.

5. Use “we” not “I” and mean your group not your organization: When communicating, coordinators need to speak on behalf of the entire humanitarian effort. A leader who uses “I” to refer to team actions overstates individual impact at the expense of the group. Use

Core Partnering Principles:

- Equity? Because it leads to respect.
- Transparency? Because it leads to trust.
- Mutual benefit? Because it leads to sustainability.

¹Adapted to a large degree from a paper by retired UNHCR Officer, Fedde Groot
an inclusive “we” as often as possible and make sure you mean all the participants in the operation and not “we” as in “us at UNHCR (or WFP, UNICEF, OCHA, etc.).”

6. If you must refer to your agency, don’t overdo it: As much as possible, coordinators should avoid referring to their agencies to make points. For example, the UNHCR coordinator should avoid saying “UNHCR believes,” “UNHCR’s mandate is…,” “UNHCR policy is…,” the High Commissioner said…”, etc., in every other sentence. That may sound exaggerated but many coordinators do this all the time. It’s generally inappropriate to the context (neutral group led by a neutral coordinator). It sounds like the coordinator thinks her agency is the centre of the universe. It can also sound defensive. Instead, construct sentences around themes of common interest: refugees, women and children, protection of vulnerable persons, etc. Also, draw on what other agencies propose or do. If you must reference your agency, do it wisely and minimally.

7. Be humble: The coordinator serves the group. The group does not serve the coordinator. The more authority (or power) one has, the more humility he must exercise.

8. Balance facilitating and getting the job done: Coordinators should aim to be inclusive but not at the expense of an efficient, effective response. Not all opinions, comments and proposals are constructive. Sometimes coordinators must abandon the role of facilitator and intervene to correct. When a comment or proposal made by someone is unhelpful (e.g. it goes against fundamental protection principles, is irrelevant or falls outside of the strategy we’re jointly trying to build), intervene and briefly but gently clarify why the contribution is wrong or unhelpful. Good guidance can require thoughtful interventions.

9. Stick to global policies and norms: Coordinators must be careful in their approach to addressing working group partners’ incorrect ideas or misinformed opinions. Where a point is incorrect but inconsequential, the benefit of a public (or even private) correction may not outweigh its cost. Knowing when to let things go is an acquired skill with context-specific implications. Where a point is incorrect but consequential, coordinators should correct with subtlety. They should do this without (patronizingly and pedantically) referring to their agencies policies (as in “this is not in accordance with UNHCR’s policy on ….”). Coordinators should refer to relevant protection and humanitarian principles. “UNHCR’s” protection policies and principles, for example, come from and are “owned” by the entire humanitarian community and not to UNHCR alone.

10. Recognize and manage conflicts of interest: UN leadership of working groups can be problematic when appointed staff do not serve full-time as coordinators but have other program responsibilities. There can be perceived and real conflicts of interest” between the roles of coordinator for a group and donor for partners in a group. When planning including prioritizing the selection of project proposals for consolidated appeals, coordinators must be fair and impartial. Inter-agency competitiveness and rivalry may be fuelled if coordinators push their agencies’ agendas or the agendas of their implementing partners. Conflicts of interest can be managed by focusing processes on strategies and objectives while avoiding talking about agencies and mandates.
11. Promote your partners: Coordinators are likely to have more frequent contact with donor representatives. In contacts with donors, speak on behalf of the comprehensive humanitarian effort. Advocate for every participating organization. Share all organisations’ funding needs within the sector. Give those who seek visibility the space to shine. Give those who need visibility support to get it. Lead from behind by promoting your partners.

   Partnering works best when those involved:
   - Take time to build strong working relationships
   - Develop genuine concern for each other’s underlying interests
   - Do more listening than talking
   - Develop good communication skills at all levels
   - Deal with difficulties rather than ignoring them
   - Balance a flexible with a rigorous approach
   - Focus on practical and sustainable results
   - The Partnering Initiative

12. Coordinate with OCHA: In a refugee response, OCHA contribute significantly. Coordinators should capitalize on OCHA’s strength in information management and appeals processes to make a stronger response. Coordinators should invite OCHA to play as active a role as possible, acknowledging their expertise, experience and tools publicly. Refugee coordination is stronger with OCHA.

13. Network: The best coordinators are the most connected ones. They make the time and effort to meet, call, email, text as many people as they can as often as they need to in order to make sure the they know the humanitarian environment and the people in it. This pays dividends in a crisis.

14. Leave the office: Related to and as element of networking, good coordinators get out of the office as much as they possibly can. See working group members in their own work environments, visit everyone’s projects and make informal stops to see government counterparts.

15. Know you haven’t cornered the market: Welcome and seek other agencies’ views on refugee protection and assistance. Make the following cliché your own: “The sum of our efforts is better than the parts.” Unexpectedly, an organization on the margins of an operation may contribute an opinion or a perspective that changes common thinking. “Outsiders” and even novices to refugee responses can provide valuable contributions. Actually, their position as relative outsiders makes for perfect “out-of-the-box” thinkers. They often offer better, more innovative ideas than the seasoned “expert.”