



# Collective Responsibility

The Perceptions, Expectations and Realities of  
NGO Coordination in Humanitarian Leadership

Engagement on Humanitarian Country Teams provides  
NGOs with the ability to influence a coordinated humanitarian  
response and the creation of an enabling environment.

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June 2013

## Purpose of Research

NGOs are widely recognized as key actors in an effective, efficient and accountable emergency response because they are frontline implementers for the majority of humanitarian operations. As such, the appropriate engagement of NGOs within humanitarian leadership is a critical component for success. Despite numerous evaluations of the cluster approach noting the value of NGO engagement,<sup>1</sup> there is lack of qualitative data on the NGO role within humanitarian leadership structures. This research attempts to fill that gap.<sup>2</sup>

Through this study, InterAction examined the perceived and expected value of NGO engagement on and contributions to Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs). Additionally, the research explored how NGOs leverage and lend their experience to the HCTs to improve the efficiency of humanitarian action. InterAction plans a second phase of research to examine other aspects of the architecture, notably clusters.

The report also includes findings on challenges faced by all HCT members – for example, the extent to which a staff member of an independent operational organization can represent his/her peers. The recommendations within this report aim to strengthen a common understanding of the role that NGOs can fulfill on HCTs, as well as to reiterate expectations of the HCTs themselves.

## Summary of Key Findings

- NGOs participate actively within the humanitarian architecture without always being fully aware or understanding of it.
- A Humanitarian Coordinator's (HC) management capacities and ability to enable collective strategic decision-making are just as important as "leadership" skills.
- Professionalism opens doors for the NGO humanitarian voice on the HCTs.
- Diversity in HCT membership is valued but should not supersede effectiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> "IASC Cluster Approach Evaluation, 2nd Phase," Groupe URD and GPPI, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "The Operational Implications of the Transformative Agenda," InterAction, ICVA and SCHR, 2012.

## Methodology

Through desk research, interviews and an online survey, InterAction was able to compile data on the current thinking of the role of NGOs within humanitarian leadership. Targeting specific countries<sup>3</sup> that represented HCTs within different crisis contexts and phases, and ensuring diversity in respondents, InterAction gained a 360-degree perspective, not only on what NGOs themselves perceived and expected from each other, but also the views of other stakeholders.

Completed by 207 respondents, the online survey included self-identification data that allowed for disaggregation by cluster experience, organizational profile and proximity to response. For example, of the NGO representatives responding, 68% had direct HCT experience at field level. Over 79% of respondents were in positions of management or responsible for direct field implementation. Respondents to the survey could add comments as well as request an interview and/or additional information on the humanitarian architecture.

InterAction interviewed 54 senior leaders, including eight current or former HCs.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the interview selection was to ensure a diversity of perspectives at field and headquarters level. While the point of view of NGOs was the primary goal, researchers also sought to understand the expectations of other HCT members towards NGO representatives. To accomplish this for the target countries, interviewees included HCs or OCHA heads of office, a global cluster lead agency (CLA) representative, an operational NGO member of the HCT and the NGO consortium representative, where relevant.

Desk research of protocols, country-level terms of reference for HCTs, and meeting agendas and minutes complemented the survey and interviews. Where available, NGO coordinating bodies provided information on how NGO HCT representatives prepare for and report on HCT priorities and decisions.

Underpinning this research is InterAction's commitment to the goal of humanitarian reform, its protocols and the accompanying refinements as reflected in the Transformative Agenda.

Figure 1 - Organizational Profile - Survey Respondents

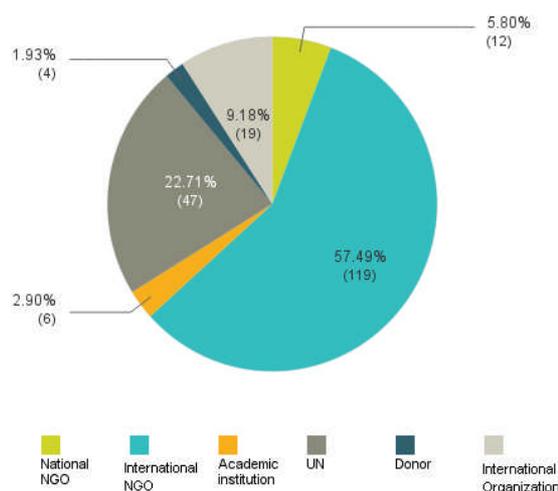
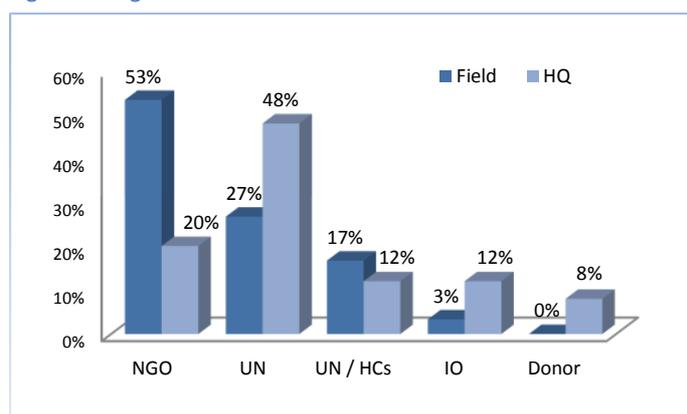


Figure 2 - Organizational Profile - Interviews



3 Chad, Colombia, DRC, Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Pakistan, South Sudan and Somalia.

4 Throughout this report, for the sake of brevity, InterAction refers to HCs as stand-alone, rather than the full norm of Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC).

## Findings



**NGOs participate actively within the humanitarian architecture without always being fully aware or understanding of it.**

Numerous studies and evaluations have demonstrated the breadth of NGO engagement within the system, both at global- and country-levels. Without the presence of NGOs as implementers, clusters would not be effective coordination fora. International NGOs demonstrate a similar commitment to country-level humanitarian leadership through participation on all HCTs.<sup>5</sup> Only 7% of NGO survey respondents have participated in a consistently effective HCT; highlighting that physical attendance, or “showing up,” is not an accurate indicator of an HCT’s efficacy.<sup>6</sup> Closely linked to this is the fact that 80% of respondents noted that NGO contributions were essential to the success of an HCT.

*“The HCT should be the primary interagency decision making body but this is rarely the case.”*  
— IO Representative

Just under half of survey respondents said they were willing to participate in HCTs even when the bodies were not effective, or despite their own lack of knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the HCT. Balanced with this was a common hesitancy amongst all stakeholders to commit senior staff to an ineffective HCT over the long-term, as well as a notable willingness to seek out work-around mechanisms.

Knowledge of the architecture and its protocols remains uneven for NGOs, with only 30% of NGO respondents stating that they were very familiar with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and its work, against 82% of UN respondents. Additionally, while no UN respondents stated they had no knowledge of the IASC, 13% of NGOs did. Comments left on the survey demonstrated this lack of understanding directly, specifically with regard to the representation of individual cluster strategy and priorities on the HCTs.

Unaware of the purpose, implementation plan and potential effect of the Transformative Agenda (TA) on the response, interviewees from the field expressed views ranging from uncertainty to ambivalence. Headquarters staff, especially those working in policy or senior leadership positions, tend to understand the TA better; however, there remains no common agreement on the role or implications for NGOs.

Current IASC processes remain focused on certain HCT actors, or upon intended deliverables. Success is hindered by a limited understanding of individual roles or accountabilities toward the collective. Welcomed initiatives, such as an HCT team-building exercise guided by OCHA, and knowledge-building trainings among the NGOs, remain in the nascent stages. Further expansions of these activities and similar initiatives are needed. Additionally, there exists a growing concern over OCHA’s role vis-à-vis the HCTs, and its ability to take on an impossible list of tasks.



**A Humanitarian Coordinator’s (HC) management capacities and ability to enable collective strategic decision-making are just as important as “leadership” skills.**

Over the past two years, UN OCHA’s Humanitarian Leadership Strengthening Unit has invested in improving the leadership capacities of HCs. While important, the research found that strength of leadership was secondary to a solid understanding of humanitarian principles and work. Decision-

<sup>5</sup> As per OCHA/HCSS data collection exercise, August 2012. National NGOs are present on only 41%.

<sup>6</sup> The majority of respondents stated that “sometimes” the HCT met expectations, while 25% of NGOs noted having never participated in an effective HCT, contrary to 10% of UN.

making, appropriate representation from Cluster Lead Agency representatives and equality among the HCT members to influence decisions are also critical components of an effective HCT. One respondent stated that the HCT “needs to be respected by all humanitarian organizations as an appropriate leadership and decision-making forum.”<sup>7</sup> Survey comments and interviews further underlined these perspectives, and also included traits such as the ability to make principled decisions, or leadership that is fair and disciplined, not dominating.

“Meetings require representation for issues to be raised. This is the forum for this action.”  
— UN representative

While a variety of humanitarian experience was valued, how that experience was gained was not valued as highly as other factors,<sup>8</sup> such as being a strong negotiator, having the ability to engage government authorities, and making decisions and following through on them. While the characteristics of a successful HC were stable across respondent profiles, the perception of HCs having adequately achieved this success varied, with only 40% of NGO staff against 64% of UN staff noting that they are aware of an HC that met their definition of successful.

“I demand from NGOs the same skills I demands from myself – team player, leader. We are different but while in HCT need unity in diversity. We must be self-reflecting.”  
— current RC/HC

For decision-making, respondents indicated that seeking consensus within the actual meeting occurred consistently 36% of the time, with an additional 59% saying it sometimes occurred. Respondents to the survey and interviews noted a concern that often the

real decisions happen outside of the HCT meetings. Further to this concern is the meeting management challenge of maintaining regular attendance, with interviewees noting frequent repetition of discussions to bring people up to date on prior discussions that they had missed.

The need for better meeting management, including defining clear roles and responsibilities, was a dominant theme throughout the interviews. When InterAction asked several HCs deemed as “successful”<sup>9</sup> what made their HCTs work, these HCs tied their responses to meeting management: agendas sent out in advance with pending decisions outlined; the need to discuss and build consensus; an agreed decision-making process; and clear priorities, or roles and responsibilities for the HCT.

Related to the characteristics, the research examined expectations of the HCT, from both members and nonmembers. Two of the nine potential expectation options stood out: the discussion of critical issues (e.g., access, bureaucratic impediments) and coordination on response priorities.<sup>10</sup>

“The more NGOs formally raise issues the harder it is to ignore them.”  
— NGO senior leader, former HCT representative

In examining how an HCT’s priorities and decisions are communicated to organizations not participating on the HCT, the majority of respondents noted a lack of a reliable conduit. For NGOs and the UN alike, the NGO representatives/consortia are the most consistent, with an aggregate of 31% among all respondents. The clusters were more reliable for UN respondents, with 35% of UN and 18% of NGOs noting them as a consistent information source.



### Professionalism opens doors for the NGO humanitarian voice on the HCT.

The presence of NGOs on the HCTs is essential, though an inconsistency in the NGO representatives’ role and ability to represent the wider NGO voice remains a challenge. The

7 International NGO survey comment.

8 Survey results showed that prior organizational experience ranked 8 (NGO) and 9 (UN) out of 9 HC characteristics.

9 Respondents were given space to name successful HCs, or HCT experiences (country/dates).

10 There was a 110% gap between the top two traits and the remainder of options selected by respondents.

research also found that the profile and personality of the NGO representative often were more important than their organizational affiliation.

Participation in strategic response discussions was seen as the main incentive for NGO engagement on HCTs (see Figure 3). As to expectations of NGO representatives on the HCT, there is a demand

*“NGOs perform best when they come together on a specific issue.”*  
— NGO CD/HCT member

for an appropriate representation of their respective constituents, the wider NGO voice and the clusters. Interestingly, this expectation was also demanded of UN Agency heads in their HCT role as Cluster Leads. Transparency on needs and gaps scored second

highest, though by a greater margin for the UN Cluster Leads. Information on what is happening on the ground is also a critical role played by NGOs. Further reinforcing the importance of the field voice was the question on the value-added of NGO participation, where current information on field realities was the top answer for 83% of respondents. A principled approach, the speed of response capacity and the honesty of the NGOs were also mentioned.

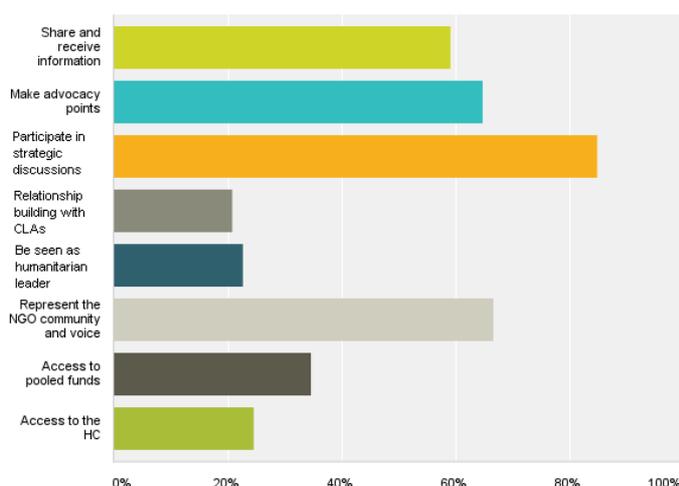
The survey and follow-up interviews showed a striking difference of opinion on the reception of NGOs on the HCTs. UN respondents overwhelmingly reported that NGOs are treated as equals on the HCT all (48%) or most of the time (50%). The international organization respondents split their answers, falling into yes, sometimes and no in relatively equal percentages. NGO staff, however, felt that only sometimes were they treated as equals (62%), with an additional 24% saying they were never treated equally.

The research demonstrated that the strength of a representative’s experience mattered. In defining successful NGO representatives, UN and NGOs alike used terms such as diplomatic, experienced, strategic, politically savvy and knowledgeable. The time and willingness to invest in processes and relationship building, while difficult, are keys to success. There was overwhelming endorsement that an NGO consortium representative has more weight than an individual operational agency and at times can be more effective. Trends indicate that most NGO representatives are chosen by their peers,<sup>11</sup> though 27% of respondents identified NGO selection by the HC or OCHA.

NGO participation on the HCTs is seen as critical, and representatives are expected to provide input into strategic discussions and act as a liaison to the wider NGO community. Interviewee responses highlighted that independently-funded NGO field coordination bodies aided in this role through the development of common platforms. Additionally, interviewees from both the NGO community and the UN noted the importance of the NGO voice to challenge HCT thinking. NGO participation on the HCT provides an opportunity to ensure that humanitarian action is responsive to needs on the ground through a joint strategy that improves implementation.

There are perceived risks that accompany these opportunities, including a fear of elitism or cliques among the NGOs, demonstrated

Figure 3 - Main Incentives for NGO Participation on HCTs



<sup>11</sup> Including election by NGO consortia, attendance through position on consortia or selected by informal group of NGOs.

through an inability or unwillingness for HCT member organizations to represent the diversity of operational NGOs.

There is also a concern that attendance provides an implicit endorsement of HCT positions, statements and products. Within a successful and representational HCT, this may not prove to be an issue. This risk is greatest within ineffective HCTs and complex situations, especially where integrated missions exist.

To alleviate these concerns, NGOs need to have regular and unimpeded access to the HC and other members of the HCT. Additionally, clarity is needed on roles, responsibilities, expectations and dispute resolution. While many respondents highlight the importance of an NGO forum or

*“Empowering HCs is something we talk about, but NGOs have a role to play. NGOs should go to HCs with their concerns. A good HC will relish this.”*  
— current RC/HC

consortium, the most important finding was that NGOs have a representation mechanism with which they are comfortable. Further to this, the linkages and support that can be sought beyond field-level was also noted, recognizing that there are numerous leverage points within the system.



### **Diversity in HCT membership is valued but should not supersede effectiveness.**

The majority of respondents (71%) indicated that the composition of the HCT directly impacts the effectiveness of the group, with 59% stating that their current HCT’s diversity could be improved. The findings indicate an inherent tension – the balance between inclusivity and manageability.

Participation from national NGOs was seen as insufficient throughout the system, and within all contexts. The role of national governments was identified as highly contextual,<sup>12</sup> and tied almost exclusively to a reinforcement of the government’s roles as a responder and coordinator of humanitarian action. In lieu of a seat at the HCT, recommendations were made that a regular meeting occur between the HCTs and government officials to get government feedback and support for humanitarian response.

The role of donors on the HCT, even as observers, raised many issues, especially in interviews. The survey found relatively strong support for donor participation, with 44% in support all the time and 47% saying sometimes. The main rationales were funding priorities and advocacy engagement. Among interviewees, donor participation was valued for potentially pushing the HCT to take a firmer, principled stance, helping keep HCT members accountable, and giving the donors themselves the opportunity to hear the challenges faced within a response. Conversely, many stated that humanitarians need a space that is purely humanitarian. Donors and host government need to be engaged, but outside the HCT.

*“Take a pragmatic approach. What makes sense where it makes sense. Must adhere to the principles.”*  
— senior NGO representative

Additionally, there was a call that the HCT mirror the response, with those around the table being representational of the humanitarian strategy and its key stakeholders. This should apply to UN agencies as well as to NGOs; it should not be assumed that all members of the UN Country Team (UNCT) are HCT members as well. Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) representatives therefore need to take their representation role more seriously, ensuring effective communication back to the cluster participants. Throughout the survey the lack of representation of the clusters on the HCT was raised, with the notation that this gap weakens both the HCT and the overall response.

<sup>12</sup> Only 17% of respondents chose “yes” while 62% chose “sometimes” to answer the survey question, “Is it appropriate for host government representatives to attend HCT meetings, even as observers?”

## Recommendations

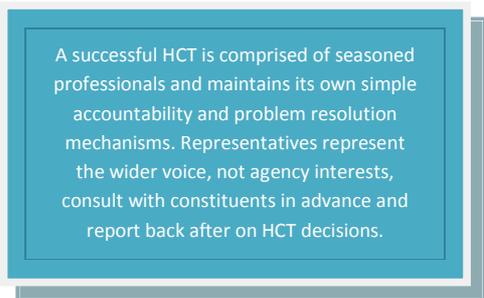
Through the survey and interviews, InterAction was able to gather information on replicable practices of successful HCs and HCT members. While context was constantly noted as critical, characteristics of successful HCTs were noted in varying scenarios and crises. HCs need to develop an HCT that is flexible, while ensuring that all members understand what is expected of them.

### Humanitarian Coordinators

- Seek out and foster relationships with humanitarian advisors from a variety of backgrounds.
- Encourage shared leadership approaches within the HCT on pooled funding advisory boards and at cluster level.
- Share information but do not use or allow the use of the HCT as an information sharing venue. Ensure that sufficient information is shared at appropriate alternative and interconnected venues, such as the clusters and intercluster coordination meetings.
- Seek practices and methods for each HCT that ensure diversity within membership while also ensuring its strategic humanitarian purpose.

### HCT Members

- Send senior, well-prepared representatives who can fulfill your role and represent your constituency, not just your agency.
- Listen to each other. Be constructive, critical, transparent and strategic.
- Commit to the HCT. Make time for process around the meeting, not the meeting alone.
- Establish/maintain report-back mechanisms to share HCT discussions with cluster partners and constituencies.



A successful HCT is comprised of seasoned professionals and maintains its own simple accountability and problem resolution mechanisms. Representatives represent the wider voice, not agency interests, consult with constituents in advance and report back after on HCT decisions.

### NGOs

- Enhance the collective value-added by providing the NGO HCT representatives with clear information on successes, progress and problems.
- Send representatives with substantive experience who are prepared and empowered to contribute to the HCT discussions and decisions.
- Find a mechanism, even if informal, to get together, discuss issues and develop a common platform for advocacy.
- Know the rules and play the game. Be proactive in relationship building. Understand what you want to get out of the system, engage appropriately and demand that your expectations are met.
- Recognize that engagement within the system requires human and financial resources. Ensure this role is noted in job descriptions, budgets and performance appraisals.

### OCHA

- Work with all HCT members to maintain and improve meeting management practices, including information sharing and meeting sequence.
- Clarify how OCHA will respond to increasing coordination and support demands.

### **UNCT Members**

- Coordinate with other CLA representatives in advance of the meeting to enable the HCT to be more strategic by limiting participation to essential UN operational agencies.

### **Donors**

- Recognize your role in humanitarian response. Consider your accountabilities and possible liabilities as a potential member of the HCT.
- Fund humanitarian engagement within the humanitarian architecture as contextually appropriate, especially among NGOs.
- Fund NGO field consortia to enable a stronger collective NGO voice.

### **HQ of NGOs/Global NGO Consortia**

- Participate actively in the humanitarian policy realm to both support country-level engagement and to ensure field realities reflected in global guidance and HC reviews.
- Provide expertise and advice on the humanitarian system and models for NGO coordination.

### **Inter-Agency Standing Committee**

- Develop best-practices guidance for HCs and HCTs on the engagement and role of host governments within a strategic response.

## **Conclusion**

A coordinated humanitarian response, while a commonly-agreed goal, remains elusive. The diversity among stakeholders is matched only by the diversity of our approaches. Collaborating at the level demanded by an idealistic goal requires individual, organizational and systemic change. The Transformative Agenda sets out some of the guidance for these changes, though still requires an attitude guided by the belief that the collective achievements outweigh individual agency priorities or visibility.

Many of the individuals interviewed for this research strongly felt that the effectiveness of the HCT is a collective responsibility. This research is a step toward better understanding of the NGO role and contributions to the HCT, as well as what the role of NGOs is, could and should be toward improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

The shifts in thinking that have allowed for the development of the TA also provide potential for recognizing the benefits of collective leadership. Based on shared decision-making and delegated authority, collective leadership provides an effective approach to the challenge of the multitude of tasks, responsibilities and expectations made of humanitarian leadership.<sup>13</sup>

The system is changing and hopefully improving. NGOs may serve as guardians of humanitarian principles and often retain the greatest connectivity to affected populations. Given this reality, NGOs must ensure that their engagement on the HCT is not as passive recipients but drivers of a coherent humanitarian response strategy, champions of a principled approach and advocates for unhindered access.

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<sup>13</sup> "Leadership in Action," ALNAP, 2011.

## Research Resources

Research materials are available on the InterAction website:

- Annex 1 – [Bibliography](#)
- Annex 2 – [TOR Methods](#)
- Annex 3 – [Survey Questions](#)
- Annex 4 – [Survey Data](#)
- Annex 5 – [Interview Questions](#)
- Annex 6 – [Interview List](#)
- Annex 7 – Interview Results (by [IO](#), [NGO](#), [UN](#) and [Donor](#))

## Acknowledgments

The InterAction Advisory Committee provided invaluable feedback and support from the initial conception of the research. The research findings were discussed at a meeting of NGO coordination bodies held in Washington, D.C., in May 2013, where further feedback was provided.

Many thanks to all who participated in the survey, those who agreed to interviews at all hours of the day and night, and who facilitated the provision of documents utilized in the desk review.

Special thanks go to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and our global NGO Consortia partner, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) for their engagement and support. Appreciation is also owed to the InterAction staff in the Humanitarian Policy and Practice and Communication units, who supported the research and aided in the finalization of the report.

This report would not be possible without the generous support of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA).