

Coordinating the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Situations

The Role of Power and Trust in Humanitarian Networks

Sussex Migration Working Paper No. 42

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Abstract

Most traditional literature focusing on coordination of humanitarian organisations argues for a hierarchy where one focal point is entitled the authority to coordinate by power of command. This argument has been criticised by theorists claiming that this is a utopia that will never become reality on a humanitarian arena consisting of autonomous actors. Instead, trust between the actors in a humanitarian network is understood as the foundation of successful coordination. Based on a fieldwork from Burundi, this paper argues that the financial ties between the organisations creates a possibility to coordinate by power of command, but that the application of this financially founded power decreases the levels of trust between the actors. Decreased levels of trust lead to decreased motivation for coordination. The paper therefore concludes that financially founded power of command is counterproductive to successful coordination. Effective coordination is founded on the ability to influence autonomous actors, not on the enforcement of decisions through power of command.

INTRODUCTION

In Gihinga camp for refugees in Burundi, 2700 people now live as refugees after being forced to flee their homes due to conflicts in their home area in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Camp Musasa hosts 7000 Rwandese seeking asylum in Burundi due to fear of persecution in Rwanda. Being among the poorest countries in the world, Burundi does not have the economical means (and in the case of the asylum-seekers, the political will) to fulfil the obligations contained in the OAU- and the 1951- conventions¹ for the legal status of refugees.

The contemporary global patterns of forced displacement are condensed in the global south, and the majority of the world's 11.5 million refugees face situations similar to the ones in Musasa and Gihinga, with host states being unable- or unwilling to take due responsibilities. According to the principle of burden-sharing, the international community enters the scene to meet the needs of the displaced. Enters the United Nations (UN), with its different specialised agencies, enters numerous international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their national counter-parts; -all with different areas of expertise, and all with their own approach to the situation of displacement. This paper seeks to understand what motivations and mechanisms that can best assure that these organisations coordinate their activities in order to provide an efficient and coherent response to the needs of the displaced persons². The argument is built on a fieldwork conducted in the two above mentioned camps for displaced persons.

There is a saying that 'everyone wants coordination but no one wants to be coordinated'. This saying sketches a picture of the humanitarian arena where the organisations jealously protect their autonomy, and where the coordination of the actors is almost impossible under the current environment in which no one can give orders, and all organisations have to fight for visibility in a saturated donor- market. Reflecting this, most of the reports evaluating the coordination of

humanitarian operations are severely critical to the attempts. The traditional academic literature concludes that there will be no real coordination of humanitarian operations until power is shifted to one focal point, which is given authority to coordinate through power of command and take decisions on behalf of the other organisations.

This argument has been criticised by practitioners and theorists who dismiss power of command as a utopia that will never become reality on the humanitarian arena where the UN does not want to take on the full responsibility and the autonomous NGOs will never hand over the power needed. Based on the analysis of the fieldwork in Burundi, this paper argues that ties of funding between the UNHCR and its operational partners are used as a source of power to command. To acknowledge that the application of such power is a possibility, however, does not necessarily mean that the paper argues for more of it. Rather, the paper analyses the effectiveness of the application of such financially founded power of command through the core questions; -does power of command in hierarchies provide a sustainable base for coordination in the long term? If not, how can coordination of the humanitarian actors otherwise be conceptualised and approached?

Much literature on coordination explains effectively

¹ Burundi has signed both the 1969 OAU Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa, as well as the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

² The focus is thus put on the *international response* to situations of displaced populations, and the focus on the displaced populations themselves is thus left for another discussion.

Less sharply delineated, coordination also means

mandate has changed, and it can be argued that the UNHCR has changed nature from an agency securing the legal protection of refugees through a rights- based approach, to a 'welfare agency' delivering emergency relief and aid through a needs- based approach (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005: 291, Goodwin- Gill 1999: 235, Darcy 1997). Today the UNHCR provides relief to millions of refugees that are hosted by states that do not have the means or will to provide services and protection to mass- influxes of refugees. This relief is usually implemented partly by specialised organisations, and the UNHCR therefore finds itself left with the challenge to coordinate the different specialised actors. The solving of this challenge is what is being analysed in this paper.

UNHCR has, through OCHA and the IASC been given the primary responsibility for coordinating the international response to the refugees'- and asylum seekers' situation in Burundi. This means in practise that the UNHCR holds the primary dialogue with the central and local Burundian authorities on behalf of the organisations that operate in the camps for internationally displaced, and further that most organisations in camps are on some sort of contractual ties with the UNHCR.

Camp level operational coordination of response to refugee situation

Every NGO is in principle free to run its own programs independent from any UN agency, as long as the national government allows entry to the country. In practice though, it is often a demand from donors that the NGO they fund operates in cooperation with the UN. Further, a substantial part of NGO's funding is channelled through the UN system, and the NGOs are thus often found as operational partners to the UN on camp- level⁴.

In the case of Burundi, NRC is asked by the UNHCR to conduct Camp Management (CM) in Gihinga and Musasa camps. The UNHCR has further insisted on NRC taking responsibility for several of the other implementing responsibilities, and NRC is currently responsible also for distribution of water, food and non- food items, as well as construction, rehabilitation and education. The UNHCR is responsible for protection and the NGO Transcultural Psychological Organisation (TPO) is responsible for physical and mental health as well as community- services. ICRC runs a project on

⁴ This is not always the case though, as NGOs often

Obstacles to coordination

Coordination is a notoriously difficult aspect of humanitarian interventions. There is a saying that 'everyone wants coordination but no one wants to be coordinated' (Van Brabant 1997: 5, Minear et al. 1992: 7). This saying reflects the dilemmas of a situation where the humanitarian actors acknowledges the positive effects that increased effective coordination would have on the people

rather involve in 'spin control' in order to collaboratively project an image of humanitarian aid as a good investment in order to expand the overall market. The extent to which actors in the humanitarian community perceive that they have a common interest with other agencies will distinctly impact the actors' motivation to coordinate.

This theoretical divide of organisations' motivations for coordination takes us back to

work when coordination actually happens in a

obstacle to effective coordination, the position of power that can be acquired through access to- and control over funding is strongly acknowledged, and used as an exemplary way that more power of command can be shifted to one focal point. This potential source of power is one of the main discussions of this paper, and will now be continued in the case of Burundi.

Power of command- a utopia?

The argument that the lack of authority to 'coordinate by command' is the main obstacle to effective coordination is widespread, and may seem self- evident for the coordinator that tries in vain to gather the fragmented operations of different autonomous organisations. It is, however, an argument that is contested both by the UN agencies and the NGOs.

On the one hand it is not clear whether the UN would accept more power of command in humanitarian actions, if this was ever a possibility. Through the interviews I have conducted, especially with the respondents that have worked on a high level for a long time, a clear perception was formulated where the UN on high- level is not willing to take the full power of command if it was given to them. The respondents understand the UN as wanting to share responsibility through the 'out- sourcing' of implementing responsibilities to the different NGO's. The UN, according to respondents, does not want the full responsibility for difficult humanitarian operations, because with responsibility comes the risk of receiving severe

on a good relationship with the UNHCR for a series of existing- as well as future programs in Burundi. As one of the respondents formulated it, "We are always on the look for future funding and contracts. As these possibilities are often found through the UN- system, it is extremely important that we are perceived of by the UN- agencies as the preferred partner for future operations".

It becomes clear that for the NGOs that receives their funding through the UN system is difficult- and potentially costly to claim independence in a reality where funding is of crucial importance. Thus, the NGO independence is often more theoretical than actual⁸.

All respondent stated that they perceived the financial ties between their own organisation and the UNHCR (where it exists) as "A strong source

(Minear et al. 1992: 3), and working in ways that is "...informed of and by each other" (Van Brabant 1999: 7). One could say that forcing through a decision that would coordinate the other actors' work would orchestrate a division of labour, but it is highly uncertain whether it would be functional. Coordination of humanitarian operations must be based on information- sharing between the actors, which then become 'informed of and by each other'. According to the respondents this information- sharing is the first feature of coordination that is abandoned by actors that perceives their autonomy to be threatened by enforced decisions. This because information by its nature is difficult to control, because it is impossible for the leader to control that all relevant information is channelled up to the decision- making levels. Actors that feel threatened by enforced decisions will tend to give only the information they are asked for by the decision- maker, and to keep hidden all the surrounding information that would make it easier for the leader to make informed decisions. This indicates that the application of the power of the purse to enforce decisions that quickly coordinate the actors on a short term basis may at the same time entail a degradation of the atmosphere of cooperation between the actors in the long term. The actors will be less 'informed of and by each other' and the 'functional' aspect of the division of labour will be decreasing.

Question 5-7 of the interview schedule aimed at reaching a deeper understanding of the effects and effectiveness of the use of contractual power. The respondents were generally reluctant to reply in a closed format to the question whether their organisation would follow an order given by the UNHCR. Through more descriptive answers to the questions, the general view was formulated that their organisation would follow an order only to the least degree possible. Whether the organisations would follow would depend on a series of contextual factors, where the potential for future funding through the decision- maker was the most prominent factor (as long as the decision would not directly harm the camp- population in a grave way). The replies to this question were significantly different; -one respondent saw it "...as a good thing if the UNHCR gives orders, as they have the right expertise and experience in refugee situations". Another respondent held that "It is our job not to follow enforced decisions; -a system Tw(aw it ")6.sc system Tw(acamp- nn wereast)5(w eegree er)]TJbli(ng3nthar

command. In the cases cited by Reindorp and Wiles power of command is used as the explanation for effective coordination, it was nevertheless "...important that other participants welcomed these elements of command as legitimate" (Reindorp and Wiles 2001: 14). This study then continues by emphasising the importance of the coordinator's demonstration of a mentality of inclusion and service orientation, so that the independent organisations does not perceive of the coordinator as rude and overruling. The studies that support power of command often argue simultaneously that the 'incredible' or 'outstanding' individual leader is a strong and necessary asset for successful coordination.

This outstanding individual was also the most recurring explanation for successful coordination in the literary review described in section 1.3.

'typical' humanitarian relief environment (if one exists) appears to include a relatively weak bureaucratic network and a social network of

Niland call 'coordination by consensus', as opposed to enforcing decisions on inferior organisations through chains of formal power of command. As Brett (2005) puts it, actual coordination "...requires rules that exclude command but allows levels of voluntary co-operation that nevertheless involve binding agreements between parties to ensure long-term co-ordination, rather than mere co-existence".

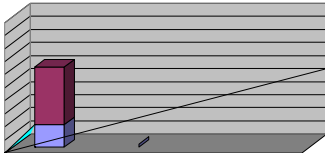
The humanitarian network in Burundi

The network- and trust theorists that is just presented treats the humanitarian organisations as ('more or less/semi-') autonomous actors, were the organisations have the freedom to choose whether they want to take part in coordination with other actors or not. I have argued that this independency often is a more theoretical- than practical feature of a NGO's reality, as funding sourced through the UN system constitutes a power- source that infringes the independence of the NGOs.

Building further on the language of Newell and Swan (2001) who identifies three different types of network, namely the social- the bureaucratic- and the proprietary network, one can say that the humanitarian network containing financial ties between the actors takes on some features of the proprietary network. I will therefore argue that the humanitarian field is still better understood as a network than as a hierarchy, but that power of command is exerted inside of this network, on the basis of financial ties. But as the ordinary proprietary network, such as a joint venture, tends to be built on clear and formal roles of power on each decision- level, the humanitarian network still rests in the informal social network mode, with some hints only of the bureaucratic network's formal coordination mechanisms. There is a discrepancy between the principle- and

impacts do the different approaches to coordination have on the levels of trust between the actors?

Question 8 of the interview schedule (see appendix 1) is a technique that is developed in order to analyse the levels of trust between different actors (Metlay 1999). The respondents' answers to question 8 can be put in a table to give a visual presentation of the differences in levels of trust between the UNHCR and is contractual and non- contractual partners.



funding. It is documented that the levels of trust are much lower between the UNHCR and its contractual partners, than their non- contractual partners. It is therefore suggested that the exertion of the power of the purse have negative implications on the levels of trust in the humanitarian networks in Burundi, and thus to decreased motivations for coordination. It has to be added here that the level of trust is a subjective and slowly changing parameter, which in addition to the use of power is influenced by a whole range of other parameters such as personal qualities and –ties. This paper does not claim that the use of power is the only reason why the levels of trust differ in the field. To analyse the changes in the levels of trust specifically brought about by enforced decisions would require studies that last longer periods of time, and on a much deeper level than the scope of this paper allows. This paper has analysed certain actors' levels of trust towards the UNHCR, at one given moment in time. However, the causal explanations from the qualitative interviews provide an understanding of the formation of this status quo that has enabled the conclusion that the exertion of financially founded power has negative implications for the levels of trust between humanitarian organisations.

If trust is understood as the basic necessity for successful coordination, this conclusion should lead to a re-thinking of the use of financially founded power. While it may lead to rapid coordination of the operation at hand, the longer term environment for coordination may deteriorate. Knowing that the majority of today's refugee situations last for more than five years (USCRI 2005) and therefore that the organisations addressing their needs must cooperate for extensive periods of time, I argue that long- term building of trust should be at the foundation of the organisations' understanding of coordination, and effect their approach to

wants coordination and to be coordinated, but only as long as they trust the coordinator'.

To grasp this finding in theoretical terms, an emerging field of theory has been presented, which seeks to establish another mind-set concerning coordination, where the humanitarian arena is understood instead as a network of autonomous actors that chooses whether or not they ought to participate in coordinated activities. Trust between the actors becomes a central theme in such networks, and is understood as the obligatory basis for successful humanitarian coordination, as opposed to formal power of command.

The fieldwork shows that the UNHCR generally seeks coordination by consensus with its non-contractual partners, while coordination is often sought through power of command towards its contractual partners. Analysed in one given moment in time, the levels of trust towards the UNHCR are much weaker from its contractual partners, than its non- contractual partners. I have argued that the findings strongly indicates (if not proves) that enforced decisions based on financially founded power will decrease the levels of trust in the humanitarian networks. If trust is understood as the basic necessity for successful coordination, it becomes clear that coordination by power of command, though a possibility, is not a sustainable base for successful coordination in the long term.

The exertion of powerful leadership can most definitely be positive and lead to successful coordination, but only as long as there is trust between the decision-maker and the other organisations, as the quotation in the beginning of the conclusion suggests. I therefore argue that long- term building of trust should be at the foundation of the organisations' understanding of coordination, and affect their approach to coordinated activities. Short- term efficiency through the application of financially founded power may seem less attractive if the long- term implication is understood as deterioration of the coordination- environment.

Effective coordination is founded on the ability to influence autonomous actors, not on the enforcement of decisions through power of command.

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