

Guidance Note

NOVEMBER
2024

CONFIDENTIAL - NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

LOCAL COORDINATION SYSTEMS

Background

A point of frustration which is regularly raised to this analytical unit by donors and INGOs across the Myanmar response is the myriad coordination challenges facing response actors. Like in other responses globally, international response actors are generally coordinated through the geographic and thematically focused cluster system. However, since the 2021 military coup, the Myanmar response has dramatically shifted to a more localized response, with large components of the international response being conducted directly by local Myanmar organizations. While some local organizations do participate in the cluster system, many others do not, for a variety of reasons.

Key among these reasons is the fact that there are, in nearly every conflict affected state and region, local coordination structures which are specifically focused on coordinating local actors in aid delivery. These local structures vary considerably in form, function, and the degree to which they engage with the international cluster system. However, what this has meant in practice is that in a response which has grown increasingly localized, a large – and critical – component of the response landscape is not actively engaging with the ‘formal’ coordination mechanisms that exist.

The lack of engagement between local and international aid coordination structures creates serious gaps. First and foremost of these is in information sharing. Frequently, the clusters will have entirely different understandings of needs in their areas of coverage from local organizations and local coordination systems; this is natural, as they are drawing upon two different sets of information systems. There are also major discrepancies in perceptions of coverage, with totally different understandings of what is and is not ‘accessible’.

To that end, it is worth examining what these local aid coordination systems are, the major barriers to greater local participation in the cluster system, and the degree to which these two systems should intersect with one another.

Local Coordination Landscape

As noted, in nearly every region of the country, local aid coordination systems exist and have active participation by local organizations. The degree to which this aid coordination happens with the facilitation of EROs or other local governance bodies varies, as does the degree to which coordination is focused on filling gaps in local service provision, sharing experiences, navigating access, or ensuring coverage.

Kachin State hosts one of the most developed local aid coordination systems in Myanmar, in the Joint Strategy Team (JST). JST has the participation of all of the major service delivery organizations in Kachin State; several INGO partners of these local Kachin organizations also occasionally attend JST meetings. The JST also regularly engages with other local coordination systems, both as part of inter-Myanmar coordination, and also to provide occasional technical and organizational support. JST groups also regularly coordinate with each other regarding their engagement with the international coordination systems, and on pursuing funding opportunities. However, the majority of the JST's focus is on the practicalities of aid delivery in Kachin; meaning navigating access with the armed actors in Kachin, ensuring coverage, and responding to emerging needs.

In Rakhine State, the primary local aid coordination system is the Arakan Humanitarian Coordination Team (AHCT). Comprised of several prominent local Rakhine organizations, and with numerous smaller organizations participating, the AHCT meets regularly and its members actively coordinate and often cooperate on filling service delivery gaps, sharing funding opportunities, and navigating relations and access with both the AA and SAC across Rakhine.

In Shan State, the primary local aid coordination mechanism is the Humanitarian Strategy Team (HST), which was modeled after the Kachin JST, and which comprises some of the largest local organizations in Shan. However, there are numerous other local coordination structures in Shan state, and generally they break down along ethnic lines and at the township level. In practice, these highly local coordination systems are often heavily based on local youth and religious networks. They are considered to be extremely effective at mobilizing aid during a crisis; however, they have limited geographic coverage.

Alongside Kachin State, Southeast Myanmar is also one of the most coordinated local response systems in the country. The primary local aid coordination system is the Karen Emergency Relief Team (KERT). The KERT consists of most of the major Karen CSOs, and is facilitated by the Karen National Union (KNU). There is another local coordination system, which has many of the same actors also participating, called the Karen Peace Support Team (KPST). Both of these coordination systems occasionally also have trusted INGO partners facilitate or present at meetings, and share information with these trusted partners; individual members and INGO partners occasionally feed information into the formal cluster system. In Karen State there are also even more localized coordination structures at the district level, which are generally structured along the same lines as the KERT. The majority of the coordination that takes place is in the form of information sharing, in ensuring complementarity of coverage between the different Karen organizations and their partners, and shared resource allocation.

In Chin State, coordination of local organizations generally happens under the auspices of either the Chin National Front (CNF), and the Chinland Council. The CNF has a Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and Chinland Council has a Ministry of Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Affairs; both of these act functionally as coordination bodies for local organizations in northern Chin State. In southern Chin State, in the areas that are more controlled or influenced by the Chin Brotherhood Alliance, local aid coordination is still in a nascent stage; however, southern Chin is still considerably underserved by the international response, and there are fewer (and generally, smaller) local organizations working in the area.

In Sagaing and Magway Regions, local aid coordination is still in a nascent state. At the township level, coordination generally is led by the local *PahAhPa*, the emerging NUG governance system; however, the effectiveness of *PahAhPa* can vary widely. The Sagaing Forum has also acted as a kind of de-facto coordination structure for the larger local NGOs and CSOs in Sagaing. However, the Sagaing Forums actual purpose and nominal mandate is much greater than local CSO coordination, as it is intended to be a political coordination body as much as a service provision coordination body; as such, the Sagaing Forum is not an aid coordination structure per se, though it does often function as one.

Challenges to Local-International Coordination

When speaking to participants in local coordination systems, and asking about why they do not coordinate with the cluster system in the same way, the same sets of issues come up repeatedly. They can be grouped under the following themes: trust, ‘extractiveness’, relevance, and ‘tone’.

TRUST

Ultimately, a lack of trust is one of the fundamental barriers to local participation in international coordination systems. Some of this lack of trust is justified; some is likely a result of poor messaging, approach, and turnover. Most of these trust gaps stem from the UN’s perceived closeness to the SAC. There are regularly fears raised that the UN or Yangon-based INGOs will share information with the SAC, either about needs, or about partners or local organizations. It is important to note that, to date, this analytical unit has not seen any evidence of the UN or of a Yangon-based INGO actively sharing sensitive information with the SAC. However, the perception that the UN is too close to the SAC, and the fear that they will share data still very much exists; this is even more true for organizations which are primarily or now entirely working in non-SAC controlled areas, such as in Rakhine, Northern Shan, Southeast Myanmar, and Sagaing/Magway Regions. There are also trust gaps that are raised by the regular rotation of personnel in international coordination systems. Trust in Myanmar is often personalized, and can take considerable time to build. Myanmar aid workers regularly lack trust in institutions, but do have trust in individuals. However, the international aid system is often based on rotations, and the Myanmar response has seen relatively high turnover. As such, when one trusted coordinator leaves, that does not mean that that trust is transferred to his or her successor.

LOCAL COORDINATION SYSTEMS**‘EXTRACTIVENESS’**

Another issue cited frequently is the perception that the international coordination systems are entirely extractive, in terms of both time and information, but provide little benefit in return. Local organizations are frequently overstretched and underfunded, and often do not have a dedicated person assigned to coordination functions. Thus, even when they are invited to cluster meetings or other coordination functions, attendance can be a major time imposition – and one which is not often not compensated or covered in existing project budgets. Additionally, the information demands themselves are also often seen as being highly extractive, with no actual benefit. According to the head of one local NGO: “We attend the clusters when we are available. We will share an assessment when asked. But we don’t share much – [they] are just sucking all the information from us!” According to another international aid worker who attends both international and local coordination system meetings: “... one of the challenges so far is that the local mechanism views the international one as highly extractive, without giving anything in return. So the incentives for them to engage are low in the current environment. It just wastes their time at best, and is an extreme security risk at worst.”

RELEVANCE

Another key barrier to local participation in international coordination systems is of perceived relevance; this is related to the points above but is distinct. Here, relevance means more that the problems and issues that are discussed at international cluster meetings are different than the issues that are discussed at local coordination meetings. International cluster and coordination meetings are, fundamentally, based on the information and coordination needs of the UN and INGOs; these functions are incredibly important; and critically, they are donor funded, as institutional donors are reliant on the information that comes from these meetings to make donor-level allocation and programming decisions. Because of this focus – and because of the way the Myanmar response is increasingly a remote response which is implemented by local organizations and subpartners – the day to day problems of on-ground coordination are no longer necessarily being handled at the cluster level. According to the head of one local CSO “At these meetings, the issues that I have to deal with are not the problem for them. I have problems of moving goods, or funding, or with volunteers, or how to be working with other organizations or [the EAO]. They don’t discuss these problems at the meeting. If they do, their problems are different from us.”

‘TONE’

A coordination problem which is harder to define, but which comes up regularly, is one of ‘tone’. Essentially, it is the perception of local actors that the international coordination systems are ‘talking down’ to them, or treating them as a lower part of a hierarchy (with the international coordination system being at the top of said hierarchy). It is the perception of many local organizations that the international system expects them to feed into the cluster system, and that the myriad local coordination systems should subordinate themselves to the international ones. This is not just a cultural issue (though in part it is); it is instead a desire for recognition of the fact that in many cases the large bulk of the actual assistance reaching communities is delivered by local organizations, and yet local organizations and the indigenously created systems – that work for their purposes – are still treated by and spoken about as a secondary part of the Myanmar response.

Response Implications

There is one fundamental point to be made with regards to coordination in Myanmar: It would be highly mutually beneficial to both local coordination systems and international coordination systems to work more closely together. The international cluster system would benefit greatly from increased coordination with local actors and local coordination systems. Greater and more real time needs data alone would be of massive benefit. For their part, local aid actors and their coordination systems would benefit from greater exposure to the international system, and institutional donor money – which is generally, highly reliant on the information provided by the cluster system and other international coordination mechanisms.

However, the answer is not necessarily to ‘force’ these systems to work with each other. As noted, the international coordination system is often fundamentally doing a different thing, for different purposes, than local coordination systems. The international coordination system is ultimately much more donor facing, and much more focused on issues of resource allocation and information sharing; local systems are much more ‘operational’, in that they are focused more on issues of common interest, access, logistics (and often, politics).

As such, what is needed is a recognition that these systems should both exist, and that they should exist in parallel, and that they should ideally be mutually reinforcing. These systems can and should engage each other more regularly, and support each other in ways that they can be supported; but, with a recognition that they are both different and equal in importance. To that end:

- International coordination actors should make a serious effort to strengthen engagement with parallel local coordination structures. However, they should start this engagement with a consideration of what they can ‘bring to the table’. Instead of approaching engagement as a set of information demands, a starting point could be engagement with local coordination structures as an equivalent level partner, and asking instead about ways international coordination structures can support the needs of local structures
- Making trust building as a key component of coordination is badly needed. As noted, many of the existing trust gaps that exist are grounded in perceptions of political alignment and degrees of closeness to the SAC. Many of these trust gaps also stem from purely not being familiar with the individuals (not institutions) in question. A real effort must be made to clearly explain to local organizations the position and policy of international coordination actors; and a real effort must also be made, on the part of individual coordinators, to make themselves personally known to and trusted by local actors.
- Both local and international coordination actors must thoughtfully consider ways in which they can be useful to each other. This means closely interrogating local organizations on what they would want to see from international coordination actors. One point which was raised by several local CSO staff interviewed for this paper was that they regularly lack visibility on funding opportunities, or on which international organizations would be willing and able to work with them. One other raised that they would like greater visibility on how targeting decisions are actually made, and how international funding is being allocated.

LOCAL COORDINATION SYSTEMS

- Related to the above points, is that funding in general remains the primary concern of most local coordination systems. It would be a logical entry point for international coordination mechanisms (which have access to their own dedicated resources) to engage with local coordination systems (which rarely if ever have dedicated resources) by finding opportunities to fund their local counterparts in some way. This could mean gestures as simple as covering transport costs, venues, per diems, or communications for local coordination systems. This in and of itself would immediately benefit and make local humanitarian responses more efficient, and would create the grounds for closer collaboration and trust building.

Guidance Note

Contributing information sources to this document include public and non-public humanitarian information. The content compiled is by no means exhaustive and does not necessarily reflect the position of its authors or funders. The provided information, assessment, and analysis are designated for humanitarian purposes only and as such should not be cited.

© 2024

Contact: analyst.myanmar2020@gmail.com