Improving Humanitarian Coordination

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Paul Knox Clarke and Leah Campbell

ALNAP

ALNAP is a unique system-wide network dedicated to improving the performance of humanitarian action through shared learning.

www.alnap.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About this report

This report is the output of the ALNAP meeting: '*Working together to improve humanitarian coordination*', held in London on 30 June and 1 July 2016. The meeting was part of a programme of research aimed at improving the effectiveness of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster-based humanitarian coordination system. This report summarises the main themes and recommendations of that meeting, and is informed by additional interviews and literature review.

How effective is the current model of coordination?

At present, the coordination system seems to be fairly effective in enhancing cooperation to prevent gaps and overlaps, and at supporting good practice on the ground. However, it is less good at addressing 'strategic', response-wide issues. The Clusters are generally seen as being more effective than Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), Inter-Cluster Coordination (ICC) mechanisms and subnational coordination activities.

The overall design of the IASC Cluster-led coordination mechanism

The current model of coordination, as expressed in much of the formal guidance, aims to create and manage a single, overarching plan for humanitarian operations in a country. In this model, coordination is directive. It has a strong element of control, and the coordination mechanism aims to determine and regulate the activities of individual agencies. The Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), in particular, tends to support this directive model of coordination. However, this directive coordination is difficult to achieve in a voluntary grouping of independent organisations, and in many places the coordination mechanisms appear to work best when they move away from a control approach to a more cooperative one: encouraging and supporting voluntary cooperation and alignment of activities around broadly defined common goals. The danger of this 'looser' approach to coordination is that individual agencies might base their activities on their organisational capacities and interests, rather than on the needs of the affected population.

'...directive coordination is difficult to achieve in a voluntary grouping of independent organisations.'

This lack of clarity around the exact role and purpose of the coordination system as a whole is reflected in the various elements of the system. There is often a lack of clarity between the relative roles of the HCT, the ICC mechanism, Clusters and subnational coordination bodies. This can lead to duplication of coordination functions, key activities not being undertaken and conflict between different parts of the structure. The problem of role definition appears to be particularly acute at the

inter-Cluster level. Subnational coordination, which has great potential to improve the effectiveness of operations, is often an 'afterthought', and is particularly under-resourced.

There is widespread frustration that the coordination model is often applied mechanistically, and is not generally adapted to national contexts. Taking a 'cookie-cutter' approach to the coordination structure results in existing government and civil society coordination mechanisms being ignored, which in turn contributes to the exclusion and side-lining of national and local capacity.

There are also concerns that the sector-based approach to coordination, exemplified by the Clusters, is not the best method for addressing the complex, multi-sectoral needs of affected people. As multi-purpose cash programming (which is by nature cross sectoral) becomes more common, the sectoral approach becomes more problematic. Whilst there are still a number of compelling reasons for using a sectoral structure at national level, alternative structures may be particularly appropriate for subnational coordination.

'Existing country-level coordination systems are not good at facilitating the inclusion of national civil society actors.'

The role of national actors in the coordination mechanism

While there is general agreement – both from arguments of principle, and from arguments of pragmatism – that the 'default' model of coordination should be one that is led by the government of the affected state, this seldom occurs. Humanitarians may default to the model they know, or may try to avoid the state where it is contributing to the humanitarian crisis. However, states are not monolithic, and in many situations there are possibilities to work closely with line ministries or other parts of government, even where the government is engaged in internal conflicts. Where even this is not possible, coordination models should be designed to align with government structures to the degree possible, to allow for government ownership at a later date.

Where the state is willing to coordinate in an impartial way, but lacks capacity, a different set of challenges emerges. A key challenge is deciding who determines what 'capacity' means and measures actors against these criteria. It is important to separate capacity to respond from capacity to coordinate: even if the state cannot respond directly, it should still retain the right to oversee coordination.

Existing country-level coordination systems are not good at facilitating the inclusion of national civil society actors. There are a number of reasons for this, including a lack of understanding of the system on the part of national actors; limited incentives for national actor participation; concerns that national actors may not act in an impartial manner; location of coordination meetings and the language used at these meetings; and unclear membership criteria for Clusters and HCTs. It is not clear whether membership should be based on actual capacity to respond, or on potential, and what the role of the coordination system should be in building capacity.

Information management and coordination

A core activity for any coordination system is information management (IM). Currently, the IM activities that occur within the coordination system appear to fit the 'top-down' and directive logic (although, as noted above, this logic tends not to work in practice) of the IASC coordination mechanism. Information flows upwards, but does not generally flow well horizontally across the system. Much IM aims at meeting the 'high-level' information needs of those 'in control' (HCTs, HQs and donors). There is only limited focus on managing information that might be of 'operational' use, and that would allow organisations to cooperate more effectively in activities on the ground. This may be a result of 'powerful people getting what they want', or of information being 'tools-led' rather than 'needs-led', or of IM systems running on default, and not trying to identify the most important information for the response.

Despite the concentration on 'strategic information', a key type of strategic information is lacking. While the coordination system spends a significant amount of time collecting information on needs, it seldom updates this to see how activities are affecting needs, and how needs are developing over time. As a result, decisions at all levels are made without a good understanding of how well the response is working, what should be supported and what should be done differently.

Effective IM is made more difficult by the reluctance of many agencies to share information with one another. Even where information is shared, different agencies use incompatible formats: different definitions, levels of aggregation and indicators. Efforts to create joint IM tools that are used by all actors have not been particularly successful in many cases.

'Much IM aims at meeting the "high-level" information needs of those "in control"'

Constraints to change

Few of these observations are new. Participants suggested a number of reasons why changes and improvements in these areas have not already taken place. These include a disinclination to change a system that has already required so much investment to achieve its current levels of performance, and a desire among many humanitarians to create a more 'efficient' command and control-style system, despite the structural difficulties (some might say near impossibility) of doing so. There are also powerful organisational incentives for retaining the current system. The system is tied to funding: activation of the 'full' coordination system guarantees funding that may not otherwise be available. And a 'top-down' system is felt to serve the interests of the people 'at the top', who tend to have more power and influence. More prosaically, humanitarians at country level do not feel they have the time, or in some cases the necessary skills, to consciously design the coordination system and the IM mechanisms that support it to meet the country context, and so tend to default to the 'standard' model.

Recommendations

Participants at the meeting generated a number of recommendations to address the issues outlined above. They then prioritised these recommendations, and created more detailed recommendations for those seen as top priorities:

- creating context-specific coordination mechanisms

- increasing mutual trust among agencies, to allow for non-directive, voluntary coordination systems that work effectively

- clarifying the roles of the different elements of the coordination system

- increasing the amount and quality of training to improve the effectiveness of subnational coordination

- increasing the participation and influence of national and local civil society organisations in humanitarian coordination

- improving information management
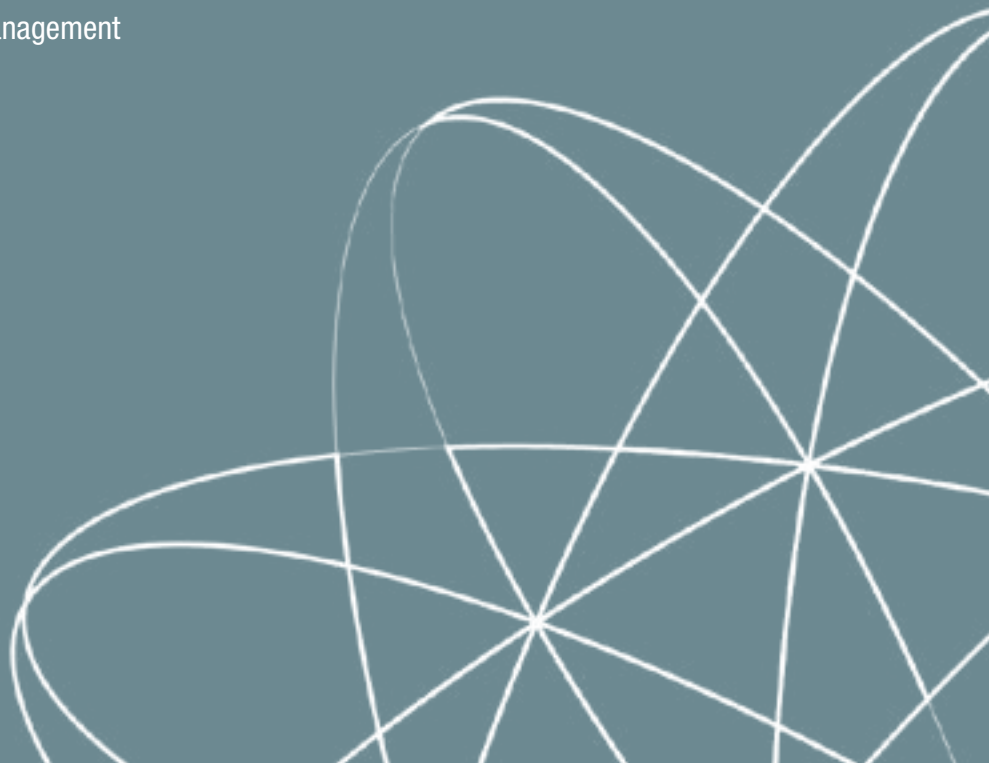
RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

During the June 2016 meeting, attendees participated in several rounds of discussion that resulted in the identification of concrete recommendations to address the coordination challenges discussed in this paper.

After these initial discussions, participants voted for the broad recommendations they most strongly supported. These recommendations were then further developed into the more concrete recommendations presented below.

All of the recommendations below were proposed by meeting participants. While the broad recommendations had been prioritised in the voting exercise, there were varying levels of agreement on the specific recommendations on these areas; some recommendations received nearly universal endorsement whereas others were more controversial. To ensure the recommendations presented are a clear reflection of the sentiments of the group, we have attempted to indicate where there was particularly strong support, and have supplemented the detail of the recommendations by reviewing transcripts of the meeting discussions and through one-to-one discussions with a sample of meeting participants during the drafting phase. We have also attempted to identify existing or emerging initiatives where the recommendations may be taken up.

The recommendations have been grouped into six areas, which roughly correlate to the structure of the full paper. It is important to note the interconnectedness of many of the recommendations. Readers may find it easier to consider the recommendations in light of the paper as a whole, as this will provide further background, definitions and clarity.

Each set of recommendations addresses a common goal. We have presented the goal followed by specific actions, which, taken together, should help in achieving it. In most cases, action is required by more than one group in order to achieve the goal. In some cases, it was not possible to identify an actor to carry out an action, and in these areas in particular further work is required to identify concrete next steps.

RECOMMENDATION SET 1

Developing context-relevant coordination systems that build on existing government and civil society coordination mechanisms

There was strong support by meeting participants for ensuring coordination is context-relevant and builds on existing coordination mechanisms put in place by governments and civil society.

In particular, participants strongly supported:

- the mapping of national response frameworks outlining coordination roles and responsibilities as part of standard operating procedures at the start of a response (15 votes)

- the need to focus on the principles and purpose of coordination, rather than adopting one-size-fits-all approaches (13 votes) and

- the need to support, not replace, existing coordination structures (11 votes)

The following specific recommendations and associated actions to achieve these goals emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 1.1

Ensure coordination mechanisms are context-relevant and adaptable

1.1.1
IASC (supported by OCHA, IASC members) should clarify that adaptation to ensure context-relevant coordination is encouraged

1.1.2
Donors (supported by OCHA, IASC) should make clear, and take further steps to ensure, that funding is based on needs, not tied to the activation of Clusters.

1.1.3
Donors should fund and support adapted, context-relevant coordination mechanisms, as well as/instead of Clusters and sectors, where appropriate.

1.1.4
Academics (supported by OCHA, Global Clusters, UN agencies and international and national NGOs) should conduct research to document a range of potential models for coordination, particularly at subnational and inter-Cluster level, which includes case study examples. This would build on the recent Global Overview of Coordination Arrangements conducted by OCHA.

1.1.5

HCTs (supported by OCHA, Global Clusters) should conduct regular coordination architecture reviews to ensure coordination mechanisms are most appropriate for evolving contexts

1.1.6

OCHA (supported by UNSSC) should ensure adaptability, organisation and coordination design are included in training packages for HCT members (and Global Clusters should do the same for Cluster Coordinators).

Recommendation 1.2

Support and build on existing national and local coordination mechanisms rather than duplicating or replacing them

1.2.1

In advance of sudden onset crises, governments (with the support of the Global Partnership for Preparedness and UNCT) should map out who has responsibility for which elements of management, coordination and response. Maps should include the relative roles/responsibilities of government agencies, civil society, international actors and private sector; triggers for action; process for regular reviews; gaps in this system.

1.2.2

In protracted crises and complex emergencies, where governments are unable or unwilling, UNCTs/ HCTs should conduct the mapping described above. The mapping should describe current structures, identify how effective these structures are presently and determine what should be retained/altered to improve effectiveness.

1.2.2

All international organisations (including UN agencies, INGOs and donors) entering a country should agree to understand and engage with existing coordination mechanisms

Recommendation 1.3

Ensure coordination is part of preparedness and planning work

1.3.1

As part of their work, the Disaster Preparedness Partnership (supported by the IASC Preparedness Working Group, the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network, the Network for Empowered

Aid Response and the World Bank) should ensure coordination issues are part of preparedness planning.

1.3.2

At a global level, actors should come together to agree on common standards for 'coordination capacity' (and potentially, and more broadly, measurable level of operational capacity required to participate in coordination systems) and work together to establish training and capacity-building programmes to address these gaps.

1.3.3

All actors conducting preparedness planning should aim to bring people and groups together to participate in simulations and similar exercises to increase understanding and agreement of coordination roles in crises.

RECOMMENDATION SET 2
Clarifying roles and decision-making procedures in the coordination system

At the meeting, participants recommended improving the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the coordination system. Specifically, recommendations in the area were around:

- improving role clarity in the coordination system (12 votes)

- refocusing HCTs on decision-making appropriate for the HCT level (11 votes)

The following specific recommendations and associated actions emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 2.1
Improve role clarity in the coordination structure

2.1.1

Based on 'what works' at present, further reflections at global level should be undertaken by OCHA, Global Clusters and members on what the relative roles of the HCT/ICC/Clusters/subnational-level coordination *should* be, how the various elements should communicate with one another – particularly around linking strategic and operational work in a substantive way – and how these roles can be effectively implemented so they are used consistently, where context-relevant. Without pre-judging these decisions, the meeting recommended that:

- HCTs should concentrate on setting broad objectives, and making decisions that affect the entire operation in the country and political decisions that require liaison with government.

- ICC should not be a decision-making body, but should concentrate on establishing and maintaining the 'big picture' and presenting issues and options to the HCT and to Clusters.

2.1.2

The Global Clusters working group on coordination reviews and cluster transition should provide support and guidance to HCTs to ensure coordination architecture reviews are conducted regularly in every country where Clusters are active. Coordination architecture reviews should go beyond decisions on whether or not certain Clusters should be deactivated to include a broader review of the different components within the coordination structure and their relative roles and context-relevance.

RECOMMENDATION SET 3
Building subnational coordination capacity

At the meeting, participants strongly supported the need to build capacity as a way to improve subnational coordination. This recommendation goes in tandem with the recommendations around context-relevant coordination structures with clear roles for different parts of the coordination mechanism. The following specific recommendations and associated actions emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 3.1

Identify the competencies and knowledge required for subnational coordination

3.1.1

Training providers and researchers (with support of OCHA, Cluster leads and members) should conduct further research to identify the competencies and knowledge required for sub-national coordination.

3.1.2

Global and national Clusters should support this work by documenting what works in their respective clusters at subnational level.

Recommendation 3.2

Build capacity for subnational coordination

3.2.1

Globally, an inter-agency learning provider or practitioner network (possibly as a working group within the IASC) should create a training package that is modular, that is developed by adult learning specialists and that uses a range of multimedia based on providing the needed competencies and knowledge for subnational coordination.

3.2.2

HCTs and Clusters in country should adapt this training package to the local context and advocate for its use.

3.2.3

Donors should support and fund the development of this training package and its delivery in crises around the world.

RECOMMENDATION SET 4

Increasing the participation and influence of national and local civil society organisations in humanitarian coordination

Meeting participants strongly supported the broad recommendation that:

- international organisations should identify and understand the priorities and interests of national NGOs, and use this to more clearly demonstrate the benefits of engaging with the coordination system (12 votes)

Related to this and other broad recommendations (see 1 above), the following recommendations and associated actions emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 4.1

Increase the participation of national and local civil society in coordination mechanisms by ensuring they have the human resource to participate

4.1.1
All actors engaged in humanitarian coordination should recognise the existing coordination mechanism is heavy and consider the implications for actors with limited capacity.

4.1.2
Donors, including UN agencies and INGOs that work through partners, should provide sufficient funding for national and local civil society to participate in coordination mechanisms.

4.1.3
Donors that fund UN agencies and INGOs that then work through partners should require these funded agencies and INGOs to report on Action 4.1.2.

Recommendation 4.2

Increase the meaningful participation of national and local civil society by demonstrating the value of coordination mechanisms

4.2.1
National NGO forums, and possibly INGO forums, should act as facilitators, amplifiers and allies

for national and local civil society participating in coordination mechanisms.

4.2.2 Donors should invest in national NGO forums, networks and consortiums to enable them to carry out Action 4.2.1.

4.2.3

HCTs should reserve spaces for national NGOs using transparent selection processes and ensuring a diverse range of national and local NGOs are represented (not just large, familiar ones).

4.2.4

The Building a Better Response initiative, which uses e-learning and short training to explain the humanitarian coordination system to national and local actors, should continue to improve the coordination literacy of local and national civil society, and work more closely with Global and national Clusters in particular, to demonstrate the value of participation in coordination to national and local NGOs.

4.2.5

Global Clusters should take steps to better demonstrate the value of including national and local NGOs to their Cluster Coordinators and members.

Recommendation 4.3

Ensure the involvement of local and national civil society in humanitarian coordination mechanisms is meaningful, fair and transparent

4.3.1

IASC and Global Clusters should determine and provide outline guidance on membership of the Clusters. Options might include:

• Open participation: all local and national civil society organisations are welcome to participate. Some elements of cluster business are addressed by smaller SAGs and *ad hoc* working groups. Membership of these smaller groups would be determined by a transparent and fair elections process.

• Criteria for participation: organisations (national, local and international) are welcome to participate if they meet certain criteria (potentially around contribution to the response).

This guidance would be interpreted locally, with the HCT determining whether adaptions are required for the specific context.

4.3.2

At a global and country level, further reflection should be done to determine whether the Cluster is the best place for capacity building, and what alternatives there are.

4.3.3

Donors and international organisations should advocate for the reconsideration of anti-terror legislation, and consider their own risk aversion, which contributes to mistrust and reduced capacity of local and national civil society.

4.3.4

Clusters, with the support of the Global Clusters, should take immediate steps to address language barriers that limit the participation of local and national civil society, by providing translation at meetings and/or of documentation, summarising key points and providing multiple opportunities to engage.

RECOMMENDATION SET 5

Increasing mutual trust among agencies, to allow for a non-directive, voluntary coordination systems that work effectively

Meeting participants strongly supported the recommendation to:

• increase mutual accountability among actors in the coordination structure (23 votes)

The following specific recommendations and associated actions emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 5.1

Increase transparency of decision-making, prioritisation and funding

5.1.1

HCTs should encourage all members to contribute agenda items and commit to addressing any HCT member's priority items in the agenda, not leaving them to 'AOB'.

5.1.2

HCTs should create a light system of following up and reporting on commitments made in meetings.

5.1.3

As part of the Grand Bargain, donors should commit to putting a larger amount of funding through the HRP.

5.1.4

HCTs should consult donors during process of developing the HRP.

5.1.5

Donors should confront and question the HCT if the HRP is of poor quality, with the aim of improving the HRP rather than avoiding it.

5.1.6

Donors should recognise where the HCT has made difficult prioritisation decisions in the HRP by allocating funding based on this prioritisation.

Recommendation 5.2

Clarify expectations around coordination mechanism decisions and process

5.2.1

HCTs should clarify the expectations of each member on the deliverables of the HCT, including gender and accountability to affected populations, and make these issues a regular part of the discussion.

5.2.2

HCTs should clarify that, where decisions are made by the HCT, they are voluntary commitments reflecting each agency's programme and objectives, not 'top down' impositions.

5.2.3

Regular meetings should be held between the HCT and ICC, and should include discussions on expectations and role clarity.

RECOMMENDATION SET 6
Improving information management

At the meeting, participants strongly supported the need for a change of mind-set regarding IM. Specifically, there were strong calls to:

- fit IM processes and products more closely to operational needs (21 votes)

- increase the user-led design of IM systems (11 votes)

The following specific recommendations and associated actions emerged during the meeting:

Recommendation 6.1

Increase the use of common definitions and indicators within humanitarian information management

6.1.1
An inter-organisational body at global level (such as Sphere or the Core Humanitarian Standard) should develop (voluntary) information and data standards, for instance around common definitions for terms like 'household' and 'child' vs. 'youth', building on existing work in this area.

6.1.2
Country Clusters and their members (supported by OCHA) should increase use of the Humanitarian Indicator Registry.

6.1.3
Country Clusters and their members should increase use of the humanitarian exchange language, HDX, to facilitate use of each other's information.

Recommendation 6.2

Fit information management processes and products more closely to operational needs

6.2.1
The Decision-Makers Needs Group should continue its work documenting the broad types of information needed for operational agencies to make operational decisions, and include within this which formats information is most usefully presented in.

6.2.2

The Global Clusters and OCHA should reconsider the information required to produce HPC products such as the HNO and SRP and identify the degree to which these needs can be met by aggregating operational information, rather than by collecting information specifically for the 'strategic' level.

6.2.3

OCHA (supported by the Global Clusters and operational organisations) should reflect on the operational utility of current HPC products and timeframes and adapt them to be more operationally useful – for example by reducing 'static' information products and aligning timelines to how data is used (in strategic and operational decisions).

6.2.4

All operational organisations should have dedicated IM specialists as part of their response.

6.2.5

Within INGOs and UN agencies at country level, managers and IM specialists should work together at or before the onset of a crisis, and over the course of the crisis, to identify data needs for their organisations, including priority needs.

6.2.6

IM specialists at country level (with the support of their agency headquarters) should, through the Clusters or ICC, share their own agency information needs and plans to collect data. Clusters/ICC should use this information to identify common operational IM needs.

6.2.7

HCTs, ICCs and Clusters should map IM requirements to better understand IM needs of donors (to justify funding), Clusters (to coordinate the response) and operational organisations (to programme).

6.2.8

Operational organisations should find ways to better use data in their operational work, and communicate any data needs to OCHA and the Clusters.

6.2.9

Donors should encourage greater use of data for operational decision-making, and greater operational relevance of IM and data products going forward.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE MEETING

The following recommendations were also made at the meeting but were not addressed in the same detail as the recommendations outlined above. They are, however, important elements in any process to improve the coordination system:

1. Reconsider the HPC to make it 'lighter', freeing up time and resource for more operational coordination.

2. Develop approaches to monitoring context and outcomes: ICC should collate monitoring data and have a continuously updated 'picture' of the response, showing what is working and what is not. This is fed to the HCT to help determine overall direction and priorities.

NEXT STEPS AND TAKE-UP

The country-level coordination system, by its nature, is jointly owned by a wide group of organisations. A large number of the recommendations above refer to OCHA: indeed, several of them build on activities OCHA is already conducting. However, there are also recommendations that require initiative to be taken by a number of other actors and groups, including the Global Clusters and CLAs, the donor community, specialist training and learning groups, NGOs and NGO networks and a number of initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Preparedness, the Information Managers Group, the Decision-Makers Needs Group, the Building a Better Response initiative and the HDX project. In some cases, and particularly those that relate to changes to formal guidance, the IASC may need to take action if the recommendations are to be addressed. And of course, many of the most important improvements will be made by HCTs and Clusters working in countries affected by crises.

The ALNAP Secretariat, which convened and hosted the meeting, will make these various stakeholders aware of these recommendations by disseminating this report and, where requested, briefing on the results of the meeting. In particular, the Secretariat will update OCHA and the Cluster/donor consultation group on the recommendations.

At the same time, we hope the participants at the meeting, who represent a cross-section of the stakeholders, will also consider how their organisations and networks can incorporate their recommendations into existing work plans, or possibly initiate new activities to address priority areas.

ALNAP

Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

T   + 44 (0)20 7922 0388
E   alnap@alnap.org
         @ALNAP

**www.alnap.org/what-we-do/
leadership-coordination**

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE