
Planning Matters: Coordination in Humanitarian Relief



By Iman Parsa and Luk Van Wassenhove , INSEAD

In disaster response, humanitarian operations take place under high levels of stress and time pressure. There is no room for bureaucracy and ambiguity.

More than 5.9 million people have been displaced due to the Turkey-Syria earthquakes – and while media attention of the disaster has dwindled, the humanitarian needs have not. Displaced people are waiting to return to their homes and need temporary housing or repairs to their damaged buildings and infrastructure. The mammoth recovery operation is in full swing, but will take years and require effective planning and execution.

In Turkey, to shelter people displaced by the earthquakes, over 300,000 tents were installed in temporary “tent cities” in hard-hit provinces. But even as the number of people in need of shelter grew, empty tents could be found in these tent cities. What had gone wrong?

With the increased frequency and intensity of both natural and man-made disasters, the need for humanitarian aid is increasing – and so are the challenges and resource limitations. Humanitarian relief operations are

often criticised, especially for their response to large-scale disasters such as the ongoing relief to the Turkey-Syria earthquakes.

The magnitude of such operations is beyond the capacity and capability of a single organisation or even a single country. In reality, response operations require the involvement of many actors including local governments, local and international humanitarian organisations, local communities and the private sector. Unless these actors work together and coordinate their operations, effective and efficient relief is impossible.

Why coordination matters

Coordination in the humanitarian operations context refers to working together despite different goals. This requires different approaches and considerations.

Information sharing is at the core of all forms of coordination. Scarce resources can be used more efficiently if all actors know who is doing what, where and when to avoid duplication of efforts. For example, following the 2004 tsunami, the World Health Organization sent measles vaccines to a village near Banda Aceh in Indonesia, only to find that an **unnamed organisation had already vaccinated some children** without leaving proper records.

Further, different actors have different levels of information about the needs, field conditions and available supplies. Consider an international organisation with no experience in a country providing relief where a severe disaster has covered many of the roads in debris. Without the information and knowledge of the local actors, it would be nearly impossible to distribute aid to people in need in a timely manner.

But there is more to coordination than mere information sharing. Information needs to be translated into actions, which often requires joint decision-making. This involves multiple actors making decisions together or communicating to ensure their efforts are aligned. These decisions may include procurement, inventory allocation, transportation and aid delivery to the affected population.

Finally, to make the best use of limited resources, actors can consider resource pooling or sharing. For example, organisations can share their inventory of relief supplies, aid vehicles and warehouses, or consolidate

supplies and jointly operate the distribution of aid. It is also possible for an agency to act as a service provider to another humanitarian organisation.

What makes coordination challenging?

Coordination between multiple parties is challenging in any setting, and more so in humanitarian relief after a large-scale disaster. Post-disaster operations involve the local government, military forces, United Nations (UN) agencies, international humanitarian organisations, local NGOs and private sector companies – each entity with its own views and priorities.

In the case of the Turkey-Syria earthquakes, having two governments involved and political tensions in the region do not make coordination any easier. In a complex landscape with many actors with different missions, capabilities, constraints, organisational structures and languages, it is difficult to share information, make joint decisions and work closely together.

Due to the urgent nature and time constraints of humanitarian aid, the diverse actors cannot afford to waste time in bureaucratic coordination processes. Because of the difficulty in establishing close relationships and effective coordination in a short period of time as the death toll increases, a coordinated response requires a well-designed mechanism and long-term planning prior to the disaster. Sadly, this is rarely the reality, as we saw in Turkey.

Moreover, stakeholders tend to have limited resources. Local actors and small NGOs play a key role in humanitarian response but often lack the resources needed for effective coordination. This may include technological resources, as well as human resources to collect and share information and attend coordination meetings. Further, where monetary resources and supplies are concerned, aid agencies rely mainly on donations. Close collaboration with other organisations becomes challenging when donors earmark their donations for specific purposes, which in effect restricts the use and sharing of these resources with other agencies.

Centralised vs. decentralised structures

In practice, coordination can take different structures and formats – generally categorised as centralised or decentralised. Usually, the government of the affected country takes the lead in bringing the actors together. Organisations such as the United Nations Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also contribute to efforts for coordinated response. In large-scale disasters, the **UN cluster mechanism**, which facilitates coordination between actors in different sectors of humanitarian action (e.g. water, shelter and logistics), may be activated as well.

In a centralised format, one actor exerts authority over the others, as Turkey's central government did in the recent earthquakes through its Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), a governmental agency under the Turkish Ministry of Interior. A centralised structure can have potential benefits including faster decision-making and resource pooling. For instance, a centralised information sharing platform allows all actors to access the necessary information for a better-coordinated response.

However, in **large-scale relief operations** with diverse actors involved or when local knowledge of the situation is critical, centralisation can in itself be an operational challenge. The tent city example in Turkey shows how a lack of local insights led to the inefficient use of resources in the form of empty tents. Many among the affected population were reluctant to move to the temporary tent cities simply because they could not leave their livestock and agricultural land behind, leading to the underutilisation of temporary shelter.

Ultimately, it is a question of what decisions to centralise and what to decentralise. Decentralised decision-making is helpful when quick reaction by actors familiar with the local situation is required. However, particularly in large disasters, centralised coordination is needed to allocate scarce resources more efficiently. The challenge is keeping centralised decision-making efficient – without the bureaucratic and political burdens – and how to connect centralised planning with local execution.

Plan ahead

Coordination is an important element for successful relief operations. However, the complex and urgent nature of disaster relief, along with resource constraints and bureaucracies in centralised systems, make it challenging. Efficient coordination mechanisms need to be designed well in advance in preparation for disaster response.

Emergency response plans should include an information sharing platform that can be activated immediately as the need arises. This requires the identification of key actors, including government agencies and local NGOs, even before disaster strikes. These actors need to actively communicate to agree on their level of involvement and how to coordinate under different scenarios. Specifically, they must be clear about what they are willing to share and how, who makes the decisions, what criteria to use and what is expected from the other partners, among other arrangements.

In an emergency response, under high levels of stress and time pressure, there is simply no time for bureaucracy and ambiguity. But even with advanced planning, uncertainty is inevitable, making it virtually impossible to execute a perfectly coordinated response. There are always lessons to be learnt and room for improvement. The [Humanitarian Research Group](#) at INSEAD contributes to enhancing coordination in humanitarian relief through research focused on dynamics and coordination models in the humanitarian operation context. When every minute counts, getting the formula right matters.

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About the author(s)

Iman Parsa is a postdoctoral researcher at the Humanitarian Research Group (HRG) at INSEAD. In his research, Iman studies non-profits and humanitarian organisations and their decisions and strategies in delivering sustainable services from the perspectives of financial security and operations in short- and long-term horizons.

Luk Van Wassenhove is an Emeritus Professor of Technology and Operations Management and the Henry Ford Chaired Professor of Manufacturing, Emeritus at INSEAD. He leads the [INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group](#) as the academic director.