

DRC Annual Humanitarian Coordination Report

February 2025

Summary

At a time when the humanitarian ‘system’ is under arguably unprecedented financial and political strain, effective and inclusive country-level coordination is more important than ever – not least with the arrival of a new Emergency Relief Coordinator who has commissioned his own review of the coordination architecture. For a third consecutive year, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) has conducted an internal study to ascertain our level of engagement in UN-led humanitarian coordination and to assess the key challenges, as well as look at examples of effective ways of working.

This year, the focus is on Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) and Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs). DRC’s country directors (CDs) provided insights on what is currently working in their contexts and what is not. A total of 23 CDs responded to a brief survey and more detailed information was provided through follow-up interviews with 12 CDs.

Their responses demonstrate a mixed picture and an extremely broad spectrum of experience when participating in UN-led coordination, highlighting the lack of consistently and systematically applied standards. While some HCTs and HCs demonstrate high levels of inclusivity and efficacy, others fall well below the standard the system expects and requires. The same can be said for INGO engagement in coordination, which has also been included in this report; in some contexts INGOs demonstrate a high level of commitment, participation and organisation among themselves, while in others INGOs are not well-organised, are therefore not presenting a united front and are not showing commitment to participating in coordination.

When DRC first conducted research on humanitarian coordination four years ago in 2021 – albeit with a broader overall focus including the cluster system – it was found that we were sitting on just under half of HCTs worldwide and that there were significant challenges with HCT functioning and HC leadership. Three years on, in 2024 when the latest survey was carried out, DRC had a seat on at least 14 HCTs globally, now just over half, and many of the challenges identified are the same, i.e. largely relating to a lack of inclusiveness of non-UN entities by HCs and HCTs. However, there are some positive examples of where DRC country directors feel that INGOs are being considered and treated as equal partners, and this tends to correlate with INGO perceptions of a more effective and better-coordinated response.

The aim of this report is to provide examples of best practice that could be replicated, as well as to highlight areas of particular concern, with recommendations on how to address the most pressing issues, including notably the establishment of an NGO-led coordination evaluation mechanism. It is important to note that this report is written from one international NGO (INGO)’s perspective, and is not representative of national NGOs’ experiences of coordination.¹

¹ For the national NGO perspective, see ICVA’s report *Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership*, October 2024: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/localisation-in-humanitarian-leadership-2/>.

Key findings

1. DRC continues to have a high level of presence in country-level inter-agency coordination, with seats on 14 Humanitarian Country Teams – just over half of HCTs globally – and 10 INGO Forum steering committees, 31 per cent of the total.
2. No CDs reported HCTs to be fully inclusive of INGOs and just 19 per cent rated overall humanitarian coordination as ‘fit for purpose’.
3. CDs’ experience of coordination varies hugely from one context to another, with some reporting high satisfaction levels, and some extremely low.
4. Just 14 per cent of CDs said the HCT was fully a strategic decision making body, while the remainder said it was either an information-sharing platform where decisions have been made behind closed doors (29 per cent) or a mixture of both (57 per cent).
5. INGOs are not always prioritising participation in coordination, or are participating only to the extent that it serves their individual organisations’ interests, as opposed to representing the INGO community.
6. The background and political ‘affiliation’ of the HC makes a big difference, especially those who are multi-hatted, i.e. serve as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and/or Resident Coordinator as well as HC. HCs with a largely development background are much less likely to prioritise humanitarian concerns and those with very close ties to the government are less likely to challenge authorities, leading to a less principled response with more unresolved access impediments.
7. Donor presence on HCTs is almost always advantageous for INGOs – they help to hold the UN accountable in contexts where NGO voices are not strong enough to challenge UN leadership. Further, when donors are present, a seat at the HCT can help position DRC strategically for funding.
8. For CDs, being actively engaged in coordination is often ‘almost a full-time job’ and the importance and value of this warrants internal recognition and dedicated resourcing.

Examples of best practice

The best examples of INGO inclusion in UN-led mechanisms are where there is demonstrated willingness from the HC to treat NGOs as equal partners. The following are a selection of best practices from DRC’s perspective that could be replicated in other contexts.

HCT co-chair

As an HCT member in one context DRC was appointed co-chair of the HCT, a position that has existed for three years but is not well documented and is not formalised through the HCT Terms of Reference. This position enabled DRC – as an INGO representative – to help shape the HCT agenda, and have authority in facilitating meetings, ensuring that NGOs’ concerns were accurately represented and giving a stronger voice to NGOs.

“I would absolutely recommend the co-chairing role, it’s critical, it gives a stronger voice for the NGOs and is not just about influence but helps ensure the response is effective and principled.”

Acting HC

In another context, the HC appointed an INGO CD as acting HC while they were on leave, while normal practice is for a UN head of agency to take on this role. This decision showed that the HC saw the INGO community as holding equal weight to UN agencies and is a good example of the right person being chosen irrespective of whether they work for a UN agency or NGO.

Regular meetings with HC

Where the HC is regularly meeting with INGO CDs there is the opportunity for NGOs to voice concerns in a private space. This is particularly valuable in contexts with very large HCTs where CDs do not feel able to raise sensitive issues. In several contexts CDs mentioned that there was frequent outreach from the HC’s office with invitations for meetings, both formal and informal, and these opportunities are very much appreciated by the NGO community.

“We have regular lunch or coffee with the HC, where we raise issues which can’t be raised in the HCT.”

“We can get collective NGO voice into the situation, s/he will be informed of our perspective for the HCT, and this will encourage broader participation of NGOs.”

Encouraged to participate

When NGOs are actively encouraged to speak up during HCTs (by HC and/or OCHA representative), this helps to balance the narrative.

Donors can be allies on HCTs

It is helpful to have donors on HCTs. It has been a consistent finding across the last three years of research DRC has conducted that donors are very often considered by CDs to be allies and help to make the HC and HCT ‘more accountable and more engaged’. According to OCHA, in 2023 donors were on 86 per cent of HCTs, with the United States, ECHO, and the United Kingdom filling 49 per cent of donor-held seats’.²

“My feeling is that donors should be part of the HCT [...] it shifts everything because they will ask hard questions regarding analysis, numbers, what the UN is getting from the government and how that is being coordinated.”

² The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2023: Overview of IASC Structures at the Country Level, December 2024: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2023>

“The head of ECHO will put pressure on the HC during HCT, but if there’s no one that has the confidence, no one will challenge the status quo.”

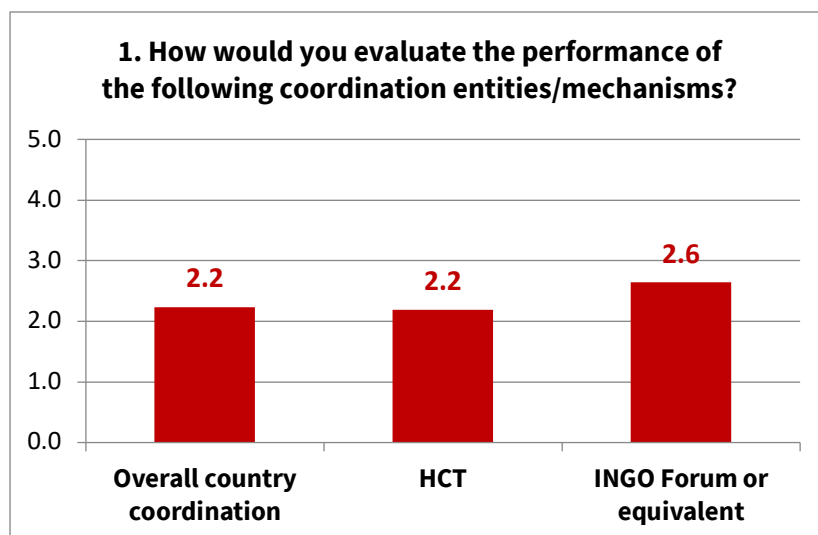
Heads of agencies must attend HCT

When UN agency heads are not regularly attending HCT even when they are in-country and are consistently delegating, this does not inspire confidence in other members. When the HC pushes heads of agencies to be present this demonstrates a commitment to ensuring a more strategic level of discussion.

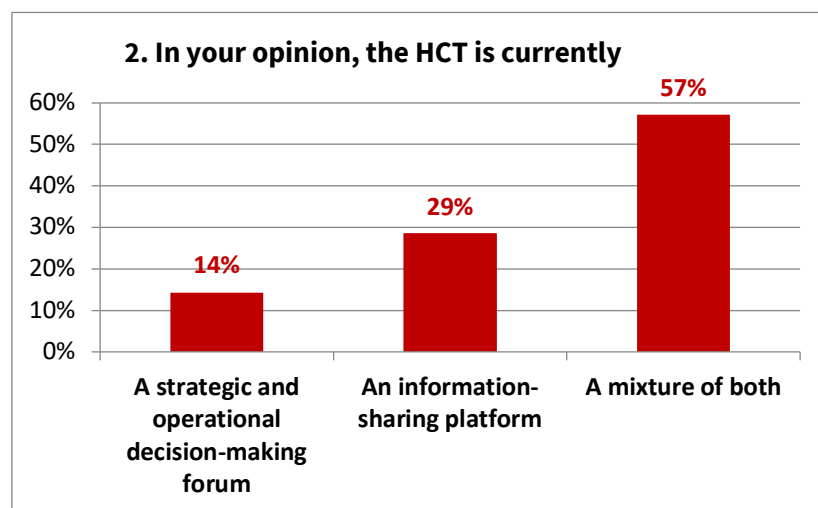
“Previously heads of agencies weren’t joining – the HC repeatedly called for this to be the case, evidence that he was trying to make the HCT a more effective space.”

Challenges

In DRC’s 2023 survey country directors were asked whether the coordination architecture in their context was ‘fit for purpose’ and asked to provide a rating rate from great, good, average, poor and very poor; 91 per cent of respondents answered between average and very poor. In 2024, a simple question was asked as to whether the coordination architecture was fit for purpose, with 81 per cent of responses saying no.



Broken down further, when asked to evaluate the performance of coordination mechanisms including overall country coordination, HCT and INGO forum, the latter was the only mechanism to score above average at 2.6 out of 5. Overall country coordination was rated 2.2 out of 5, with HCTs given the same overall rating, i.e. below average.



One of the main criticisms levelled at HCTs is the extent to which they are actually decision-making forums. A 2024 Peer-2-Peer analysis found that ‘humanitarian responses are undermined by limited HCT strategic direction and insufficient collective decision-making.’ When DRC CDs were asked about the extent to which the HCT is a truly decision-making forum, CDs in 14 per cent of contexts stated this was the case; in 2023 this figure was 13 per cent, so a minor increase. In 29

per cent of contexts the HCT is seen as an information sharing platform only, indicating that decisions have been made ‘behind closed doors’ often at the UN Country Team (UNCT), thereby excluding non-UN agencies. In over half of contexts – 57 per cent – the HCT is seen as a mixture of both (see above).

Listed below in more detail are some of the challenges perceived by DRC country directors.

HCT meetings are often not well managed

From exclusively UN-led agenda-setting to minutes that are not shared or do not accurately capture proceedings, there are a range of issues with core secretariat functions. A number of CDs stated that HCT meeting agendas are shared last minute with no opportunity to influence, and even if an agenda is shared a few days ahead there is often still not the chance to add or remove items. During the meetings agenda items can be pushed to the end under the AOB section or squeezed out entirely by the HC or person chairing the meeting. Meeting minutes and action points are not accurately captured and/or are not shared, which minimises the ability to use them as leverage in follow-up. Further, it was stated that UN agencies are dominating the HCT agenda and decision-making.

“They always put in more agenda items than can be discussed, the meetings are badly managed. If there’s a thorny subject the RC/HC says we’ll come back to it in AOB but they never do.”

“There are very rarely action points. No one follows up, people make suggestions for agenda items but they are ignored. Action points are never time-bound or minuted or documented.”

Size of the HCT

In most contexts the HCTs are too large, sometimes up to 60 people, whereas a maximum of 15 attendees has been suggested to be optimal.³ OCHA found that from 2019 to 2022 the average size of HCTs grew from 25 to 32.⁴ This negatively affects trust and the ability to have transparent and meaningful conversations which lead to strategic decision-making. The HCT Terms of Reference (ToR) state that ‘the size of the HCT should be limited to allow for effective decision-making’ but there is currently no means of measuring this, and as with many aspects of UN-led coordination there is a lack of consistency across contexts.⁵

“The HCT is too big, impacting the clarity and strategic direction; all the UN reps make it inefficient in terms of providing specific guidance.”

Lack of HC engagement with NGOs

As mentioned, in some contexts CDs reported that the HC is regularly convening meetings with INGO country directors or the INGO forum steering committee. However, in others these meetings are rare or non-existent.

“HCs haven’t had a proactive approach to outreach with NGOs, especially when they have little humanitarian understanding.”

³ ICVA, Cracks in Coordination 2024: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2024/09/Cracks-in-Coordination-Trust-and-Engagement-in-Humanitarian-Country-Teams.pdf>.

⁴ The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2023: Overview of IASC Structures at the Country Level, December 2024: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2023>

⁵ HCT Terms of Reference 2017: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2019-02/hct_tors.pdf.

“The previous HC had one meeting with INGOs in two years, the current HC held a meeting at the beginning and talked about a ‘continuous dialogue’ but we haven’t seen a follow up meeting in three months.”

The background of the HC

When HCs are too embedded in the regional political sphere it affects the extent to which they are willing to advocate to the authorities for a principled response and to overcome access impediments. This also affects their perceived neutrality and independence – key principles underpinning their leadership and humanitarianism more broadly.

“This does not help them to have sufficient distance from the government and be neutral and address humanitarian issues.”

Getting the INGO house in order

Although in some contexts INGO coordination is working smoothly and effectively, in others there is a lack of committed engagement for example to maximise the benefits of HCT membership. Effort put in by some CDs is not being matched by others, and the result can be a weak, disjointed and incoherent INGO voice which can ultimately affect the perception of UN and donors, weakening the position of INGOs. (Some) INGO CDs need a better understanding of the value of coordination and the importance of using a seat on the HCT to represent the whole INGO community as opposed to their own organisation, as per the HCT ToR – and HCT compacts where they exist – which states that HCT members must ‘make a commitment to contribute to the HCT as a collective, and to pursue collective outcomes.’⁶ While the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) provides training to INGO forum directors, it would be worthwhile expanding this to include individuals elected to represent INGOs at the HCT.

Some of the issues raised include:

- INGO coordination is weak and INGOs are not working well together to agree on points to raise at the HCT or as a collective with UN and donors in-country; this can cause reputational damage.
- Weak INGO coordination affects the extent to which INGO concerns are presented during HCT meetings – if there is no strong INGO voice the UN agencies lead and dominate the discussions.
- Occasionally, even when INGOs have seats on the HCT, they are not attending and not joining prep calls in advance, offering little value for the INGO community.
- It is said that some INGOs enjoy the ‘status’ or the ‘perks’ of being on the HCT but do not use the platform for the collective INGO community as intended.
- Organisations are applying and selected to be HCT members without necessarily having the capacity and the willingness to make the effort required to fully participate.
- HCT members are not systematically feeding back information to the INGO community, sometimes even using the information for their own gains.

⁶ HCT Terms of Reference 2017: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2019-02/hct_tors.pdf.

Accountability

When it comes to effecting change in contexts in which coordination is not working effectively – e.g. HCTs are considered not to be performing well, HCs are not seen to be advocating for humanitarian principles – the focus shifts to accountability mechanisms and the extent to which they are actually functioning. There are a number of accountability mechanisms and tools that exist, among them Peer-2-Peer Support Missions, Operational Peer Reviews and Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs). These are UN-led, albeit with inter-agency participation; the findings are often not shared transparently with all stakeholders as a matter of course; and follow-up is often not satisfactory. There can also be considerable delays in producing reports and developing follow-up action plans, which is not conducive to swift and decisive changes being made.

Two other accountability tools are the HCT ToR and the HCT compact. A number of CDs expressed doubt as to the effectiveness of these documents in reality, and a recent OCHA report shows that only 54 per cent of HCTs had compacts; this is concerning as HCT compacts are supposedly one of the key Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) tools for ensuring accountability among HCT members as well as between the HC and the Emergency Relief Coordinator.⁷

Recommendations

1. Training/sensitisation materials for incoming HCs on humanitarian coordination from an NGO perspective – including NGO-led coordination – should be developed in consultation with NGOs and rolled out as part of the HC onboarding process. The emphasis is very much on ensuring national NGOs are involved.
2. The 2017 HCT Terms of Reference should be updated to emphasise the importance of inclusion and participation of non-UN HCT members, as well as good meeting management. The updated ToR should be circulated and ‘socialised’ among HCT membership and beyond to ensure all members are aware of what they should expect and are able to hold UN leadership to account in the case that the ToR are not adhered to. Accountability and recourse to action should be included within the document.
3. HCT compacts should be developed and agreed on in all contexts with HCTs; if OCHA or the INGO forum identifies a context without an HCT compact, this should be raised in the Emergency Directors Group and ultimately addressed by the Emergency Relief Coordinator.
4. Good practice regarding HC leadership and HCT performance should be systematically and transparently documented by OCHA in consultation with all HCT members. Examples of best practice should be centrally held by OCHA and a regular exercise undertaken to determine where and how these can be replicated where possible, in consultation with NGOs.
5. An independent NGO-led HCT evaluation should be conducted separately to existing UN-led mechanisms such as Peer-2-Peer Support Missions, Operational Peer Reviews and Inter-Agency

⁷ The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2023: Overview of IASC Structures at the Country Level, December 2024: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2023>

Humanitarian Evaluations. In addition, findings from these missions, reviews and evaluations and subsequent follow-up and action plans should be shared more widely and more transparently among all stakeholders, both at global and country level.

6. Real-time independent monitoring of HC and HCT performance should become standardised and an independent oversight body should be established. [See here](#) for the World Health Organization model.
7. In contexts where the HC is deemed to be too politically affiliated, to the extent that they are compromising the principled nature of the response, a Deputy HC with operational NGO experience should be appointed.
8. Training on humanitarian coordination regarding participation and expected behaviours should be offered by ICVA to individuals elected to represent INGOs at the HCT. This should include a focus on the value of participation for the INGO community, the impact of failing to do so effectively as well as responsibilities and associated behaviours.



Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in close to 40 countries and employs 7,500 staff globally.

DRC advocates for the rights of and solutions for displacement-affected communities, and provides assistance during all stages of displacement: In acute crisis, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. DRC supports displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies. DRC works with civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and inclusion.

Our 6,200 volunteers in Denmark make an invaluable difference in integration activities throughout the country.

DRC's code of conduct sits at the core of our organizational mission, and DRC aims at the highest ethical and professional standards. DRC has been certified as meeting the highest quality standards according to the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

HRH Crown Princess Mary is DRC's patron.

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