Exploring Barriers to Coordination between Humanitarian NGOs: A Comparative Case Study of Two NGO’s Information Technology Coordination Bodies

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are increasingly collaborating through inter-organizational structures such as coalitions, alliances, partnerships, and coordination bodies. NGO’s information technology coordination bodies are groups of NGOs aimed at improving the efficiency of ICT use in humanitarian assistance through greater coordination. Despite their popularity, little is known about these coordination bodies, specifically the extent to which they address inter-organizational coordination problems. This paper examines coordination problems within two humanitarian NGO’s information technology coordination bodies. Based on data collected through interviews, observation, and document analysis, despite positive attitudes toward coordination by members, seven of eight widely accepted barriers to coordination still exist among members of these coordination bodies. Further, in a comparison of mandate-oriented, structural and behavioral coordination barriers, research finds mandate issues were most significant and structural factors were found in the greatest numbers. Findings suggest that effective humanitarian NGO’s information technology coordination bodies must pay attention to both organizational design and management issues, although the former are likely to have a greater impact on coordination.

Keywords: Competition for Resources, Coordination Barriers, Humanitarian NGO’s, Information Technology, NGO’s Coordination Body

DOI: 10.4018/jissc.2011040101
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as the number of man-made and natural disasters has risen, so has the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in international humanitarian relief and development (UNDP, 2002). This growth has in part contributed to their increasing importance in the humanitarian field but at the same time has increased the range of challenges they face. One of these challenges is inter-organizational coordination around information technology (Saab et al., 2008).

In an attempt to mitigate this challenge, humanitarian NGOs are forming structures such as coalitions, alliances, partnerships, and coordination bodies (Guo & Acar, 2005; Zhao et al., 2008). NGOs’ coordination bodies are groups of NGOs brought together with the purpose to improve coordination of their activities. Coordination efforts among NGOs members of a coordination body are thought to function as a solution to the duplication of efforts, poor planning and implementation of relief efforts, and a lack of knowledge among humanitarian organizations on the developing situation. This NGOs’ coordination entails developing strategies, determining objectives, planning, sharing information, dividing roles and responsibilities, and mobilizing resources. Coordination among NGOs is also concerned with synchronizing the mandates, roles and activities of the stakeholders and actors at higher organizational levels. NGOs coordination ensures that priorities are clearly defined, resources are efficiently utilized and duplication of effort minimized in order to provide coherent, effective and timely assistance to those in need (Harpviken et al., 2001).

The issues involved in forming and maintaining these entities, as well as inter-organizational relationships more broadly, have been the subject of some studies (Bennett, 1995; Donini, 1996; Harpviken et al., 2001). These studies find that while coordination bodies share a limited number of common traits, they vary in several dimensions. Common features include (1) independence from government; (2) existence of a semi-permanent secretariat; and (3) a variety of participants sharing common ideology (Bennett, 1994).

Within the frame of these common elements, coordination bodies have been found to vary in their structure, size, formality and duration. Structural variations are observed in their variety of missions, organizational forms, and decision making processes. Size variations are reflected in coordination bodies that attempt to coordinate intensely among a small subset of NGOs, or target larger memberships and less complex interactions. Variation in the level of formality and authority depends on who has taken the initiative to set up the coordination entity, and which agencies are involved (Harpviken et al., 2001). Moreover, coordination bodies may be temporary initiatives, ongoing inter-agency bodies or permanent incorporated nonprofit organizations (Zhao et al., 2008).

A number of coordination bodies focus exclusively on information technology and management (IT/IM) related issues. We refer to them in this paper as information technology coordination bodies. These coordination bodies aim at reducing redundancies and pooling limited IT resources, while at the same time promoting inter-organizational information sharing to improve humanitarian relief and disaster response. They help to ensure that organizations that are members have access to the best information and communication technology and practices when assisting during or after disasters. The two cases investigated in this paper are examples of such coordination bodies. HumaniNet is a salient example of an information technology coordination body. HumaniNet consists of over a hundred organizations. HumaniNet provides its members with practical assistance in global information and communication technologies, especially in remote areas.

Despite their popularity, the existing scholarship on humanitarian NGOs has yet to investigate the impact of humanitarian NGO’s information technology coordination bodies. The literature is especially silent on the extent to which obstacles obstruct an effective inter-organizational information technology coordination under the umbrella of a coordi-
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