



# **STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: A Review Of NGO Coordination in the Field**

## **Case Study: Pakistan 2002-2010**

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### **Background Note**

During the 1990s ICVA supported NGO coordination in the field in various ways and published two resource books: “Meeting needs: NGO Coordination in Practice” and “NGO Coordination at Field Level: A Handbook”. Commissioned by ICVA in 2010, this review builds on that earlier work, comprising three parts: an Overview Report introducing some key issues in NGO coordination; a series of Case Studies providing insight into how NGOs respond to those issues in the field; and a Lessons Learned bringing together critical points identified in the Case Studies.

These Case Studies include responses to both natural disasters and complex political emergencies from a range of countries around the world. The studies are specifically concerned with formal coordination bodies convened by international NGOs, although some of them include or support national NGOs. While every effort has been made to present an accurate picture of each response, gaps in the record and errors in recollection are inevitable. However any errors in the studies are the responsibility of the consultants and ICVA, and corrections and updates are welcome.

## **Background: From Earthquake to Flood**

During the 2002 earthquake in Pakistan, an informal international NGO (INGO) network called the Northern Areas Earthquake Relief Operation (NAERO) was formed in order to coordinate emergency response and rehabilitation activities. In June 2003 a two-day workshop in Islamabad discussed the potential for forming an informal coordination body at the national level, and the Pakistan Humanitarian Forum (PHF) was founded by Islamic Relief (UK), Oxfam GB, Church World Service (CWS), Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children (UK, USA, Sweden), Concern, Plan International, Mercy Corps International, and Relief International.

While the stated objectives of the PHF were to enhance coordination with government and UN agencies, monitor the humanitarian situation and influence policy and practice, a key driver was a commitment to reduce the number of agency assessments. With only a small number of members initially and no national-level disasters in 2003-4, their collective activities were relatively low-key, with only one meeting in the first year. Then came the October 2005 earthquake, a far greater disaster than the 2002 event that had brought them together initially.

The 2005 earthquake was the first deployment of the UN Cluster approach to coordination, and the number of coordination meetings multiplied beyond the capacity of most NGOs to attend. Chaired by Church World Service, the PHF held meetings every day, and became the first port of call for NGOs arriving in country. Existing relationships between PHF members gave them an advantage over UN agencies and national NGOs, enabling them to coordinate their membership in assessing the affected areas. It is worth noting that the cluster system appeared to fail to notice this existing investment, and that the real time evaluation of the cluster approach did not even mention the PHF.

Nearly all the INGOs working in Pakistan had attended PHF meetings during the earthquake response itself, and the PHF came out of the earthquake response with nearly 20 members. A number of INGOs, notably MSF, did not join the PHF, with two possible reasons cited by respondents. First, there were concerns that participation in a coordination body might decrease operational independence; and second, some INGOs felt that the PHF was dominated by anglophone NGOs. However by September 2010 every major INGO had become a PHF member.

PHF activities were not sustained effectively in the ensuing years – partly due to the lack of pressure as programmes returned to normal levels, partly due to high staff turnover which made it difficult to create consistency, and partly due to leadership problems caused by the PHF's lack of formal organisation. Country directors gradually stopped attending meetings, sending lower-level staff without the authority to speak on behalf of their organisations and, as a result, the Forum was nearly dormant until the 2008 civil unrest that created a large-scale IDP crisis within the country.

The political, financial and security environment following the 2008-2010 emergencies raised the profile of the PHF and made collective action more appealing to INGOs. It became clear that the PHF was necessary to represent INGO interests at the national level, which led to an increase in membership to around 40 members currently. Responding to these developments, PHF leadership re-focused the PHF mission to include recovery and sustainable development issues, and propelled it towards creating a separate Secretariat and the Paksafe security office.

## **Securing the PHF Foundations**

Since it had started out relatively limited in size and scope, the PHF did not have any formally agreed documentation such as basic terms of reference (TORs) to guide its members. The lack of activity in 2006-2007 (accompanied by a loss of interest in the PHF) followed by two major emergencies in 2008-2010 (accompanied by a growth in membership and activities) showed how much of a problem this could be in terms of ensuring the PHF continued to function as a representative body.

The PHF operated without an Executive Committee (ExCom) for most of this time, which was one reason why the workload was so high for the Chair. In 2008 this gap was addressed informally by World Vision as Chair, who asked for volunteers to attend key meetings and report back. A system was set up to ensure a single representative would consistently attend specific meetings, with two back-up representatives in case of problems. Representatives would take their own minutes, which were then typed up by an IRC secretary and e-mailed to the entire membership.

In 2009 the incoming Oxfam Chair convened a working group to review TORs which had been drafted in 2008 but never approved. The TORs were approved, laying out the PHF's core components of General Forum, ExCom, and Administrative and Coordination Unit, and elections were held for the first time. Basic procedural requirements were also clarified, such as deciding that a majority vote by a quorum was the basis of decision-making. It was also established that Country Directors should represent their organisations at PHF meetings and the PHF at external meetings.

Thematic working groups of two types also operate under the PHF auspices: ad hoc Task Forces (dealing with short term issues) and permanent Working Groups (dealing with more strategic issues). At present there are three of the latter groups, dealing with security (lead by IRC), advocacy (lead by Oxfam GB) and general coordination. These can be difficult to manage, especially when domination of a Working Group by the agency with most resources (such as Oxfam, who always have a strong advocacy staff, and so can provide additional resources to the group) may not sit comfortably with members who do not share that group's approach.

In order to become a PHF member, potential members must submit documentation demonstrating that they meet the membership criteria laid out in the PHF Terms of reference. Their application is circulated to the membership, discussed in a PHF meeting and then decided based on a majority vote. A membership fee has been applied to members since the PHF was founded, although it was set at a relatively low level of US\$500 initially. The fee was intended to cover minor costs that might be incurred (such as publications) and was not enough to pay for full administrative services.

Members did not see the value in a higher membership fee, and some felt it would make the PHF a club for larger agencies with more funding. However it became clear that support requirements were increasing and donors for the Secretariat and Paksafe office expressed their interest that the members should demonstrate their commitment to the PHF, and the fee was increased to \$1500 at the September 2010 AGM. Members that do not pay are threatened with a public announcement in the PHF general meeting and even risk being expelled from the Forum. This has so far been avoided, and members generally recognise the value of establishing a Secretariat.

More informal accountability is also part of the PHF structure – or rather, the relationships supported by that structure. Membership of the PHF means that CDs know each other on a first name basis, a social network that makes it more difficult for them to act inappropriately – for example, the sort of overt poaching of staff from other agencies that happened during the 2005 earthquake response has not been seen in the 2010 flood response. There is also anecdotal evidence that territorialism between NGOs, or larger NGOs muscling out smaller NGOs, has decreased since the PHF began operating (although this might be because the 2010 flood emergency was so vast).

While it is generally accepted by external stakeholders that the PHF represents international NGOs (at least those involved in relief rather than development work), it does not have any national NGO members. The PHF was committed to working with local civil society organisations from the start – the TORs state that national NGO networks may join as affiliate members – this has proven hard to achieve in practice. Although individual INGOs have partnership arrangements with individual national NGOs, the national NGOs do not themselves have a representative body like the PHF.

While many national NGOs are valuable implementation partners, and there are a number of dynamic local NGO leaders, they are not especially good at organising amongst themselves, particularly in the highly politicised environment. There have been several attempts by national NGOs to form such a body, but none have been completely successful; at the time of writing a National Humanitarian Network had been formed as the latest such effort. This lack of overall leadership makes it difficult for the PHF to engage, and the fragmented nature of the national NGO sector makes coordination overall more difficult.

PHF members have also organised workshops on key issues for INGOs, including one on advocacy in 2006 and one on Emergency Planning and Preparedness in 2007. In 2010 a workshop on partnership with national NGOs was held, with 10 organisations mapping out who is doing which activities with partners and working to build up a national NGO coordination structure from the district level up.

## **A House of Relationships**

Despite poor performance initially, the UN continued to invest in the clusters. As a body, the PHF represented members in the inter-cluster coordination meetings, while individual PHF members attended the cluster meetings relevant to them, and reported back to the membership on the cluster meetings they attended. During the IDP crisis, however, PHF members had expressed their dissatisfaction with the performance of the clusters and lobbied for NGO co-leads to be assigned.

A delegation representing the global clusters visited in mid-April 2010, and one of the key points was the need to assign dedicated cluster coordinators. Internal PHF discussions amongst the ExCom members identified 5 key clusters where NGOs had the capacity and willingness to act as co-leads (Save the Children was already co-lead for the Education cluster), and the support of OCHA was engaged in taking this proposal to the UN Humanitarian Coordinator.

These discussions were overtaken by the 2010 floods, when it became clear once again that the clusters were not performing well, but opposition from within the UN agencies prevented these discussions from moving forward. However the flood response stretched UN capacity as well, and at least two UN agencies solicited additional support from their INGO counterparts. The PHF ExCom therefore decided that, in addition to individual members attending, an ExCom member will represent the PHF at every cluster meeting, although how much impact this will have is to be seen.

Relations with the UN are more constructive in other areas, partly due to positive relations with OCHA, who recognise the added value of NGO engagement. The Chair and other ExCom members (including former ExCom members who can provide institutional memory) represent the PHF with four seats on the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), and issues that are raised on the HCT can be brought back to the membership. The PHF was also involved in setting up the OCHA-managed Emergency Response Fund (ERF), with two PHF members sitting on the ERF Review Board on a six-month rotation. It is worth noting that no national NGOs have taken up their assigned space on the HCT, although they have on the ERF; the PHF is also searching for a national NGO representative for the committee, unsuccessfully at the time of writing.

There are fewer links between the PHF and the Government of Pakistan, although the PHF Chair is invited to the monthly Policy and Strategy meeting convened by the government in Peshawar, as well as other high-level meetings. However because individual NGO relationships with the government via an MoU system are purely administrative, rather than dealing with policy, there is limited opportunity for engagement. However many of the issues faced by PHF members (and other NGOs) – such as civil-military relations and maintaining humanitarian space – require discussions with government.

A large part of the appeal of the PHF is the opportunities it offers to build a network quickly: the greater the level of involvement (from General Forum to Working Groups to ExCom to Chair), the greater the opportunities to make contact with higher-level decision-makers. In addition to providing contacts, the advantages of normal membership are clearly articulated: it gives NGOs a collective voice, a forum for discussing issues (and venting frustration), a channel for information sharing and a network for peer support.

The PHF is seen as a neutral forum through which UN agencies, government departments and donor offices can address the NGO community. It is also seen as one of the few sources of reliable information from the field: due to security constraints, UN agencies and institutional donors have very limited opportunity to travel to the field themselves, making the PHF one of the few venues where they can gather information efficiently. Increased contact between the PHF and the donors in turn leads to increased scope to influence donor policy constructively.

### SECRETARIAT AND PAKSAFE

Five different agencies have chaired the PHF during its seven-year history: Islamic Relief, CWS, WorldVision, IRC and Oxfam. The absence of an Executive Committee for much of this period meant that it was frequently the Chair (usually supported by the Deputy Chair and former Chair) who had to provide much of the support required. Since this meant tasking staff from within the Chair's organisation as necessary – for example, an IRC staff secretary would give 50% of his or her time to PHF activity – it meant that it was almost impossible for a small agency to fill the position.

The need for a Secretariat had been discussed by members as early as 2005 and discussed with ECHO since 2007. It was clear that a Secretariat function would release ExCom members (and particularly the Chair) from what was essentially a second part-time job. Unattached to any single PHF member, Secretariat staff would avoid the danger of misrepresentation in external meetings, while raising the profile of the organisation. This was also potentially an argument against a Secretariat – if Secretariat staff attended meetings, this might lead to less engagement by PHF members and therefore less effective advocacy.

As Pakistan underwent successive emergencies, the PHF grew in size (towards its present membership of around 40 INGOs) and scope, and the workload of the Chair and the newly-created ExCom became too onerous, particularly in terms of representation. ExCom members increasingly found that their PHF duties were at the expense of their responsibilities towards their own organisations; smaller NGOs felt excluded due to their lack of capacity to take on decision-making positions within the PHF. It was therefore decided to seek funding for a Secretariat office that could take on some of the workload, including policy work.

The IDP crisis had also raised concerns about growing insecurity, and a Pakistan Security Forum had been meeting on an open door basis, attended by private companies as well as international and national NGOs. Feeling that this was too open, a PHF Working Group on Security comprised of INGO security officers began to meet separately. Their view was that INGOs had specific security and political issues that national NGOs did not; for example, INGOs were subject to demands by the government that they accept police escorts, despite the fact that the police were greater targets for terrorist attacks than the INGOs they would be accompanying.

Encouraged by visits from representatives of InterAction (the alliance of US-based international NGOs, which also hosts a Security Advisory Group), a needs assessment was carried out in October 2009, a decision to set up a separate NGO security resource made by early 2010, and a proposal approved by the Security Working Group was sent to donors that June. A consultant – previously involved in setting up the Afghanistan National Security Office – visited Pakistan in September 2010 to begin implementation of Paksafe. The project is intended to provide advisory services to INGOs, monitoring NGO security concerns and providing trend and risk analysis. While even a purely advisory role carries some liability risks, many NGOs cannot afford a separate security officer position. While it is PHF members who will benefit primarily from Paksafe, there will be links with the existing security forum and UNDSS.

In the same period a proposal for the Secretariat was developed, with job descriptions for Coordinator and Advocacy Coordinator posts adapted from those used by the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq. The proposal was agreed by the ExCom and then the General Forum, and the budget signed off by the ExCom; as PHF Chair when the proposals were approved, IRC agreed to handle contracting and recruitment. Funding for the Secretariat would come from OFDA, DfID and ECHO for the first year, while ECHO would underwrite the Paksafe proposal, but the funding application was delayed by operational demands during the 2008-2009 IDP crisis.

The ExCom was supposed to change over in September 2010, but a motion was approved by the membership to extend the current ExCom until December 2010 to provide continuity. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) was elected as Chair at that meeting and assumed the Chair in January 2011.

## Critical Factors

- Maintaining PHF activity from 2006-2008 proved to be difficult, although this was a natural result of the absence of major emergencies, which reduced the incentive to coordinate. It is clear that the PHF has waxed and waned with successive emergencies in Pakistan, each emergency posing new challenges and presenting new opportunities. This raises questions about whether it is possible to maintain the PHF in the absence of external pressures, and in particular how to future-proof the PHF to ensure good performance in future emergencies.
- Reviving the PHF from 2008-2010 was a question of personality and organisation, with the essential component being a strong Chair.
  - It was important for the Chair to be drawn from one of the larger NGOs to demonstrate that the PHF was a serious representative body, but it was equally important that the PHF not be identified too closely with a single NGO.
  - The Chair set the tone for the entire PHF internally and externally, as well as providing administrative support. Given the heavy workload dealt with by the Chair, this required commitment, selflessness and transparency, combined with an ability to take decisions and bring colleagues along.
  - Diplomatic skills were essential not just for external representation, but also to be able to address individual NGOs in terms that they would respond to, particularly in cases when agency opinions differ within the membership.
  - Being able to tap into existing networks and build new ones was also a vital skill in order to influence the wider humanitarian system. One of the ways in which the PHF maintained these networks was by establishing that former Chairs would automatically remain on the ExCom so that the current Chair had access to their experience.
- While the PHF benefited from several Chairs who were able to meet these requirements, the lack of formal structures to guide the members was a major weakness. Clear TORs proved to be essential to provide a solid framework for internal discussions and external representation, and the PHF would have been more productive if such TORs had been put in place earlier in its development.
- The PHF discovered a Catch-22 when looking for funding to provide additional support. Donor support is easier to get if a coordination body has a track record to demonstrate that the members are committed to the process and the body is worth investing in. However it is difficult to sustain an increasing level of collective action over a period of years without having some sort of support; for the PHF, that support came from the larger NGO members.
- To create a genuinely collective body, members needed to feel ownership. Two means of achieving this were participation in democratic decision-making processes, and solution-oriented small groups. While requiring paid subscriptions provides some indication of the level of members' engagement, a more nuanced measure was regular attendance at meetings and active participation in working groups.

- One of the concerns expressed around the Secretariat was that if it was too dynamic and successful, it might – paradoxically – take away responsibility from members, making them less engaged. Instead the Secretariat is intended to improve information flows between PHF members, and between PHF members and external stakeholders.
- One of the ways in which the ExCom made the PHF engaging for members was by ensuring that lines of communication were always open. In practical terms this meant that information was shared consistently and frequently through regular emails (including meeting agendas and minutes), but the fact that all members received the same information also helped to maintain a sense of equality.

### Sources

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