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# The Coordination of Humanitarian Action: the case of Sri Lanka

by Koenraad Van Brabant

## Abstract

This case study concerns humanitarian field coordination efforts during Eelam War 3 in Sri Lanka, between 1994 and 1996. The war and the coordination efforts continue.

Most documented experiences of the coordination of humanitarian action relate to situations in which government was weakened, collapsed or not in control of significant parts of its territory. Sri Lanka provides an example of a government that has asserted its sovereignty and that simultaneously pursues political, military and humanitarian objectives. The government's continued responsibility for the protection of and provision for its citizens is briefly examined in the light of its role in conflict. An overview of the challenges for humanitarian action and capacity to respond leads to a discussion of the restriction of 'humanitarian space' by the army. Throughout the period in question, humanitarian agencies not only needed to coordinate for programme effectiveness, but also to advocate for humanitarian space and access.

Following a review of the coordination mechanisms in place at the outbreak of war, the different initiatives used to strengthen it during the war are examined. Special attention is paid to the review of the NGO Consortium on Relief and Rehabilitation and the Interagency Emergency Group. For organisational, but also for political reasons, both functioned simultaneously and in parallel.

The absence of professional knowledge regarding coordination, and the occasional shortage of technical and methodological expertise, added to the usual resistance to coordination, made it a difficult exercise. Contextual constraints, such as the outbreak of the war coinciding with an effort to rethink coordination, and the complex and sensitive politics around humanitarian assistance also played their role. The most important obstacle to effective coordination remained however, the absence of an effective institutional link to coordinate the humanitarian efforts of both the government and those of specialised agencies.

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#### **Notes on the Author**

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**This paper is dedicated to all the people  
in Sri Lanka who, in ways great and small,  
work for tolerance and peace.**

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## Theme and structure of the paper

This case study concerns field coordination efforts during the outbreak of Eelam War 3 in Sri Lanka between 1994–1996. In addition to considering some of the general obstacles to effective coordination, its specific interest lies in the description of the difficulties of coordinating the humanitarian effort within the context of a strong government waging a war. Together with the war, the coordination efforts continue to date.

A useful place to begin is by considering what coordination consists of, and then examining various NGO, UN and governmental experiences of coordination. The paper then presents the Government of Sri Lanka's claim to authority in light of its past and current role in the conflicts that have torn this island. An overview of the challenges for humanitarian action and response capabilities leads directly to the issue of just how much humanitarian space was allowed for agencies to operate in. Next, coordination mechanisms in place at the outbreak of war are reviewed, followed by the different initiatives to strengthen it during wartime. This raises the question of their effectiveness and of structural and contextual constraints to coordination. <sup>1</sup>

# Chronology of Events

- 1971 First JVP led youth insurgency in the south
- 1975 Emergence of Tamil militant groups
- 1976 Tamil United Liberation Front demands separate state
- 1983 Island-wide bloody riots against Tamils, start 'Eelam War 1'
- 1987 Indian intervention, Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord  
First national rehabilitation and reconstruction plan  
Indian-Peace Keeping Force fights with LTTE until 1990  
Second JVP-led youth insurgency in the south until 1990
- 1990 Start Eelam War 2; expulsion of Muslims from the north
- August 1994 People's Alliance wins elections and begin peace moves  
Preparatory study on national rehabilitation and reconstruction
- January 1995 Presidential Task Force for the north established
- April 1995 LTTE break off talks and starts Eelam War 3  
Army abandons territory in the east  
Pilot resettlement scheme for IDPs in the east suspended  
Start Review Committee of NGO Consortium
- July 1995 Government moves the theatre of war from the east to Jaffna peninsula
- October 1995 Army offensive that leads to capture of Jaffna in December  
Population flees Jaffna city  
UN proposes Multilateral Emergency Task Force/Forum  
Start Interagency Emergency Group
- November 1995 GoSL reaffirms its sovereignty and capacity to the UN  
Appointment Focal Point for relief to the north  
Media campaign against NGOs
- January 1996 Second draft proposal regarding Consortium on Humanitarian Aid
- April 1996 Army captures Jaffna peninsula  
Resettlement and Reconstruction Authority for the North created  
Appointment Focal Point for relief to cleared areas in the north
- June 1996 Evacuation of population and aid agencies from Kilinochchi in Vanni  
NGO Consortium formally disbanded
- Autumn 1996 Army occupies Kilinochchi  
New NGO Consortium on Humanitarian Aid inaugurated

# 1

## The Coordination of Humanitarian Action

### What is field coordination?

**H**umanitarian action needs to be coordinated to achieve any overall programme effectiveness.

Operational coordination is required to achieve the best resource allocation in terms of needs and priorities, but resource allocation must also be coordinated in terms of coverage: duplication must be avoided but it is also important to avoid omissions in sectors of work or in target groups that require help. Secondly, coordination is required when dealing with the standards and protocols of implementation.

But joint, and therefore coordinated action in a situation of active conflict may also be required to negotiate humanitarian space. Humanitarian space refers in the first instance to the basic rights of victims of conflict — at a bare minimum these rights include protection and material assistance. Humanitarian space also refers to the right of access for impartial agencies to provide humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian space is not always guaranteed: belligerent parties may restrict it, or it can be limited by threats to security. Where parties to a conflict restrict this space, joint action may be required to assert humanitarian concerns and principles in the face of more dominant political or military concerns. Coordinated advocacy for humanitarian principles and negotiation for space involves humanitarian agencies in ‘political’ questions.

Coordination is a notoriously difficult aspect of humanitarian action. There is a saying that everyone wants coordination but no one wants to be coordinated. The obligation to coordinate with other humanitarian actors is not normally an explicit agency policy and it is also unclear which mechanisms work best and why, and in what context. However, there is a growing pool of experience available for comparative review (for example, Bennett 1994b; Borton 1996; Donini 1996; Lanzer 1996; Whitman & Pocock 1996) to which this case study would like to add.

### NGO and UN coordination

#### *NGO coordination*

NGOs have been criticised for their competitiveness and poor coordination (Bennett 1994a: 2). NGOs have shown that they can cooperate and take a lead in contexts where governments and the UN cannot or do not want to. The Joint Church Action during the Biafra war, the Emergency Relief Desk during the Ethiopian civil war and the Oxfam–NGO consortium for an internationally isolated Cambodia, are examples of a large-scale operation, combined with international advocacy. The nature of NGO coordination tends to change when a formal authority emerges, sometimes government, sometimes the UN, in the absence of an effective government. NGOs need a collective voice to participate in national policy debates and national aid planning to ensure recognition of their role in civil society and raise issues of specific concern to them.

### ***UN coordination***

The over-arching coordinating framework for the UN's overall involvement in a given country typically rests with the UNDP, whose head represents the UN to the national government. In humanitarian crises, the UN continues to search for a satisfactory institutional framework for coordination. There have been experiments with a lead agency model, for example using UNICEF in south Sudan, UNHCR during wars in the former Yugoslavia and with situation-specific operations such as the UN Border Relief Operation (1982–1991) for Cambodian refugees in Thailand, or the UN Office for Emergency Operations (1984–1987) for the famine response in Ethiopia. The creation in 1988 of a UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes to Afghanistan (UNOCA) with a specially appointed coordinator for the overall UN efforts country-wide was therefore an innovative approach. In 1993 however UNDP in Afghanistan took back the responsibility for rehabilitation and economic and development assistance, leaving UNOCA with a reduced mandate of relief only (Donini et al. 1996).

Dissatisfaction with perceived weaknesses in the UN's capacity to mobilise a coordinated emergency response during the Gulf war (Minear et al. 1992) led in 1991 to the creation of a standing UN department for coordination: the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA). It could be argued that in many ways the DHA was set up to fail (Dedring 1996). In some cases, such as Liberia and Mozambique, there has been tension between the DHA and the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, whose main mission is to seek political solutions to a conflict, and notably UNDP and UNHCR over operational coordination. Following the establishment of the DHA, in a major crisis the UN can appoint a humanitarian coordinator at country level. In principle answerable to the DHA, this role has often been filled by the UNDP's resident representative. His or her need to express concern for an adequate humanitarian response does not always fit easily with the diplomatic representation of the UN to a national government, as the events in Sudan (Karim et al. 1996: 270–73) and Sri Lanka show.

### **Coordination by government**

We see NGOs and the UN take a lead role in the coordination of humanitarian action where a government is weak or collapsed, or where it is seen

as unwilling to take full responsibility for the protection and provision of all its citizens because it is itself party to a civil war. In principle however, national governments are responsible for the coordination of humanitarian action.

The challenge for government becomes harder as the number of international agencies increases, and if it has no plan for humanitarian aid or no formal coordinating body. Often specialised ministries or administrations are created for refugee affairs, relief and rehabilitation or humanitarian assistance in general. Helpful as this is, it brings with it additional internal coordination problems at the interface of such specialised administration and the normal line ministries.

Governmental coordination becomes sensitive and contentious where government is strong and invokes national security concerns. This can be over the presence of refugees in a context of regional tension, or where the government itself is a party to a conflict. In such cases a Ministry of the Interior, as in Guatemala, or a Ministry of Defence, as in Thailand and Sri Lanka, becomes the *de facto* 'lead agency'; coordination can then seem more like control. The question of effective operational coordination becomes linked to that of humanitarian space, with agencies demanding more than the government is willing to allow. For international humanitarian agencies, this argument quickly becomes one of sovereignty. In such negotiation or argument over humanitarian space, the UN usually finds itself in a different position from that of NGOs. The UN has a recognised humanitarian mandate but is an institution made up of member states; while NGOs have a self-appointed mandate that may be morally recognised but have no international legal status. This combination gives them a strong position in the argument over humanitarian space but also leaves them more vulnerable to an angry reaction from the government.

A special feature of Sri Lanka is that a belligerent government provides a degree of humanitarian assistance also in opposition controlled areas. The government's claim to authority in matters related to humanitarian assistance is derived from the assertion that it continues to protect and provide for all citizens in its national territory. The following section examines this assertion in the light of the government's role in the conflict and its control over humanitarian space.

# 2

## Humanitarian Action in Sri Lanka

### Protection and provision - the responsibility and authority of the government

#### *Ethnic conflict or a crisis of governance?*

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka stems from a conflict over group rights that originates in the British colonial period (1815–1948). Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse country of 18 million people of which the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese constitute a clear majority (circa 74 per cent). The largest minority are the Tamils who themselves divided between the ‘Ceylon Tamils’ (12.5 per cent) and the ‘Indian Tamils’ (now 5.5 per cent). The names are rather inappropriate given that all Tamils, like the Sinhalese, originate from the Indian subcontinent. There is also a Muslim minority (7.5 per cent). For almost a century the colonial administration had followed a policy of balanced — or ethnically equal — rather than proportional representation. The political aspirations of the Sinhalese majority became possible when universal suffrage was introduced in 1931.

Immediately after independence in 1948 the new government enacted legislation depriving the majority of the then much larger number of ‘Indian Tamils’ of their citizenship and voting rights, partly for ethnic reasons, partly to break the power of an organised working class. Several hundred thousand would subsequently repatriate to India.

In 1956 however, Sinhalese nationalism became an electoral rallying cry, leading to the first riots. Tamil politicians wavered between a cross-cutting élitist alliance and straightforwardly ethnic politics, but perceived political discriminations and subsequent riots as strengthening Tamil nationalism and their demand for an autonomous or even independent ‘Tamil Eelam’. Bloody riots in 1983 fueled the armed Tamil militancy, now openly supported by India, and led to Eelam War 1. They also fostered international sympathy with the Tamil cause. In 1987 India intervened to stop the Sri Lankan army from taking Jaffna, the political and cultural centre of the Ceylon Tamils. The subsequent Indo–Sri Lankan peace accord brought in an Indian Peace-keeping Force (IPKF). This itself got quickly entangled in a war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an effective guerrilla organisation that promptly bit the hand that had fed it. The LTTE violently established its supremacy over other Tamil militant groups, the remnants of which would later cooperate with the government forces to defeat the LTTE. A morally defeated IPKF withdrew in early 1990. Peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE fell apart when the LTTE started Eelam War 2 in mid-1990, in which it lost ground in the east but took control of most of the north, where only a ring of fortified army bases remained. Eelam War 2 drew the Muslims into the conflict. In the east, they were set upon by the LTTE and trained as home guards. This resulted in reciprocal massacres of Tamil and Muslim villagers. In November 1990 all Muslims were expelled from the LTTE-controlled north.

Meanwhile, between 1987 and 1990, while the IPKF was fighting the LTTE, the government had bloodily suppressed a second armed youth insurgency in south and central Sri Lanka, the first having occurred in 1971. Although this insurgency was essentially rooted in frustrated employment aspirations, unresolved tensions between traditional and modern identity in Sri Lanka, and a perceived erosion of democracy and state accountability (Government of Sri Lanka 1990), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that led the uprising, also used anti-Tamil and anti-Indian rhetoric to mobilise the Sinhalese youth. Although the JVP used terrorist tactics, the government was internationally condemned for violating human rights.

Sri Lanka is riven by multiple interrelated conflicts: between Tamils and Sinhalese, between Tamils and Muslims, within the Tamil body politic and within the Sinhalese body politic. And yet Sri Lanka prides itself on having continued democratic elections. The ‘all or nothing’ rivalry between its two main political parties, an intense political patronage that divides all to the last village community, combined with aloof and élitist attitudes of those in government have however, raised questions about the plurality of Sri Lanka’s democracy. Even though such view is not widely held by prominent opinion-makers in Sri Lanka, it could be argued that violence in Sri Lanka is less an ethnic than a governance issue, and that all groups have experienced government repression.

### *Territorial presence*

An unusual feature of this conflict is that the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has constantly maintained a skeleton administration in the so-called ‘uncleared’ or LTTE-controlled areas. This includes a functioning district-level presence of line ministry staff and a Government Agent (GA) as the most senior authority in the district. For the GoSL this signals continued control over its territory and an acceptance of its obligations towards the war-affected populations. Indeed, the GoSL continues to pay its civil servants, gives pensions and welfare allowances to the poor, and sends food to those in the north that war has internally displaced. This distinguishes it from other war-time situations in Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, south Sudan or Afghanistan, where the government effectively lost control over significant parts of its territory and could or would not, assume responsibility for all its citizens.

### *A war to make peace*

National elections in mid-1994 toppled the UNP government that had held power for 17 years, and had been responsible for significant state repression against Tamils and Sinhalese alike. It was widely felt that the People’s Alliance (PA) had been elected for its promise to make peace. Indeed, PA quickly initiated a triple strategy for peace: talks with LTTE, the preparation of a political package that would offer substantial autonomy to the predominantly Tamil-inhabited areas and a major national rehabilitation and reconstruction programme (ERRP 2), studied and costed by a World Bank-sponsored team of consultants. But the peace talks rapidly broke down after which both GoSL and LTTE refused international mediation. In April 1995 the LTTE started Eelam War 3. The GoSL then claimed the moral high ground declaring that it had been forced to wage war and was fighting not the Tamils but LTTE as the only obstacle to a political settlement of the conflict. Unfortunately there was also significant opposition within the Sinhalese body politic to an agreement that would give the Tamils substantial autonomy. Today, the most difficult issue remains the future of the eastern districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara, a question that directly affects the substantial Muslim population there. As a result of past political manipulation, there is now a rough demographic balance between Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese in the east. The east offers much-needed irrigated land for Sinhalese settlers from the south and has the excellent deep-water port of Trincomalee. A political settlement over the east will be more difficult and contentious, than over the Tamil-dominated north.

### *The international attitude*

The facts that the PA government took concrete steps to make peace, and that the LTTE initiated Eelam War 3, have led to a major shift in the attitude of the international community. The LTTE now stands condemned with general support moving to the GoSL. There remains a questions over whether the government is really prepared to make substantive concessions to placate genuine Tamil grievances without losing the support of the Sinhalese nationalists. Meanwhile the intensity of Eelam War 3 has created much humanitarian need among the Tamil population in the north and east. They do not necessarily perceive the GoSL to be fighting the LTTE and not the Tamils. They do know that humanitarian assistance from the GoSL is insufficient and they see international attention as a way to protect themselves from GoSL abuse.



**Challenges for coordinated humanitarian action**

***Displacement, drought, repatriation and resettlement***

During the peace talks (September 1994–April 1995) GoSL and UNHCR had re-started the repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees from India. The GoSL had also initiated a voluntary resettlement programme for internally displaced people (IDP), with stated entitlements and guidelines, and a pilot scheme in the east. Eelam War 3 interrupted both programmes.

The army offensive in the autumn of 1995 led to Jaffna being returned to GoSL control, but not before virtually all the inhabitants had fled the city, joining the tens of thousands of IDPs from earlier phases of the war. Some 150,000 went to the eastern part of the Jaffna peninsula, only to be returned home when that too came under GoSL control in the spring of 1996. Another 250,000 crossed the Jaffna lagoon into the Vanni. The Vanni is the mixed jungle and agricultural region between the lagoon and Vavuniya town. The bulk initially settled around Kilinochchi, the major urban centre in the Vanni, but would become displaced again, together with Vanni residents, by subsequent fighting there.

In the east LTTE regained control of much of the hinterland and resettled villagers found themselves back in an ‘uncleared’ area. There is no clear frontline as in the north, and civilians in many places have to cross the ‘lines’ on a daily basis. Many have more limited access to food and basic services than in the north, and the Tamils are less likely to get financial support from relatives abroad than their counterparts from urban Jaffna. In the east, both LTTE and notably the police are less disciplined, and there is a gruesome history of massacres and disappearances. The army often disregards the official policy on voluntary resettlement and has prevented resettled villagers from fleeing again to safer urban areas. Sinhalese villagers also tend to get more generous relief and resettlement assistance from the authorities than Tamils and Muslims. The north and east constitute the ‘dry zone’ in Sri Lanka and the whole situation was aggravated by a country-wide severe drought in 1995-1996. The category of IDPs became complemented with one of residents who were ‘drought-affected’.

***Needs assessment and the adequacy of the response***

The first practical challenge in organising a coherent emergency response is to determine roughly how many people are involved. The GoSL officially put the figure of the newly displaced at 100,000 while the estimate of Government Agent (GA) in Jaffna and the agencies was 400,000. In practice the GoSL used a figure of over 300,000 to calculate food rations and the problem of the number of affected people would not arise until later.<sup>1</sup>

Food security remained a major concern because of the restrictions on its trade and production, caused primarily by an economic embargo on the north but aggravated by drought. The war and displacement from Jaffna made health a major concern. The Jaffna Teaching Hospital which had been the major referral centre for health no longer functioned. There was a great need for surgical capacity, curative care and public health. Although the majority of displaced were taken in by local residents or found refuge in ‘welfare centres’, often schools, temples and public buildings, there were immediate shelter needs. In the medium term, people would have to be relocated from the welfare centres and from overcrowded residences. Although the drought reduced the risk of communicable diseases and the incidence of malaria, as well as extra pressure for shelter against the rains, it did increase concerns over food production and access to sufficient quantities of safe drinking-water.

In these key areas, the needs and the impact of the humanitarian response had to be monitored over time. As no agency covered all districts and sectors, interagency collaboration in assessment, monitoring and evaluation was required.

***Protection***

Protection is an explicit aspect of the mandate of some operational organisations, notably the ICRC and UNHCR. Others feel they have a ‘witnessing’ role. The situation in Sri Lanka raised many protection issues. In the past both warring parties had massacred civilians, and fierce arguments have arisen between agencies and the GoSL over reports of new such instances. Civilians being used — by either side — as shields behind which to travel, hide or carry out attacks is an unacceptable tactic. Medical facilities came under fire from both the army and LTTE, who each justified such action with the argument that enemy casualties were being

treated in them. Both sides historically have tortured and abused prisoners and carried out extrajudicial killings. LTTE uses child soldiers in contravention of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which is at the core of the mandates of the Save the Children Fund alliance and UNICEF.

Agencies had to decide what position to take regarding human rights abuse, and how to respond to them.

### ***Rehabilitation and reconstruction***

During the peace talks in late 1994, a group of World Bank sponsored consultants prepared a draft plan for the large-scale rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-affected zones. Unlike the UN, NGOs, although portrayed in the plan as important implementing partners, were not consulted in the process. They did manage to obtain two meetings with consultants but were not themselves yet ready to think on such a grand scale and consider the change of role from relief providers to participants in reconstruction. In January 1995 the GoSL set up its own, exclusively governmental, Northern Task Force which was suspended when Eelam War 3 broke out. In April 1996, when the army had taken the whole Jaffna peninsula, and over 200,000 Tamils again came under GoSL control, the Task Force was revived. The GoSL then presented to the international community a multi-million dollar funding proposal for immediate relief and rehabilitation in Jaffna. The request was shared and discussed within the UN, and by the representatives of major donor governments. But NGOs also had to define their position and consider what possible role they could or would or ought to play.

### **The capacity for humanitarian response**

#### ***Government capacity***

The GoSL itself had significant potential capacity to provide humanitarian assistance. There was a weakened but still functioning administration in place in most of the conflict-affected areas, as well as an effective system of registration. There were policies and guidelines for the poor and for people affected by war or natural disaster. There was a Ministry of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation with years of experience. The terrain in Sri Lanka, compared to other countries, is easy and the logistical infrastructure good. Where problems occur, these mostly stem from a top-down approach to planning, a slow disbursement of funds and

bureaucratic attitudes that inhibit consultation. With the number of IDPs fluctuating between half and one million, the treasury is severely burdened, but Sri Lanka can generally count on significant foreign aid, directly for development projects and humanitarian assistance, and indirectly through macro-economic support.

#### ***International agency capacity***

For the UN, UNHCR in practical operational terms has been the lead agency, mostly working with NGO partners, and to a lesser degree with local government authorities. UNHCR's presence in Sri Lanka is linked to the need to repatriate tens of thousands of refugees, mostly from southern India. The agency considered IDPs as 'of concern to the UNHCR', and also provided relief to areas that had absorbed repatriated refugees. The role of UNICEF was to work in conflict areas with and through the GoSL. It had no field presence in the north. The position of UNDP on the other hand was an awkward one — being both central and marginal to the UN's efforts in the conflict zone. As in other countries, UNDP would be likely to play a lead role in a rehabilitation and reconstruction programme, but not in the emergency phase. Still the brief of the UNDP resident representative included humanitarian activities. To do this UNDP has funded an in-country post of 'Adviser on Humanitarian Affairs' since 1993. The ICRC was invited in by the GoSL during the youth insurgency in the south, and plays a very important role in both protection and relief assistance in the north and east. There are approximately eight major international NGOs (INGO) operational in the north and east, several of which were working in Sri Lanka before the escalation of the ethnic conflict, and many of which also have programmes in the south. A few internationally affiliated church organisations channel humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people from all ethnic groups.

At the time of the exodus of the Jaffna population, the GoSL made it clear it did not want a larger UN presence. With an explicit reference to Rwanda, it also refused new INGOs arriving to work in the north.

#### ***National non-governmental capacity***

In war-time Sri Lanka there were also many Buddhist and some Hindu and Muslim charitable organisations, and a rich array of community-based organisations (CBO) that provided relief and

welfare assistance. Some of these, with increased foreign funding from INGOs, the UN or even bilaterally through the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, have grown into intermediary NGOs. Most of these cover small geographical areas and have varied but generally limited expertise and capacity. Some, not all, tend to be ethnically oriented.

It is quite possible that the Tamil Relief Organisation (TRO) has the largest operational capacity in the north. It denies affiliation to LTTE and claims to be an independent NGO. Others see it as the relief and rehabilitation wing of LTTE. Whatever its status, there is little doubt that LTTE, as with other national organisations in the territory it controls, has a major say in the policies, programmes and resources of TRO.

### ***Host population***

As in other countries, significant but hidden relief is being provided to the many IDPs by resident host populations. The majority of IDPs — Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim — are not in camps, but have been accommodated and supported by family, friends or sympathetic local people. Host populations have in turn been affected by the drought and moving battlelines.

Notwithstanding this significant overall capacity that, if well coordinated, could have been applied effectively, the condition of civilians in the Vanni and in the east gradually deteriorated. A major reason for this has been the tight control and restriction of humanitarian space.

### **Humanitarian space**

#### ***The economic and the military embargo***

From the time when LTTE gained control of most of the north in the early 1990s, an economic embargo was declared. Some items, with obvious security implications, were banned. These include, for example, binoculars, barbed wire, small batteries (used for detonators), petrol or diesel fuel and urea-based fertiliser (urea can be used to make explosives). Other items such as paraffin and cement (used to build bunkers) were allowed only in controlled quantities. In the summer of 1995 the restrictions on urea-based fertiliser were extended to other ‘straight’ fertilisers, even though it is not actually feasible to make explosives with them.

Although an official list of banned and restricted items would be ‘gazetted’, the Ministry of Defence

would, without warning, add restrictions on other items such as bicycles and their spare parts, tinned food and boxes of matches, all of which could presumably be used by LTTE guerrillas. Periodically, cash carried by agencies to pay salaries and make local purchases would also be limited. Humanitarian agencies could carry restricted items after obtaining a permit which required endorsement by the MoD, but even then, the local military command at Vavuniya and Trincomalee could impose their own more arbitrary restrictions on every possible relief item; towels, clothes, buckets, hurricane lanterns, plastic sheeting, most medical drugs and even soap and Oral Rehydration Salt. Although not officially restricted, there would always be bureaucratic or logistical problems as to why such items could not be allowed entry or at least only in minimal quantities (Van Brabant 1996). No less problematic was the fact that drought-relief measures were initiated all over the country except in the north, where no permit was ever granted for spare parts to repair the many damaged pumps and drilling rigs.

There was an arbitrary measure that white plastic sheeting could be distributed to the IDPs on the Jaffna peninsula but not in the Vanni, although the bulkier and harder to distribute cadjan (woven palm leaves used to construct simple huts) was allowed.

In the east the embargo was more unofficial without being less arbitrary. As the army withdrew its outlying camps, many villages found themselves again in ‘uncleared’ territory. Those who had resettled were entitled to food rations, available from the government controlled centres, but found that they could only take small quantities at a time, forcing people to travel back and forth continuously.

Controlling humanitarian assistance to the north was easy in practical terms. There were only two possible routes of entry where the lines had to be crossed. There was the landroute to the Vanni, with check-points in place at Vavuniya, and a sea route to the Jaffna peninsula, with checks at the port of Trincomalee. Agencies would not use military planes or Navy ships to go to Jaffna, nor the private vessels chartered by the GoSL. The ICRC operated its own ship between Trincomalee and the peninsula, thereby offering ‘neutral’ transport.

#### ***Perceived impartiality***

The international humanitarian agencies made several joint representations to the GoSL to point out the unmet needs of the population in the north,

and to argue particular measures for health, water, shelter and food security. Arguing humanitarian concerns, and easier access for assistance, was always a politically sensitive affair. The GoSL and the military remained concerned that the aim of LTTE was to politically exploit the humanitarian argument. There were also quite some doubts about the impartiality of the international agencies, ranging from the belief that they were politically naïve and unaware of how LTTE manipulated their presence and assistance to the suspicion that, out of solidarity with the Tamil ‘underdog’, some staff might consciously support LTTE. NGOs particularly were the object of suspicion, something that has to be seen in the light of years of international condemnation of the (previous) GoSL over human rights, election violence and state repression.

The perception was fueled by the fact that the humanitarian agencies had to argue more over the situation in LTTE-controlled areas than the one in GoSL-controlled areas — many saw their material

assistance role as complementary to GoSL capacity as they had a stronger presence and programme in LTTE-controlled areas, making them more likely to witness, and speak out about, large-scale civilian death caused by the government forces, than about the massacres of civilians carried out by LTTE. They also had no access problems in government-controlled areas. Although there were occasional signals from LTTE command that it might exercise a greater control over their work, as it did over local NGOs, this did not occur, so the agencies did not experience much restriction of the humanitarian space from LTTE. It was structurally difficult to appear impartial and balanced because of the situation on the ground.

It was obvious that control over the Tamil civilians in the north was an important aspect of the political and military strategies of both parties to the conflict. The humanitarian agencies had to balance considerations of need against the risk of playing into these strategies.

# 3

## Mechanisms for Coordination

### **Mechanisms for coordination at the outbreak of the war**

#### *The Government*

The Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction appeared the natural locus for coordination. Within it was located the office of the Commissioner General for Essential Services (CGES) who would organise the GoSL assistance to the LTTE-controlled north, notably food rations, paraffin and medicine. However because most agencies were directly operational or worked through line ministries and local NGOs, the humanitarian and rehabilitation activities of the GoSL, the UN (except UNICEF) and the NGOs would operate parallel, without a single attempt to work according to an agreed overall plan.

#### *The UN*

The UNDP hosted an ‘NGO-Donor Forum’ every month to bring together representatives from the donors, the UN, the Red Cross, INGOs and the GoSL to discuss development issues and to provide updates on the humanitarian situation. Between 1990 and 1994 it had been the forum where NGOs had articulated their concerns over what was perceived as an intimidating style of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry in Respect of Non-Governmental Organisations (Van Brabant 1995). In 1994 the idea of setting up an NGO project database within UNDP, as the core of a potential

Information Unit, managed by the UN or by an interagency committee including the GoSL was floated, but the project never got off the ground.

For its part, UNHCR developed close programming relationships with a number of NGOs, as intermediaries or final implementers of its various rounds of quick-impact projects that had started in late 1993 to assist communities to which repatriated refugees had returned. Programming and review meetings were organised with its partners.

#### *The NGO Consortium*

The NGO Consortium on Relief and Rehabilitation constituted the largest forum, originating in 1985 with informal meetings between NGOs. On the escalation of war in 1987 these meetings became formalised as the NGO Consortium. Representatives from GoSL, the UN, and the Red Cross were routinely invited to the monthly meetings, the agenda included district updates, information exchange of activities planned or in progress, and any issues arising. A ‘coordinator’ post existed between 1987–1993 which was then replaced by a half-time post of ‘secretary’ and an Advisory Committee of seven member NGOs.

A review of the first decade of the consortium revealed a profound discrepancy between its stated objectives and the minimalist practice of coordination that the members allowed. The objectives included: assessments of relief and rehabilitation needs; sharing of technical resources

and expertise; strengthening of local organisations and collective liaison with government agencies. In practice the consortium did little more than hold unimaginative monthly meetings. District updates would vary in quality and sometimes listed the reporting agency's activities rather than focus on unmet needs. Sectoral coordination, for example, in health or agriculture, would depend entirely on the initiative of an interested member agency. Thematic exchange, such as on savings and credit schemes, occurred in networks outside the consortium with no link or feedback to it. The agency directory gave a general profile but without details of budgets, staffing or projects.

There was no database of who was working where. The consortium failed to stimulate critical debate around policy and programme issues. Neither was it used as the forum for even critical challenges such as the question of NGO legislation or a large-scale rehabilitation and reconstruction plan for the war-affected areas.

This ineffectiveness, and the resulting discontent with its performance, had been the members' own choice. Reviews in 1989 and again 1991 had highlighted its structural weaknesses, but each time the members, presumably fearing the loss of independence, had refused to give it the formality, the clout and capacity to become more effective. It therefore remained a loose association in which nobody was required to give up any autonomy. The Advisory Committee was not an effective mechanism of governance and did not produce a longer term vision or sense of direction. A half-time secretary was just enough capacity to prepare a meeting and send papers around. Locating the secretary in the office of a member agency, using the letterhead of a member agency and rotating the meeting place among members, not only kept the cost low but also the profile. It thus could not act as an identifiable and effective focal point for other agencies, for government and for visitors.

## **Strengthening coordination**

### ***A UN initiative***

When in the summer of 1995 the war intensified on the Jaffna peninsula, international agencies reviewed their emergency preparedness. In October 1995 the UN initiated its internal Emergency Task Force meetings, chaired by UNDP. These included agencies such as WFP, FAO and WHO who then had no programmes or presence in the war-affected zone. The agenda and outcomes of the meetings

were not shared however, at least not with NGOs.

That same month, following a field visit of an experienced UNHCR emergency officer, the UN organised a one and a half day seminar that it was hoped would result in a multilateral task force for the management of the humanitarian situation. Presided over by both the Commissioner General of Essential Services and the acting UNDP representative, it brought together senior representatives from government, other UN agencies, the Red Cross, NGOs and donors. When it became clear that the GoSL was reluctant to invite outsiders into the decision-making process, the idea of a task force was modified to an information-sharing 'forum'. But this also was unacceptable to the GoSL.

Friction had already been growing in relations between the GoSL and the UN. UNDP had to send back two medical doctors, UN Volunteers, when the MoD refused permission for the radios seen by the agency as a precondition for their work in the north. The GoSL had also formally complained when the director of UNESCO in Paris, on the basis of an MSF-France press release, condemned the death of schoolchildren in an air raid on the Jaffna peninsula.

A public clash with the UN occurred shortly after the seminar. When it became clear that the population was fleeing Jaffna city, the UN Secretary-General publicly expressed his concern for a potential humanitarian crisis, and the need for a relief operation on an appropriate scale. This caused a sharp reply from the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The government reaffirmed its commitment and capacity to provide humanitarian assistance, but also made it clear that it did not want a larger UN presence, let alone direct UN intervention. It effectively defined the conflict as an internal affair, leaving GoSL to maintain the lead in managing the crisis.

### ***The Government***

One immediate result of this clash with the UN was the appointment of a civil servant as a 'Focal Point', to serve as interlocutor on matters pertaining to relief for the LTTE-controlled north. Hopes were raised that this would herald a much-needed improvement in communication and interaction between GoSL and the international humanitarian agencies in particular. Although over the following months, agencies met individually and collectively with the 'Focal Point', it eventually transpired that

the role carried with it no effective authority. It was simply to try and ‘facilitate’ solutions to the many practical problems that the agencies experienced, with no return flow of information on the GoSL’s plans and activities, let alone any joint planning.

In April 1996, when the whole Jaffna peninsula had come under army control, the GoSL revived the Resettlement and Reconstruction Authority for the North (RRAN), the successor of an interministerial Presidential Task Force North that had first been created in January 1995, at the time of peace talks and when a national reconstruction programme was being prepared. As with its predecessor, it was not clear who participated in RRAN, what its precise role and procedures were and on the basis of what information it made decisions. Remarkably the international agencies were informed that the authority of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation over the north was withdrawn, and restricted to the war-affected areas of the centre and east. Confusingly, a second Focal Point was now appointed, to serve as the interlocutor for the areas of the north newly brought under government control. Once again, what real authority this post entailed was unclear, and the appointment did not open a channel for effective dialogue and communication, let alone coordination, between international agencies and the GoSL.

The absence of effective communication and coordination with central government, was in contrast to the situation on the ground, at least in the northern districts where GAs and line ministry staff faced the problems generated by sudden and large-scale displacement compounded by drought. Close cooperation ensued between the humanitarian agencies within the framework of district relief committees. In December 1995 it appeared that the GA in Vavuniya, in whose district lay the ‘crossline’ land route into the Vanni, would become that area’s coordinator.

Combining this role as logistical hub with one of information centre proved difficult in practice. Notwithstanding support from the international agencies, the lack of skill and discipline in the flow of information between the many players in Colombo, and the GA and agency offices in the Vanni, led to often incomplete, confused or unverified information, making coordination impossible.

That there was no effective coordination with government was due to the fact that military and political objectives were allowed to override

humanitarian concerns, though not to the point of creating a mass emergency, which would have generated more international pressure. The MoD assumed overriding authority over any matters pertaining to the war zone. Staff of the MoD and the Joint Operational Command did not attend interagency meetings or meetings with the Focal Points and were, like the office of the Secretary of Defense, barely contactable. There were thus no possibilities for information exchange and confidence-building.

### ***The NGO Consortium on Relief and Rehabilitation***

During the first 18 months of war, for external and internal reasons, the NGO Consortium did not offer an effective mechanism for coordination. A major external reason was the climate of intimidation and suspicion that quickly arose. Noone remained unaffected by the renewed outbreak of war and inevitably the unease between most Sinhalese and Tamils, heightened including amongst those involved in relief work. A vicious press campaign in November 1995 alleged that humanitarian agencies were intentionally or unintentionally supporting LTTE. At one point a crowd mobilised by local radio against an NGO meeting, turned aggressive. Church-affiliated organisations providing relief were intimidated when two priests were arrested and accused of smuggling banned items to the north. The smear campaign effectively intimidated agencies who then became secretive. The fact that some statements made at a consortium meeting were leaked to and distorted in the press, raised great concerns over their confidentiality. In any case, Government officials stopped attending consortium meetings.

Internally, the consortium had not built up a tradition of proactive coordination. This would not materialise overnight, so a review process was set in motion which coincided with the first year and a half of the war.

*Objectives* To enhance the quality, effectiveness, professionalism and transparency of the work of its members became the aim of the new consortium. It formulated three objectives:

- to render services of interest to its members;
- to provide a forum for different stakeholders in the humanitarian response to meet and encourage its members to develop a common position and take collective initiatives;

- to promote and facilitate joint strategic initiatives, proactive coordination, collective learning and skill development.

Clearly the most demanding, but also the most important objective, was the last.

Importantly the geographical scope of the consortium was confirmed as island-wide. Previously its members had been focused on the north, making it vulnerable to accusations of partiality and revealing an inadequate analysis of the different conflicts in Sri Lanka.

Another new proposal was for the consortium to provide a forum to explore the roles, opportunities and constraints of those agencies working in but also on the conflict. Previous discussions tended to be dominated by the technical and logistical aspects of relief. Little focused attention had been devoted to local capacities, livelihoods of the psycho-social or gender dimensions of conflict. There appeared little awareness of local-level intercommunal dialogue and reconciliation efforts, or of the availability of documentation by Sri Lankan analysts on the causes and the politics of the conflict. Better knowledge of these two issues would have helped agencies position themselves more effectively to argue their role and place in the face of public doubts and criticisms.

*Membership* The review raised important questions about membership. The previous policy of open and inclusive membership had yielded little effective action. Therefore a clearer type of membership organisation was proposed, with Articles of Association, formal membership applications to be screened, stated rights and obligations for members and the possibility of revoking membership from individuals who showed no active commitment. A smaller membership would have to be balanced against greater quality and effectiveness. Interestingly, some church-affiliated organisations were uneasy about becoming full members of a formal NGO consortium. New, more controlling NGO legislation remained a threat, and they felt they might better maintain a separate identity: 'we are with you but not of you'. The question was also raised whether pure human rights organisations could be full members? Both the GoSL and LTTE have been very sensitive over statements and denunciations by human rights organisations. The human rights organisations in Sri Lanka, however, do not form a cohesive group with an agreed code of conduct. This makes operational agencies with a field presence wary about backlash against them, particularly if the information about violations would appear to have come from them. Although it was felt that relationships of trust and cooperation had to be developed with human rights

### The Review Process of the NGO Consortium

A review took place in a consultative and accountable manner and took a strategic planning approach. The effectiveness of the consortium had been questioned by members in early 1995. The Advisory Committee then organised some exploratory reflections that highlighted the major issues and sensitivities. On 7 May a Review Committee was created, whose terms of reference were approved by consortium members. The members, four Sri Lankans and three foreigners, were selected on the basis of commitment and experience. They analysed the situation in Sri Lanka and in the NGO sector and the relationships of NGOs with other players. Then a vision for Sri Lanka and for the NGO sector was articulated. This was followed by a statement of aims, objectives and potential activities, and was accompanied by recommended priorities. Questions of capacity and funding were framed by stated objectives. Finally, a structure of governance was proposed, with an elected Steering Committee that would offer firmer guidance while maintaining transparency and accountability.<sup>2</sup>

The first draft proposal was ready in September 1995, with a second following in January 1996 (Review Committee 1996). The war slowed the process considerably and questions of funding and membership could only be returned to in mid-1996. By July 1996 the Review Committee had substantially taken over the role of the Advisory Committee. After a workplan for the creation of a new consortium had been detailed, and an Interim Committee created of individuals from agencies with demonstrated interest, the old consortium was disbanded. The new Consortium on Humanitarian Aid effectively started work in the autumn of 1996.



organisations, it was decided that only operational agencies should become members of the consortium.

*Capacity* To be effective the consortium needed a small secretariat. To fund it, and avoid any continuation of a largely passive membership, the principle of a membership contribution had to be honoured. It was proposed to raise the token membership fee. Reference criteria for a new fee could be the level of the annual salary of an unskilled worker in an NGO office, or 1 per cent of an agency's annual budget, which seemed a reasonable price for information and coordination benefits. For those with the willingness but not the ability to pay, contributions in kind could be considered.

### *NGO coordination at district level*

In several districts of the north and east, NGOs had their own regular gatherings. Apart from the field office representatives of larger international or national agencies, they were mostly made up of local CBOs or intermediary NGOs. Their meetings tended to be rather formalistic, and limited mostly to information exchange, not unlike that of the NGO Consortium in Colombo prior to the review. The Jaffna grouping had been most comprehensive in its agenda, but the occasional high-handedness of the TRO had caused bad feeling. In Trincomalee, some reflection had started on the role and functioning of a coordinating body. At least until 1996 the communication between district-NGO consortia and the NGO Consortium in Colombo depended entirely on the field staff of larger organisations. This in the medium term seemed an inadequate mechanism. The reflections and agreements in the capital did not always find their way to the field, while not all concerns raised at field level — especially in places other than Jaffna and the Vanni — were followed up in Colombo. Ideally a direct communication and collaborative effort could be developed between coordinating bodies in the capital and in the district. This would require preliminary investment in a similar collective reflection at district level, and probably some support for institution building, as international agencies had provided for district-level NGO coordinating bodies in the south. However, this could not be done in the middle of an emergency.

Some rather effective collaboration in the field did occur though, certainly in the north. The district relief committees chaired by the GA provided a

framework for continued assessment and programme planning, UNHCR and the ICRC then participated in these. The GoSL's restriction on the number of international agencies also helped, as well as, ironically, the restrictions on access and relief goods. The exchange and pooling of material and technical resources is more spontaneous when such goods are scarce.

### *The Interagency Emergency Group*

With the intensification of the war in the autumn of 1995, eight larger operational NGOs began to have their own regular meetings. This coalition derived spontaneously from the common experience of bureaucratic obstacles, and from the realisation, after the clash between the GoSL and the UN, that as international agencies they had a somewhat different 'political' position than Sri Lankan agencies. Sri Lankan agencies had also been reluctant to join in collective advocacy and representations to the GoSL, or to sign even carefully worded press releases. The NGO Consortium was not at the time an effective forum. Very quickly UNHCR, the ICRC and the other major relief providers joined in. Later UNICEF and WFP occasionally attended meetings. UNHCR and the ICRC because of their specific international legal status at times followed a different protocol in raising issues with the GoSL, so written communications from the group would only be signed by the NGOs. Even so, the forum ensured a common understanding and continued common objectives.

In the spring of 1996 questions arose over the participation of donor representatives. It was felt that humanitarian concerns should remain clearly distinguished from a broader foreign policy agenda of donors and the GoSL, so preference was given to the Interagency Group making special representations to the donor community. There were also questions raised about the participation of advisers on humanitarian affairs of which there were two: one working for the Canadian International Development Agency, and one working for the UN. While the adviser working for the donor agency adopted very much an observer's role and kept most interventions to advice, the UN adviser was sometimes made to act as spokesperson by the head of UNDP.

Given that UNDP had no operational activities in the conflict-affected areas, and that the GoSL had shown clear irritation over too firm an advocacy about humanitarian concerns by UNDP, several

### The purposes of the Interagency Emergency Group

The objectives of the Interagency Emergency Group were to monitor the condition of the displaced and the host population and to communicate a comprehensive and analytical picture of the situation to the GoSL and the diplomatic community; to provide a forum to initiate coherent lobbying and advocacy initiatives; and to discuss the meaning and nature of the humanitarian mandate in order to collectively maintain an impartial position in a highly politicised situation.

operational agencies felt that the head's agenda, priorities and approach had become excessively cautious. These structural tensions between diplomatic representation of the UN and acting as humanitarian coordinator, caused significant unease for all concerned.

### Effective coordination?

#### *The coordination of humanitarian action*

The major challenges for operational coordination were in the areas of needs and capacity assessment, resource allocation, standardisation of procedures and guidelines and coordinated planning and implementation. Throughout the war, the most serious attempt at coordination was undertaken by the Interagency Emergency Group.

*Assessment* Although the GAs regularly produced situation reports by district, these were not normally accessible to international agencies. Some of their contents was shared at district-level meetings, but by and large the picture built up in the Interagency Group was derived from the reporting of the member agencies. Importantly one or two NGOs also conducted semi-structured interviews with IDPs and host families, to gain insight about their perceived needs.

The Interagency Group fairly quickly appointed an Information Officer. The original idea was that the postholder would monitor political and military developments, population movements, food security, public health and logistics and identify key issues and trends. Such an overview could then be used for joint operational or advocacy initiatives. In retrospect the attempt to process the various data with a computerised database did not seem to have been appropriate. To facilitate input, information

was sought from member agencies in a standard format, for which special forms were designed. Agency field staff however saw these as an extra burden and were unwilling to fill them in. More importantly, the database approach focused attention on easily quantifiable activities. Thus much effort was spent tracking the supply of emergency household items, whereas the greatest vulnerabilities lay in the areas of food security, water and health. There were various sources of information on these sectors, some quantified and others not, that were not properly collated.

Food security was a politically sensitive issue, especially after the GoSL took offence over hasty and unsubstantiated reports of food shortages and international press statements that food was being used as a 'weapon of war'. As the GoSL had taken formal responsibility for rations, the humanitarian agencies accordingly avoided involvement in food transfers.

Although initial nutritional surveys did not show signs of significant malnutrition, grave concern persisted over food security. For practical and political reasons independent monitoring of the ration supply line was impossible. Information about local food production and market prices was available but, without an adequate food security model, no use was made of this data. WFP and FAO, concerned about the impact of the drought, were not allowed access to the north. It was eventually a household food security survey by ICRC that revealed that mothers and the elderly were becoming malnourished due to sacrificing their own food to give their children, and that food insecurity was greater in parts of the east than in the north.

In the sector of water and sanitation, only one agency involved developed a dossier, monitoring water levels in wells, keeping an inventory of facilities and activities and arguing the need for a firmer intervention. As similar information was not collated by the other agencies involved, a detailed picture was only available for one area of operation.

The district health committees, in which local Ministry of Health and agency staff participated, allowed the monitoring of health needs and the response capacity of the health services in the north. However, no effective information exchange or coordination occurred centrally in Colombo. Logically, the Ministry of Health should have been the appropriate authority, but throughout the first year of war, it failed to call any of the quarterly meetings that it had initiated in the spring of 1994. Moreover, the *de facto* decisions over health

supplies were taken by a Medical Committee in the MoD. This was closed and inaccessible to humanitarian agencies, and the rationale for its decisions was never reported.

On the whole an adequate interagency monitoring and information system proved difficult and slow to develop. Through the verbal reports at the weekly meetings, however, a reasonable and fairly comprehensive picture could be maintained, albeit not always substantiated with hard data. This contributed to the overall situation reports of the UN Adviser on Humanitarian Affairs. In this politically very charged context, a UN report still carried more clout than one produced by NGOs, whom the GoSL continued to keep at arms length.

The biggest omission was the assessment of capacity. Fortunately, the TRO and the skeleton government administration in the north showed remarkable organisational talent, while the IDPs and host population in general had more assets than was at first feared. After two years of war and displacement, those original assets had been largely depleted.

*Resource allocation* In geographical terms, the agencies, followed the moving population concentrations, both pushed by the war in the north. The most glaring strategic weakness of the whole coordination effort, however, was the neglect of the east. Politically crucial, militarily more fuzzy and insecure, and logistically more demanding, there were pockets of much greater need, and more infringement and violation of people's rights, than in the north.

As far as sectoral allocation is concerned, the imbalances in the type of material assistance provided cannot be blamed on the agencies, but result from the restrictive policies of GoSL and MoD. Most agencies were unwilling to get involved in food ration provision, which GoSL had officially taken on as its responsibility. They were keen on stimulating local food production, but found their efforts hampered by restrictions on fertiliser, seed and cement for the repair of irrigation canals. Support in the sectors of health, water and shelter was inadequate due to the restrictions imposed. As a result more effort went into the supply of emergency household items than would normally have been the case. A major demand of the IDPs was for income opportunities, for which there was limited expertise available among the agencies. Some local initiatives were funded to provide much-needed psycho-social counselling.

In light of the operational limitations experienced, and of the significant local capacity, hindsight shows that more attention could have been paid to capacity building, especially for CBOs, intermediary NGOs and associations of IDPs, however difficult in a context of continuing displacement.

*Standardisation of guidelines and procedures* In the absence of effective task force work, little systematic attention was paid to standardisation. UNHCR and its implementing partners streamlined procedures for the submission of proposals for quick-impact projects. Agencies distributing household items agreed on a package and procedures. But different agencies continued to use different methodologies in nutritional surveys, or different policies for the applications to revolving loan funds that had been set up prior to the latest escalation of war.

*Joint planning and implementation* Few involved in relief and rehabilitation expected the entire Jaffna population to flee. A quick response to such a large-scale crisis was seen as a higher priority than a planned response. Although there was some rapid consultation on who was planning to do what, agencies made their own decisions on what supplies to purchase. Some engaged in advance 'flag planting', and then could not deliver.

Proactive interagency planning mostly revolved around providing shelter. In line with MoD stipulations some agencies had imported white plastic sheeting that could not be used for camouflage. The agencies were very aware of GoSL concern that too much assistance would consolidate the displacement of the Jaffna population, who GoSL were anxious to see return. Coordination did take place around methodologies of targeting and distribution that would leave IDPs themselves with maximum choice where they would reside. These plans were disturbed by arbitrary restrictions on the transport of plastic sheeting to the Vanni. Detailed joint operational planning in the face of unpredictable restrictions on importing or transporting relief items ceased being useful or realistic. Because of constraints and shortages, there was much pragmatic exchange and pooling of resources once these had been taken across the lines.

As far as the 1996 GoSL request for the funding of relief and rehabilitation in Jaffna is concerned, this was shared with the UN and donors but not with NGOs, who were also excluded from the informal discussions that the donors and UN held about them.

### *The coordination of humanitarian diplomacy*

The Interagency Group as a whole, or at least the NGO part of it, made a number of collective approaches to GoSL, LTTE and donor representatives. Initially these tended to focus on access for the humanitarian agencies (with GoSL) and on their independence (with LTTE), but increasingly the emphasis turned to the needs of the civilians. Several memorandums or short reports were produced on topics like: the unmet needs in health, the impact of fertiliser on agricultural production and the impact of drought and displacement on access to safe drinking-water.

The NGOs were individually and collectively unprepared to argue for humanitarian principles and humanitarian space. There was no clear concept of what was considered basic rights of civilians in a war situation. They did not master international humanitarian and human rights conventions, and were generally unaware of which ones the GoSL had signed. They even failed to take the GoSL's existing policies of entitlement for the poor, the drought-affected or IDPs and GoSL guidelines on resettlement as reference. They were unaware, until much later, of the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct in disasters, on which they might have based an argument for their own role and humanitarian principles.

Nevertheless, the Interagency Group did provide a forum for collective reflection on the ways in which humanitarian efforts could be co-opted by parties to the conflict, and then entangled with political and military strategies. This contributed to a more insightful and careful collective positioning, and prevented a situation in which agencies could be played off against each other.

A painful test in this regard occurred in December 1995, when it was accidentally discovered that a British medical relief agency planned to carry out an 'assessment' at Elephant Pass, a military camp at the Jaffna lagoon, then still fully inside LTTE-controlled territory and only accessible by military plane. The agency was new to Sri Lanka and only had a small project in the government-controlled east. It had informed the other agencies about its hope to start a medical programme in the Vanni, but not about the Elephant Pass. It did not participate in the NGO Consortium meetings. The planned assessment raised grave concerns, not in the least among the agency's staff. Not only had LTTE shot down some military planes, but it was also felt that the agency, through such close association with the military, might expose itself to LTTE retaliation if it intended to start work in the Vanni. It was also known that only one civilian resided at Elephant Pass, which rather compromised the 'humanitarian' character of the assessment. Finally, the existing agencies at the time felt reluctant to move too hastily into areas in the north that had returned to government control, as these held few civilians and were under tight military administration.

The overwhelming need remained in LTTE-controlled areas, access to which was severely restricted. One agency moving on its own into the army-controlled area might open the door to pressure on the others to follow suit and to shift their attention away from the civilians in LTTE-controlled areas. It was hard to see in the planned assessment more than a publicity and fundraising exercise. In the end, the assessment did not take place but whether that was due to the pressure exercised by the other agencies remains uncertain. The episode underlined again the aggressive competitiveness of some NGOs.

# 4

## Structural and Contextual Constraints on Coordination

### Structural Constraints

#### *Resistance to coordination*

The history of the NGO Consortium highlights some of the usual agency objections to coordination. Agencies claim they have different mandates. Different agencies may indeed focus on different target groups, for example, refugees, prisoners, children or the disabled, or on a specific sector such as health, food or logistics. But it is obvious that neither population categories nor sectoral assistance can be looked at in isolation from each other. The work of different specialised agencies is inherently complementary which supports the case for coordination. Moreover, all share a similar underlying humanitarian mandate: to save lives and to reduce suffering, and where possible to protect and restore livelihoods and local capacity. Another objection is that agencies have different operating principles. That appears the case for the ICRC which therefore may adopt a separate approach (Doppler 1996). Other agencies, that may want to combine material assistance with protection and/or with conflict mediation roles, have generally not thought through the implications for operational conduct. What is needed here are divisions of labour and learning from each other, again an argument for and not against collaboration.

It should be admitted that the real reason why agencies find it so difficult to coordinate is that they want to maintain their independence and individual

profile. Collaboration and coordination have a cost, but so does competition, and when done effectively it can render the combined efforts of agencies considerably more cost-effective — although this may not show in their individual accounts. Coordination in practice may fail due to substantive reasons, but most often it breaks down because of poor leadership. But resisting it *a priori*, on the grounds of agency independence, negates the best interests of the target groups (and of the taxpayer) which, in turn, contravenes the agency's proclaimed humanitarian ethos and principles.

Seeking to collaborate and coordinate is not generally an explicit agency policy. It should be made so and written into the job description of every country-level representative. In many cases appropriate decision-making should be delegated, but the decision whether to try and collaborate and coordinate should not be left to the discretion of country representatives, as is current practice, often at the mercy of personal likes and dislikes.

#### *Knowing about coordination*

Knowing how to foster coordination is not a professional skill that is commonly required of aid workers, nor is the experience and model of coordination part of organisational memory and professional training. Rather, making coordination happen is entirely dependent on the motivation and skills of individuals. These skills include diplomacy, consultation, trust, chairing effective meetings, maintaining a sense of direction with a continuously

relevant agenda and developing and articulating a shared vision. Specific training in coordination is strongly recommended.

### ***Technical and methodological knowledge***

Effective sectoral and thematic collaboration and coordination requires at least some participants to have an adequate technical and methodological knowledge regarding perhaps revolving loan funds, gender analysis, participatory appraisal methods, nutritional surveys, logistics planning or food security models. Coordinated approaches are difficult to formulate where there is insufficient technical expertise. Where such knowledge is available, task forces become not only a forum for standardisation and coordination but also a receptacle for collective learning.

### ***Situational coalitions and formal associations***

The Interagency Group, like the NGO Consortium at its inception in 1987, was an informal coalition of agencies that started meeting on a self-selected basis and in response to a specific situation. There was no formal distinction between members and observers. Individuals who were included by the participants in their meetings depended partly on the structural position of an agency in the politics of the conflict, and partly on more subjective perceptions of trustworthiness, common interest and commitment. It had no formal structure and practical problems of funding and human resources were simply addressed as they arose.

Coalitions depend on a continuing sense of shared immediate interest. They therefore may, and indeed should, break up as members identify more useful contextual alliances elsewhere. Another problem is that maintaining coalitions is a very time-consuming activity. Trust, interest and commitment have to be reaffirmed at each and every meeting and with every change of agency head. All this can quickly become another full-time task in addition to someone's workload at a particular agency. Lack of time and leadership, and sometimes of technical expertise, meant that the Interagency Group did not develop other effective task forces beyond the one on logistics.

Formal associations have a longer term perspective and assume a more institutionalised commitment. When equipped with capacity of their own, the stress on individuals is less. Peer group dynamics play a smaller role than in coalitions, and the head

does not have to remain essentially a facilitator but can act more authoritatively when needed. Less situationally dependent, it can bring a broader scope to the agenda for its meetings. Within their framework formal associations can accommodate coalitions in issue-specific task forces. As the history of the NGO Consortium also demonstrates, formal associations can also suffer from poor leadership. They do not collapse as quickly as coalitions but their meetings become sterile, the agenda irrelevant and the discussions boring.

Both coalitions and formal associations need to address the problem of size and quality of membership. The more inclusive they are, the greater the risk that they end up with the lowest common denominator, wasting time listening to the views of otherwise uninterested members or with important decisions blocked by a majority of conservative voters more concerned with their own interests than those of the people their agency is there to serve.

## **Contextual Constraints**

### ***Timing***

Had Eelam War 3 not broken out, or had it done so much later, then the new vision for collaboration and coordination articulated by the Review Committee of the NGO Consortium would already have taken root more vigorously and possibly been involved in less stressful and controversial rehabilitation programmes. The lesson here is that the substance and format of coordination are better identified before an emergency and not in the centre of it.

### ***Politics***

A remarkable feature of this case is the creation of a restricted Interagency Group parallel to an NGO Consortium and practising many of the principles that the Review Committee of the NGO Consortium would recommend. On the one hand this was related to the pragmatic need of the large operational agencies to focus collectively on their own concerns and priorities. But the consolidation into a smaller group of international organisations also reflected the tremendously politically charged atmosphere around humanitarian assistance which had put a particular spotlight on the international humanitarian agencies and had silenced many Sri Lankan organisations. In the light of the changed political situation with peace proposals and a new phase of war, every agency — national and

international — had to review its analysis of the situation and its role and position in relation to it. The operational constraints imposed by GoSL and MoD meant that operational coordination occurred mostly at district level and that the Interagency Group remained focused on the questions of impartiality and humanitarian space. Opening itself to new members was certainly conceivable but not without first a mature dialogue about how any newcomer saw its role and position in the overall politics of the conflict.

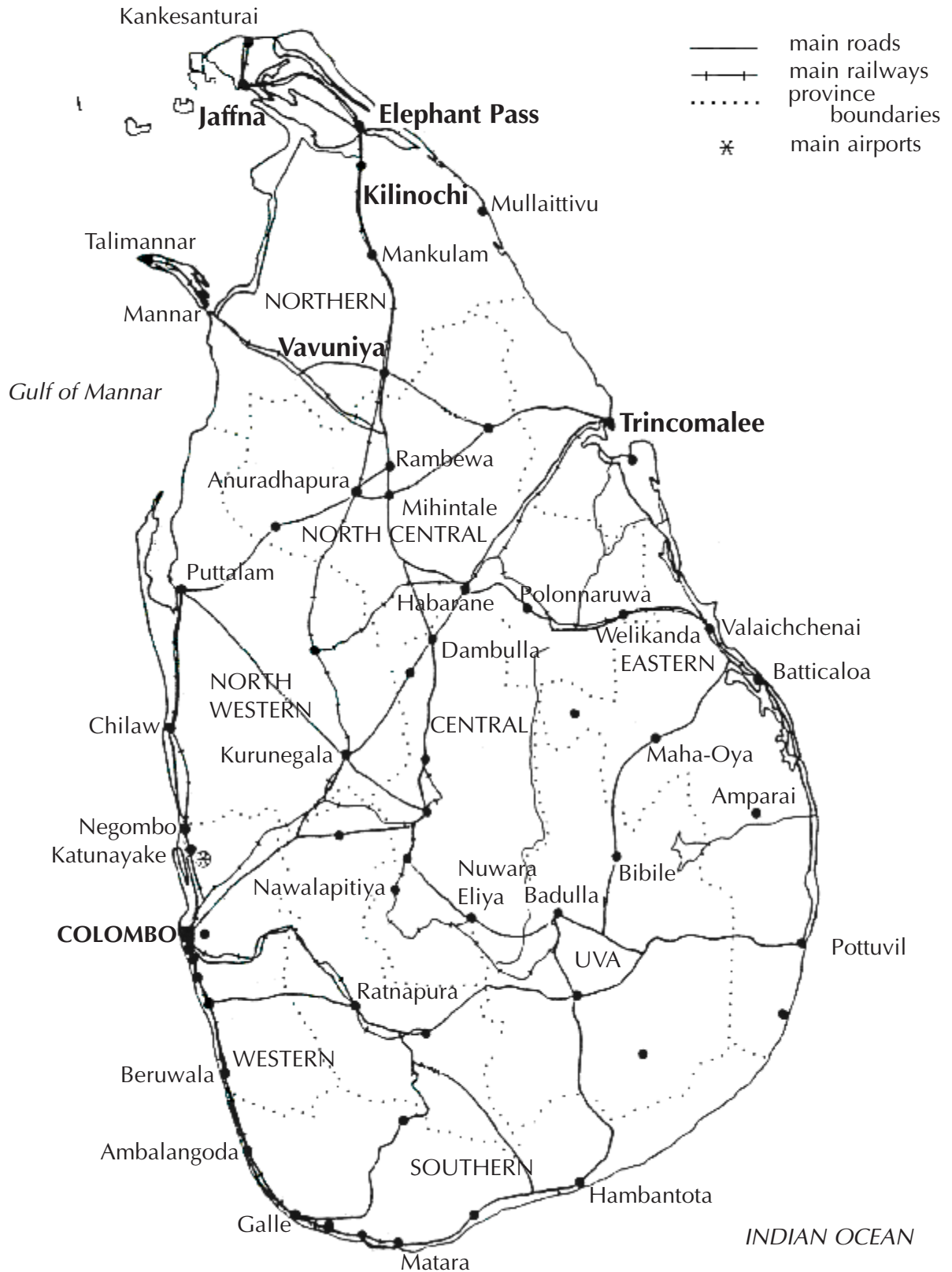
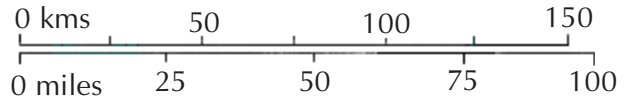
***No coordination without authority***

The single most important impediment to effective humanitarian coordination was the fact that the GoSL, and more particularly the military, retained

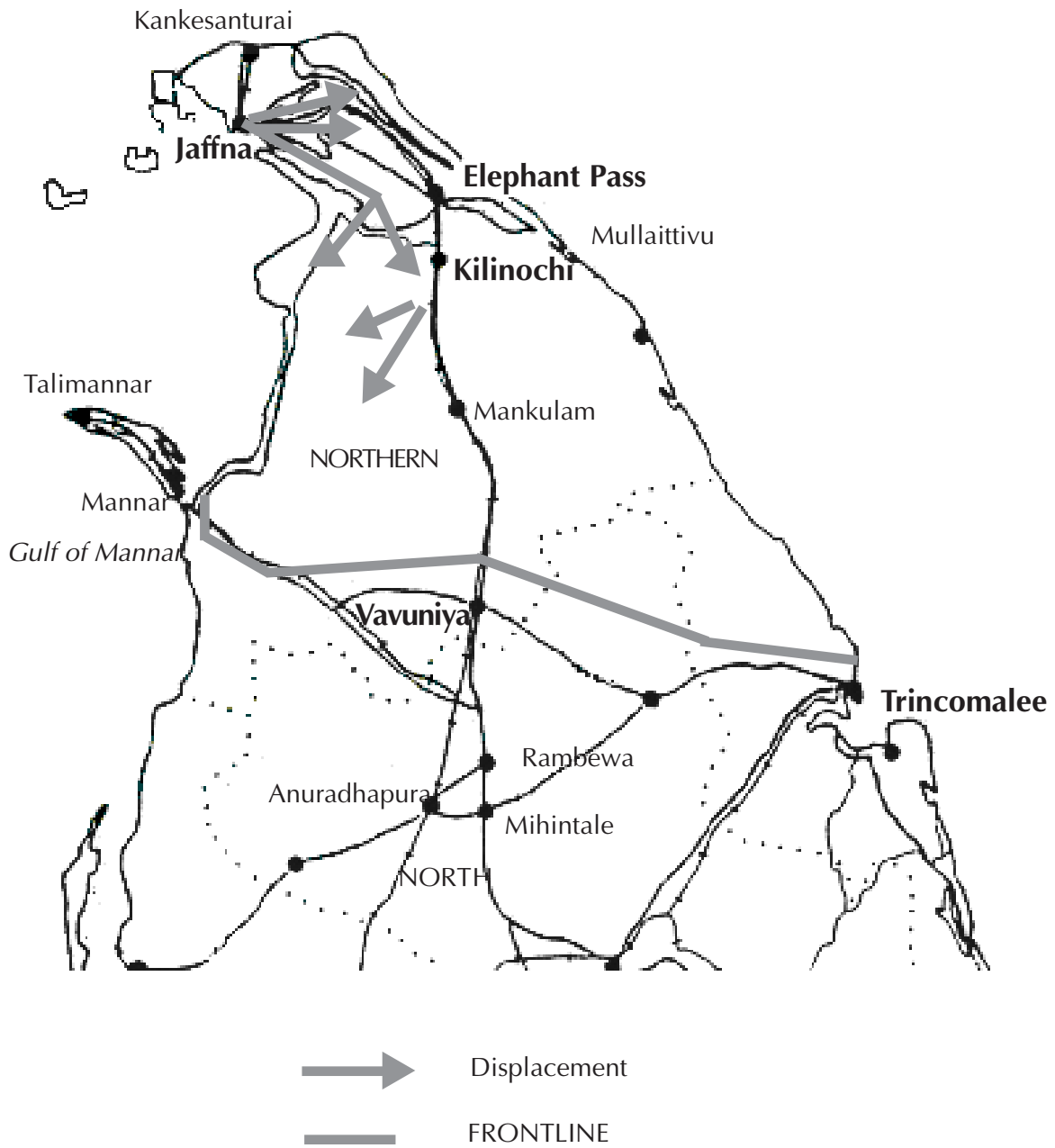
the final authority, but did not participate in the agency efforts, keeping the agencies outside their own intra-governmental coordination mechanisms. This effectively separated the provision of humanitarian assistance by the GoSL from that of other players. The latter then could assess, agree and plan among themselves, but in the face of unarticulated policies or arbitrary decisions, they could never be sure of being able to implement their policies.

The shape that coordination efforts take, and their focus and effectiveness are not, as this case study shows, only influenced by the motivations and skills of the agencies and their representatives, but also by the political environment in which humanitarian action takes place.

# Maps of Sri Lanka







Map showing the front line and principal displacement effects of the conflicts in Sri Lanka.

# Endnotes

1. Whereas sometimes figures are exaggerated to attract more international assistance, here it appears they were reduced to prevent greater international involvement that could have been exploited by LTTE or otherwise interfered with the war effort of the GoSL. The question of numbers of newly displaced was not of central operational importance at first. Although the total supply of relief goods remained small, the fact that many new IDPs had assets and were supported by the resident population, meant that those in welfare centres were targeted. They constituted at most 15 per cent and could easily be identified. Over time, however, the resident population saw its capacity to support IDPs decline, or become itself affected by drought and displacement. The situation of IDPs from earlier phases of war, who had been receiving support from humanitarian agencies, deteriorated as attention and resources shifted to the more recent IDPs. The categories of people in need, and the scale of the problem, did not therefore remain constant.

2. Inspiration was drawn from the experience of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (Pakistan) with whom one of the Review Committee members had been involved. This in turn, like the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, had been partially inspired, again through experiences of individuals, by the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand, founded in 1975.

# Acronyms

CBO	Community based organisation
CGES	Commissioner General for Essential Services
DHA	Department of Humanitarian Affairs
ERRP	Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation Programme
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IPKF	Indian Peace-Keeping Force
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GA	Government Agent
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PA	People's Alliance
RRAN	Resettlement and Reconstruction Authority for the North
TRO	Tamil Relief/Rehabilitation Organisation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNP	United National Party
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

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# RRN

## **Background**

The Relief and Rehabilitation Network was conceived in 1993 and launched in 1994 as a mechanism for professional information exchange in the expanding field of humanitarian aid. The need for such a mechanism was identified in the course of research undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on the changing role of NGOs in relief and rehabilitation operations, and was developed in consultation with other Networks operated within ODI. Since April 1994, the RRN has produced publications in three different formats, in French and English: Good Practice Reviews, Network Papers and Newsletters. The RRN is now in its second three-year phase (1996-1999), supported by four new donors – DANIDA, ECHO, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland and the Department for International Development, UK. Over the three year phase, the RRN will seek to expand its reach and relevance amongst humanitarian agency personnel and to further promote good practice.

## **Objective**

To improve aid policy and practice as it is applied in complex political emergencies.

## **Purpose**

To contribute to individual and institutional learning by encouraging the exchange and dissemination of information relevant to the professional development of those engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

## **Activities**

To commission, publish and disseminate analysis and reflection on issues of good practice in policy and programming in humanitarian operations, primarily in the form of written publications, in both French and English.

## **Target audience**

Individuals and organisations actively engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance at national and international, field-based and head office level in the 'North' and 'South'.

The Relief and Rehabilitation Network is supported by:

Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
DANIDA

ECHO

Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland

Department for International  
Development