Opening the Black Box.
An outline of a framework to understand, promote and evaluate humanitarian coordination.

June 1999

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1. INTRODUCTION.

The coordination of international intervention in conflicts is an old sore. Although nobody is in principle against coordination, in practice efforts to achieve coordinated action lead to irritation and frustration. Coordination efforts can quickly provoke institutional 'turf' wars. The discussion about coordination then degenerates into one of power and authority. Nothing quite reveals the 'international humanitarian system' as the opposite of a 'system', as a study of the coordination between humanitarian actors intervening in conflict. ' Humanitarian action' tends to appear as a rather bewildering array of institutional actors running around in an 'arena' with shifting alliances and competing interests that sometimes closely resemble the 'clanic factionalism' that aid workers so deplore in some societies they operate in.

There are powerful 'market incentives' to make institutional survival and self-interest a dominant preoccupation in the humanitarian world. It is possible for institutional donors to influence that trend by rewarding agencies that collaborate and coordinate. That would help overcome one problem in practically fostering cooperation ie. that hardly any aid agency has a policy on inter-agency cooperation and collaboration (1). As a consequence the actual stance of an agency, certainly at field-level, is left to the 'discretion' of the resident representative. A second practical problem is that few aid workers, even with careers of many years, know much about the rich history of collaboration in the humanitarian world. That is all the more problematic in that the ingredients that analysts and evaluators most systematically identify as a key factor where some successful coordination occurs, are 'personal chemistry' and 'leadership' (eg. Donini et al. 1996:45). Recently there is a renewed interest in coordination. This has led to a growing number of studies of coordination experiences and lesson learning exercises (e.g. Donini 1996; Ball and Campbell 1998). Helpful as these are, many discussions about and reviews of coordination remain frustrating because it is often not very clear what is understood by 'coordination' (eg. Donini 1996:97; Court of Auditors 1997:9). In the absence of a common reference, it is also difficult to evaluate coordination efforts (eg. Borton 1996:17).

This paper starts out with a cursory overview of coordination experiences by major players in the humanitarian world (Section 2). The aim is only to indicate the wealth of experience there, not to offer a critical analysis of it all. The review indicates that coordination in and by host governments and coordination in and by donor administrations are understudied. It also points at the important role donors could play in fostering better collaboration and coordination among operational agencies. Section3 provides the substance of the paper. It outlines a framework for understanding, promoting and evaluating coordination. That framework is a tool. Like any tool, it is a means to an end, and it can be refined, improved or discarded. It has at least three potential uses:
a. The framework may help us understand better what we refer to when we talk about 'coordination'.
b. It may serve as a tactical guide for those wanting to strengthen the coordination efforts. In that sense it is a tool to facilitate focused discussion, not for guaranteed outcomes.
3. And it could be a reference for those wanting to evaluate coordination practices.
The framework needs testing in practice. The paper finally concludes with a discussion

of strategic coordination (Section 4).

2. COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION EXPERIENCES IN THE HUMANITARIAN WORLD.

2.1. Host Government Coordination.

The most neglected and understudied aspect of the coordination of humanitarian action must be that by host governments. Yet many countries have created specialised ministries or administrations for refugees (eg. Pakistan, Ethiopia) or for relief, rehabilitation and/or reconstruction (eg. Rwanda, Malawi, Sri Lanka). Sometimes there are governmental departments whose intent is to foster 'coordination', such as the Dpt. for Coordination of Humanitarian Organisations and Funds in Croatia or the Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit in Rwanda. National governments will stress their prerogative to screen aid agencies for integrity and competence. They can argue that international aid should be provided through government structures or at least in line with national plans and policies. Sometimes, as with the discussions over the NGO Coordination Act in Kenya in 1990 or with the controversy over the inquiries of the NGO Commission in Sri Lanka in 1991-1993 (Van Brabant 1997a), the government will strongly argue that it must legislate and supervise an otherwise chaotic and unaccountable NGO sector, and ensure that its programmes and projects are coordinated.

Humanitarian agencies in general, and NGOs in particular, in times of conflict have tended to stay away from host governments. One major reason is political. In a number of situations, aid agencies have operated in a country without government consent, for example in Biafra in the mid-60s (Borton 1994:29-34), or in Tigray and Eritrea (Duffield 1995) and in Afghanistan in the 1980s (Nicholds & Borton 1994). Even where they operate in rebel-controlled areas with the consent of the government, such as in Sudan or Sri Lanka or Angola, they may want to maintain a distance from the government that itself is party to the conflict, to maintain their neutrality. This attitude is not always without ground. In times of war, governments have defined refugees and/or displaced people as a 'national security concern', and therefore severely restricted humanitarian access and assistance. The Ministry of the Interior (eg. in Guatemala) or the Ministry of Defence (eg. in Thailand or Sri Lanka) can come to take on an overriding authority over line ministries or specialised national aid administrations. A second major reason is the capacity of the national authorities. Even assertive governments such as the one in Sri Lanka, seldom have the administrative capacity to check, analyse and review the narrative reports and accounts that aid agencies provide as requested, let alone provide detailed ongoing situational assessments or policy guidelines for programming. The situation is not helped by the lack of coordination that itself may exist within the government. In Sri Lanka the supervision and 'coordination' of NGOs and of humanitarian aid in 1994-1996 'floated' between the Ministry of Social Services, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, and the Northern Task Force in the President's office, with a lack of communication and sometimes rivalry between these government structures (Van Brabant 1997b:14-15). Equally disabling can be the lack of 'vertical' coordination within the government administration, resulting from too many and poorly managed provincial or regional restructurings. Thus Hararghe province encompassing most of east Ethiopia was restructured in 1989 and part of it designated as the Ogaden Autonomous Region. A few years and a change of regime later, in 1993/4 the whole area was again restructured and now split into three new entities, the Oromo Region 4,

the Somali Region 5 and Dire Dawa Autonomous Region. This led to changes in the civil service staffing, but also to unclear demarcations of territorial boundaries and of the respective roles and responsibilities of the regional and national administrations (see Van Brabant 1994). The lack of capacity in national administrations enhances the temptation among aid agencies to bypass even government structures that in principle are supportive. Humanitarian aid resources for Mozambique between 1987-1991 were mobilised through national emergency appeals. In 1987 and 1988 NGOs still worked through the government but after that, frustrated with the lack of speed and competence, they increasingly became directly operational, thereby of course only further undermining government capacity (Egan 1991). Understandable as this may be, this legacy of independent action creates its own problems when, following an end to a conflict, aid agencies want to see the government take up 'its responsibilities' again, and hand over many of their projects.

2.2. NGO Coordination.

There is a rich, but not well analysed nor widely disseminated experience of NGO coordination (eg. Bennett 1995). Analytically, not necessarily chronologically, speaking, it is possible to distinguish examples of sectoral coordination, of a lead agency role, of a situation-specific operation and of a standing capacity for collaboration.

NGOs with medical programmes are often the first to start collaborating, presumably because effective health care and disease control is beyond the scope of any single agency and requires integrated efforts and services. Examples are the Coordination of Medical Committees (CMC) operating in Afghanistan in the late 80s, and Medicam in Cambodia. Other experiences of sectoral coordination come from the agricultural sector, with for example the Eritrean Interagency Agricultural Consortium or the Tigray Transport and Agricultural Consortium and the Agricultural Relief and Rehabilitation in Cambodia grouping of agencies.

Although there is a folk perception that NGOs are even more suspicious of each other than UN agencies, there are various examples of NGO 'collaboration' and 'coordination' being fostered and practically supported through the initiative of particular NGOs. Such a role was played by the Norwegian Refugee Council for the LINK NGO Forum in Mozambique (Bennett 1995b) and by the Norwegian Save the Children in Sri Lanka (Van Brabant 1997b:13-14). In refugee settings, UNHCR has sometimes subcontracted a few larger NGOs as major 'implementing partner', who then in turn become the channel for funds and the supervisors of programmes of other, usually smaller, organisations. That 'model' for example was adopted for the refugee camps in Kenya, with the Kenyan Red Cross, CARE and the Lutheran World Federation as 'intermediaries' between UNHCR and a larger array of operational NGOs (Kathina Juma 1995).

Some of the strongest examples of operational NGO collaboration come from contexts where the UN for political reasons did not or could not play a role, so that NGOs took on a lead role in large scale operations, usually accompanied by advocacy efforts. Examples are the Joint Church Action, that flew relief into Biafra from the island of Santo Tome, the Oxfam-led NGO Consortium for Cambodia (1979-81) or the Emergency Relief Desk (1981-1991) which, based in Khartoum, provided assistance to Eritrea and Tigray

during the Ethiopian civil war. Most of these collaborative operations were temporary.

The growing competition among aid agencies, but also the need for NGOs to operate and advocate in an increasingly globalised environment, has fostered more 'standing' collaborative arrangements. Some of these are oecumenical between church organisations, such as Agencies Collaborating Together (ACT), others are family-type federations of specific agencies with many country-organisations. The older example there is probably the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, but more recently Save the Children, Medecins sans Frontieres, Oxfam, CARE, Action against Hunger and Caritas, to name but a few, have been developing and strengthening their international structures and collaboration. Other standing NGO 'fora' are InterAction in Washington, as umbrella organisation for the US development and humanitarian NGOs, VOICE in Brussels as link between NGOs and the humanitarian structures of the European Commission, and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, linking northern and southern NGOs with policy-makers in Geneva and elsewhere. Sometimes such non-situation specific collaborative experiences have given rise to what institutionally is a new entity, whose management is largely independent from the original 'founding organisations'. That appears to have been the case with PACT (Private Agencies Cooperating Together) in the USA, the Disaster Relief Agency (DRA) in the Netherlands or ACORD (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development) in the UK. A notably case has been the Christian Relief and Development Agency in Ethiopia, which grew out of the Christian Relief Committee that was created in 1973 in response to famine in the country. This not only still exists but, unusually, receives funds from donors that member agencies can submit projects for, which are now screened and supervised by the CRDA (Borton 1995:31-37).

To this can be added national NGO networks, Councils or federations. Often created around development activities these tend to be bypassed by international organisations in times of crisis. There are some international networks for natural disaster response, that involve national and international NGOs (eg. La Red in the Spanish speaking world, or Duryog Nivaran in South Asia). In times of conflict, national NGOs in a first phase may join in with the coordinating structures that international NGOs create at country-level. But it is not uncommon for them subsequently to create their own forum, such as the Lebanese NGO Forum, Ponleu Khmer in Cambodia, FONGA in Angola or the Afghan NGO Coordinating Body in Peshawar, Pakistan.

2.3. UN Coordination.

The most commented upon problems of coordination between aid agencies, notably in the humanitarian field, concerns those of the UN. As with NGO collaboration efforts, it is possible to analytically identify the same four approaches.

In outset, the various UN agencies were 'specialised' agencies, who therefore each would provide a leadership and coordinating role in their respective sectors (eg. health for the World Health Organisation or agriculture for the Food and Agricultural Organisation) or for their specific thematic focus (eg. refugees for UNHCR or women

and children for UNICEF). In practice however, sectoral and thematic mandates overlap, and the tendency among UN agencies has been to become increasingly generalist, with ever more 'mandate-overlap'. Following the conflicts and crises in Biafra and around the creation of Bangladesh, the UN Disaster Relief Office was created in1972 in order to give the UN a better response capacity. But already in the 1970s many of the other UN agencies started developing an in-house emergency response capacity, that marginalised UNDRO. The specialised agency approach therefore seems to have become a thing of the past.

The other approach is that of nominating a 'lead agency'. In stable contexts, UNDP tends to be the lead UN agency, as a 'primus inter pares'. In crisis or conflict situations, others too have taken on that role, based on their mandate, or on their capacity or the political space that they were allowed. Thus UNHCR took on a lead agency role in Bosnia, UNICEF in Operation Lifeline Sudan in south Sudan and WFP in North Korea. The lead agency approach in the UN has not been without frictions. Non-lead agencies perceive a conflict of interest between fostering the interests of the UN as a whole and that of the lead agency in particular. As soon as the situation allows then, they may be tempted to re-assert their independence from the leading UN agency.

There is also interesting experience in the UN with situation-specific operations. The UN Relief Operation Bangladesh (1971) was an attempt to provide integrated logistics and communications support. Two more comprehensive integrated operations in the 1980s tend to be reviewed as valuable approaches. These were the UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) for Cambodian refugees in Thailand (1982-1992) and the UN Office for Emergency Operations in Ethiopia (1984-1987) (Jansson 1990). None of these had a country-wide remit, which remained with UNDP. UNBRO in particular seems to have been effective notwithstanding the fact that it was successively staffed and managed by WFP, UNDP and UNHCR. Some of the reasons of its perceived effectiveness, beyond the integrated character of the operation, were the fact that decision-making authority rested in the Bangkok office, close to the field, and that it controlled the funding, also for NGOs (Benson 1994:30-34). Perhaps the first country-wide special UN operation was UNOCA, or the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes in Afghanistan (1988-1993). Initially it had an especially appointed coordinator who acted as the spokesperson for the UN system to all concerned parties and who was directly answerable to the Secretary-General. In 1992 however UNOCA became subordinated and answerable to the newly created Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), and in 1993 UNDP retook the responsibility for rehabilitation and economic and development assistance in Afghanistan, leaving the now renamed Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance with a reduced mandate for relief only (Donini 1996 et al: 9-15). The resulting parallel systems for resource mobilisation and programming were reintegrated some years later, with the UNDP resident representative also nominated as the humanitarian coordinator, with OCHA staff placed in his office.

The DHA was an attempt to create a standing coordinating capacity and structure in the UN. The need for such had become obvious during the Gulf crisis with Iraq, where the lack of clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of the UN Resident Coordinators, the Personal Representative of the Secretary General, a lead agency such as UNHCR and senior UN Emergency Managers, had given rise to serious tensions,

disputes and inefficiencies in the UN's response (Minear. et al 1992). The Gulf Crisis in 1990 had also generated an Interagency Working Group in Geneva, that then became a standing forum, the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC), with participation of the heads of leading UN agencies, the International Office for Migration, the Red Cross movement and international NGOs. In its short existence (1992-1997) the Department for Humanitarian Affairs received much abuse and has been perceived as a 'failure'. Part of the problem can be attributed to staff and management weaknesses in the DHA. But the DHA was also a 'concept in search of a commitment' (Donini 1996:123) and was set up for failure by those who supported its creation. There was little commitment among the UN agencies but also among the donors to make it work. Funding had to come from voluntary and often earmarked contributions so that DHA staff were constantly constrained by financial uncertainty. The DHA also had no authority over other UN agencies it was supposed to coordinate, it could not have the field-knowledge that the operational agencies had, and it was resented where, as for demining and demobilisation, it took on an operational role that no other UN agency was filling (Dedring 1996). Following the reform of the UN in 1997, DHA was succeeded by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), with a smaller staffing, but a clearer mandate and modus operandi with the other UN agencies. The operational tasks have been allocated to other UN entities. Information, analysis, policy-development and advocacy towards the Security Council have become a major responsibility for OCHA in New York. For the coordination of field operations, OCHA works more clearly with and through the IASC in Geneva and with and through the operational UN agencies that take a lead, mostly UNDP and UNHCR.

At the same time, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has restructured his secretariat, and created four executive committees that bring together various UN agencies: an executive committee on peace and security, on economic and social affairs, on humanitarian affairs and on development cooperation. Human rights are a crosscutting issue, so that the High Commissioner on Human Rights is represented on all four committees.

That still leaves some structural questions or ambiguities in the coordination of UN actions in and on conflict:
a. One is the relationship between the UN executive committees in New York and the InterAgency Standing Committee in Geneva. In principle the link is the Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance, the head of OCHA. In practice the IASC has a broader membership than only UN agencies, but it also meets less regularly that the Executive Committees which complicates a harmonisation of views and positions between the two fora.
b. Another one is the relationship between three coordination frameworks that are simultaneously in use and being further develop by UN agencies: the Consolidated Appeal process, a Strategic Framework approach and a UN Development Assistance Framework (Hyder 1999).
c. Thirdly there is the relationship between a Special Envoy or a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), whose main role is a political one of mediation in a conflict (see eg. Vance and Hamburg 1997), and that of the Resident Coordinator for aid in a particular country. The situation can become even more complicated when there are also UN peace-keepers in place, with an overall commander who he too must relate to the SRSG and the Resident Coordinator. 'Coordination' between these three focal points

however becomes more a matter of 'coherence', between the diplomatic, peace-keeping and assistance efforts of the United Nations.

2.4 Donor Coordination.

Perhaps most understudied and generally not documented however is the coordination of those who tend to insist so strongly that the operational agencies better coordinate, ie. the donors. Yet there are interesting experiences around of donor fora or coordination fora in which donors actively participate: the Angola Humanitarian Coordination Group, the Somalia Aid Coordinating Body, the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia, the Afghanistan Support Group and the recently started six-monthly gathering of donors and UN agencies involved with Operational Lifeline Sudan are examples.

A number of donor administrations have global aid priorities and strategies, and may also develop country strategies. This however they seem to do in isolation of each other. In stable situations an opportunity for the 'coordination' of aid are the annual pledging rounds of development aid. Recipient governments however know all too well the limited coordination that results from those meetings. For crisis and conflict situations, the degree of information sharing and 'coordination' between donors seems significantly lower (eg. Court of Auditors 1997:9).

The disparate available evidence seems to indicate that in general donors do not coordinate beyond the overall direction of their policy objectives. They also may complicate if not undermine the coordination between operational agencies through the funding decisions they make.

One reason may be a different analysis and appreciation of the political dynamics of a region and of the nature of an incumbent government. Thus a number of donors are more sympathetic towards the policies and priorities of the current government in Rwanda and accept the intense impact of the genocide experience on these. Other donors, particularly those who were closely involved in Rwanda prior to the genocide, tend to maintain a more critical perspective towards the current government. Whereas the first will engage more closely with the government, the latter will tend to maintain a certain distance and channel their aid through the UN or directly to NGOs. The net result is that the donor 'community' gives conflicting signals and that there is no common use of incentives or disincentives (Baare et al. 1999:30-31).

Around Afghanistan, since 1997 and in the context of a strategic framework exercise, donors have been in the driving seat to make the Western aid agencies work in more principled and better coordinated ways. This has led to an enormous amount of meetings in an effort to develop an integrated assistance programme. The donor Afghanistan Support Forum which meets every six months has been a key mechanism. As of 1999 it should get an Islamabad-based counterpart in the Afghanistan Programming Board, on which UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross movement will also be represented. A critical review indicates that there is a high consensus over the policy objectives of the Western donors in Afghanistan. Yet when it comes to operational

policy and strategy decisions, donors act independent of each other, even if their decisions have an impact on operational work that is also supported by other donors. Examples have been ECHO's decision in August 1998, to suspend all its funding to NGOs operating in Kabul or DFID's decision to stop funding NGOs that against its advice deploy international, notably British, staff in Afghanistan. These decisions were taken with disregard for the consequences on the operational capacity of agencies that were also receiving funds from other donors. Whereas a degree of convergence therefore may be achieved over the broad policy objectives or over operational standards, there can be significant divergence in the critical areas of policy implementation and strategy (Van Brabant & Killick 1999:24-27 and annex 2). Meetings of donors, just as those of operational agencies therefore, can be an opportunity to share information and exchange views, but do not necessarily generate collaboration let alone coordinated decisions or actions.

Donors decisions have also complicated better coordination among operational agencies. In Rwanda in 1994 for example, USAID and ECHO had personnel on the ground, but the recognition of the importance of these two donors was not matched by close contact between the US's Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and ECHO personnel. Consequently DART chose to support the UN Rwanda Emergency Office to work with internally displaced people, whereas ECHO saw the ICRC as taking a lead role towards the IDPs (Borton 1996:9). Still in the Great Lakes, following the Rwandan refugee crisis in 1994 and 1995, notably ECHO strengthened UNHCR's capacity to coordinate NGOs working in the refugee camps in Tanzania and east Zaire, by channelling most of its funds through the UN organisation. This stands in sharp contrast with the situation in for example Albania in 1999, where donors have provided assistance to the Kosovar refugees on a totally bilateral basis, first through their own national military contingents, and then through funding NGOs. UNHCR was indeed caught unprepared, but its poor initial performance has only been prolonged and aggravated by donors refusing to offer the agency cash resources, and bypassing it completely. The result three months into the crisis is a 'coordination vacuum' that the government of Albania or NGOs by themselves cannot fill. A final example are the UN's consolidated appeals. Even though there are significant problems with the quality of the UN Consolidated Appeals, donors have also been reluctant to strongly support this common resource mobilisation effort where, as for Afghanistan, efforts were undertaken to improve its quality.

Donor administrations are also not immune to internal coordination problems. Humanitarian assistance from the European Commission is provided through ECHO, DG1 and DG8, while humanitarian assistance from USAID can come from the Bureau for Refugees, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance or the Office for Transitional Initiatives, to name the principal players. These different administrations do not necessarilly work in better coordinated ways than the UN agencies they like to criticise (eg. Court of Auditors 1997:4) although the US agencies tend to be more responsive to US government policy directives.

Another long-standing area of grief for operational agencies are the diverse proposal and reporting requirements, budget lines and contractual stipulations of different donors. This adds to the administrative burden of aid agencies. Equally unproductive is the individual commissioning of evaluations by different donor administrations, often with similar or

overlapping terms of reference. Currently there is a proliferation of evaluations of aid work in Sudan, and the same is likely to happen for the response to Hurricane Mich in Central America and to the Kosovo refugee crisis in the Balkans. The result can be an ongoing stream of consultants with the same questions, and many project evaluations but no strategic, system-wide overview. Much value could be had from pro-active information sharing about review and evaluation plans, from more multiple donor joint initiatives in that regard, and from a wider sharing of the insights gained from these exercises, which, if well done and convincing, could lead to more common approaches.

A Sri Lankan NGO activist once called for a 'donor code of conduct'. Directed at an international NGO that was funding national NGOs, the concept could well be extended to governmental aid administrations.

2.5. Civil-Military Coordination.

With a growing involvement of peace-keeping forces in humanitarian tasks, first in support of Rwandan refugees, and then more prominently in Bosnia and for Kosovar refugees, civil-military coordination or CIMIC has become a new field of study, research, doctrine-development and practice, at least in the military. Clearly multi-lateral peacekeeping or peace-support operations also suffer from coordination problems between the various military contingents that compose the overall force. Each has its own command and control structure that may respond as much to its own national government authority as to the force commander. Beyond that, although in a number of Western countries aid workers, notably from NGOs, and peace-keeping training schools have increased their contacts, the prime purpose of this has been to reduce the cultural divide between the military and humanitarian aid workers, and to familiarise both with the presence of the 'other' in the theater of operations. There does not yet seem to be much good analytical documentation of how civil-military cooperation or coordination evolved and stood up in real life contexts, or at least such documentation is not widely available in the civilian aid world.

This too then is an area where critical field research could usefully be undertaken. This will of course reveal differences in organisational style, with the military given to 'unity of purpose, unity of command, unity of understanding' (Sanderson 1996:185), and aid organisations, especially NGOs, quite the opposite. But a probably more interesting area of reflexion is the more developed notion in the military of strategic, operational and tactical levels of command (Anderson 1996:188), something that aid agencies, with perhaps the exception of the ICRC, tend to be seriously confused about.

3. A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING, PROMOTING AND EVALUATING COORDINATION.

The cursory overview in section 2 indicates that coordination in the humanitarian field is highly problematic but also that there is a wealth of experience, including very positive experience. Without a better review of that experience, and a wider knowledge of what often has been achieved, the almost automatic rejection of 'coordination' by many aid workers, will be hard to overcome. For those who want to promote coordination however, it is recommended not to start from the institutional entry-point which provided the structure for our overview. Indeed, this risks immediately invoking the reflex of institutional self-interest and organisational rivalry. The resulting feelings and attitudes of defensiveness are not conducive to improved coordination.

It is suggested that those wanting to promote better collaboration and coordination start from the premisse that coordination is not an end in itself but an attempt to enhance the quality and impact of the international intervention in and on these conflicts. The concept of 'coordination' also encompasses many things: integrated planning, common standards, common positioning... . But also, less sharply delineated: working in 'orchestrated' ways that 'converge', are 'coherent', 'informed of and by each other', and stimulate learning from the collective experience... . Conflicts, the responses to them and the impacts of these responses, are fluid, they evolve and change. 'Coordination' therefore is an ongoing activity, that is here discussed as a process, rather than, as has often been the case, as a 'blue-print'. Key to 'success' is intellectual leadership, more than institutional leadership. Understanding coordination in either/or terms of 'coordination by command' or 'coordination by consensus', with the latter believed to lead to the lowest common denominator, is not totally devoid of realism but also not entirely helpful. Striving for total consensus among a large number of agencies most of whom have no clear policies, is a misplaced objective. More realistically the coordination process seeks to create a 'critical mass' of leading agencies, whose improved analysis and increased effectiveness makes them more influential in the debates and decisions about interventions.

This chapter sets out a framework. Part 3.1 identifies three interlocking levels of the coordination of conflict interventions. Part 3.2 is a critical review of common objections and of institutional obstacles to coordination. Part 3.3 discusses a range of functions that a coordinating process at field level may take up. Which functions are taken up and which not will decide whether the coordination effort remains fairly 'hollow' (agency-oriented) or is more 'substantive' (task- and target-oriented) (see Donini et al. 1996:24). Part 3.4 explores the question of coordinated action to obtain humanitarian space. Part 3.5 brings coordination for conflict management into the picture.

One obstacle to coordination efforts is that neither those who are or should be around the table, nor even the nominal 'coordination facilitators', have a clear framework to understand and pursue coordination with. Hopefully this article can shed some light on that.

### 3.1. Levels of Coordination of Conflict Interventions.

This paper looks at the coordination of conflict interventions from a humanitarian perspective. Yet 'humanitarian objectives cannot be separated from the issue of conflict resolution' (Sanderson 1996:181). Action in conflict must be related to action on conflict. Conflict interventions take place at different levels and for different purposes, and it seems useful to distinguish these and the coordination that is required at each:

      At operational field level there is the humanitarian assistance, provided by a wide range of actors, which needs programmatic coordination.

      At the other end there are the political attempts to bring the violence and the conflict to an end. Conventional wisdom holds that international efforts to this effect stand a better chance of being successful if they are 'coordinated'.

      In between is the need for 'humanitarian space' without which the operational agencies on the ground cannot realise their programmes of assistance and protection.

The nature and the scope of that humanitarian space however is not determined by them but by the effective power-brokers on the ground. It is from them that a 'framework of consent' (Lautze et al. 1998:13-16) needs to be obtained. But these powerbrokers first and foremost have political and military agendas. The assumption is that humanitarian agencies will improve their chances to obtain more consent or enlarge the available humanitarian space, if their negotiation efforts are orchestrated. 'Humanitarian space' is not an abstract notion. It is related to concrete assistance and protection efforts. Assistance and protection cannot be provided without a certain humanitarian space but that humanitarian space also needs to be sustained through the responsible provision of assistance and protection. Programmes and consent are interlocked. Ultimately however, the only bargaining power of aid agencies is that of moral authority and argument. They therefore may require support from the regional and international political actors, through pressure or through incentives, to convince the power brokers in the conflict to provide more humanitarian space. It is over humanitarian space then that the political and assistance strategies (should) 'meet', a meeting that needs to be 'coordinated'.
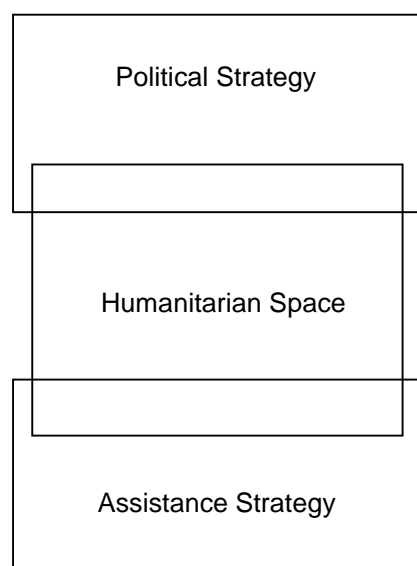
3.2. Objections and Obstacles to Operational Coordination.

More effective operations and more humanitarian space for aid providers and civilians alike seem eminently pursuable aims. Why does this unity of purpose then not lead to greater support for collaboration and coordinated approaches? Those trying to promote and facilitate coordination will have to face a number of objections against coordination, and part of their task will be to provide convincing counter-arguments. This is something that is largely within their control. At the same time the humanitarian world operates in ways that offer strong disincentives against effective coordination. That is largely outside the control of field coordinators, and needs to be addressed at higher organisational levels but above all also by donors.

A major systemic obstacle comes from the fact that the humanitarian sector is a saturated market where implementing agencies are competing for funds. Visibility and scale of the individual agency are seen as a key element for successful long-term financial survival. This competition unfortunately also extents, as we have seen, to official aid donors. Yet it seems not totally outlandish to believe that the excesses of what has become unhealthy competition can be tempered by a greater emphasis on 'profile' rather than 'visibility' ie. a 'reputation' of professionalism of an agency. Donors can create incentives for collaborative work by rewarding it financially. Donors and agencies alike in the communications to their constituencies and 'audiences at home' can offer positive messages about collaboration.

Beyond that, there are a number of common objections against coordination.
   A first one is that of 'different mandates'. Too much is made of 'mandate' issues. This usually smacks even more overtly of mere organisational self-interest, with total disregard of the interests of the intended beneficiaries. Fundamentally humanitarian agencies do not have different mandates. They may specialise in certain sectors or focus on different target groups such as children, refugees, mine victims etc. But it is obvious that population categories nor sectoral assistance can be seen in isolation from each other. People afflicted by disaster do not mistakenly 'slice up reality' the way aid agencies tend to do. Agencies have to recognise that the underlying humanitarian mandate is the same: save lives, reduce suffering and try and protect or restore livelihoods and local capacities. The work of different agencies is therefore inherently complementary.
   Secondly, particularly when confronted with an acute emergency, the humanitarian sector puts a premium on speed. There is the fear then that the coordination effort will cause delays (eg. Minear et al. 1992:3; Doppler 1996:134). The point is not that this argument is without substance, but that it applies in only a minority of circumstances. Many crises become protracted, so that the most effective response is not necessarily or no longer the speediest one.
   Thirdly, there is institutional resistance to creating yet another 'layer of bureaucracy'. If coordination attempts are indeed so unprofessional and ineffective as to be nothing more than 'bureaucracy', they are indeed a wastage. Yet at the same time few would refuse to recognise that uncoordinated work also creates much wastage, as well as unfilled gaps. The reservation therefore does not seem to be against coordination per se, as against ineffective coordination. The challenge then becomes to render it effective. Given that the same senior managers who object to interagency coordination probably see internal coordination as an important aspect of their

management responsibilities, the stumbling block seems more a wish to retain 'authority' than a concern over 'bureaucracy'.

Fourthly, effective coordination indeed has a cost. It is time and therefore staff-intensive, and needs to be properly resourced. The problem is that 'damage-control' and 'wastage avoided' through coordination do not show up in the books, and that it is therefore difficult to demonstrate that the coordination effort even from a financial point of view has been 'cost-saving'. But because wastage does not show up in the books it does not mean that is has not happened. If cost-effectiveness would be more regularly looked at in evaluations and audits, this would quickly appear.

Fifthly, there is a rather strange belief that coordination complicates accountability. True, where resources are pooled in a coordinated effort, it may become more difficult to trace the end-use of everybody's individual dollar. But surely that is a distorted concept of 'accountability'. Financial accountability cannot be limited to the figures that appear in the accounts. 'Wastage' from unnecessary duplication of efforts does not appear in any agency's accounts, but is therefore no less of a management failure. Moreover, aid funds are provided to bring assistance. There cannot therefore only be accountability upwards to the financial auditor, there has to be accountability in terms of the effectiveness of the work, and its impact.

All these objections mean that seldom is there a policy within organisations that puts the active pursuit of collaboration and coordination efforts with other agencies in the job description of field representatives. As a consequence, the attitude of an agency towards coordination efforts is left entirely to the whim of individuals, and can change completely as individuals change. More serious understanding of the what and why of coordination is generally weak to non-existent in the professional knowledge of many aid workers. The result is that the representative of an agency in one country may be acting as a major opponent of coordination, while the same agency in another country is taking the lead. This is irresponsible and unprofessional and needs to be corrected at the level of agency policy. Even where agencies have formally signed up to a coordination protocol, field representatives tend to be totally unaware of this (Kunder 1998). Basic knowledge about interagency coordination should become as much part of the 'general knowledge' of managers as the basics of personnel management.

There is a risk that in the humanitarian world organisational self-interests come to dominate the interests of the target beneficiaries and of the tax payers. This conflicts with the agencies own proclaimed humanitarian ethos and principles, and should therefore be exposed and confronted.

What then are qualities of a good coordinator? If intellectual leadership is a hallmark, then the person will adopt a 'coordination by argument' rather than 'coordination by authority' approach. This will require a thorough understanding of the situation, of different perceptions of it, and of the organisational incentives that work against more coordinated action. The challenge will be to show leadership in identifying the topical agenda issues, to offer the more convincing analysis, to raise the key questions and to take a lead in exploring what might be the best possible way of responding to them (Walsh 1996; Van Brabant 1997b:21-22).

A crucial characteristic of an effective coordinator is the ability to run effective meetings. Few things are quite as prevalent and motivation-killing in the humanitarian sector, as

ineffective meetings. Properly preparing a meeting, ensuring that the right people attend it, and managing it to produce results, is a key skill. To a degree this requires a certain type of personality, to a degree this skill can be learned or developed. Beyond that, the coordination facilitator needs to have relevant knowledge and expertise about 'coordination'. S/he needs to have an understanding of the mandates, cultures and operational practices of the variety of actors whose work needs to be coordinated. S/he will definitely benefit from having knowledge about other aid coordination experiences. Where decision-makers come without any knowledge of the extensive experience with coordination, it may be necessary to show that there is ample precedent. It are individuals for example, who have carried the 'institutional knowledge' about functioning NGO coordination mechanisms from the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons (CCSDPT), founded in 1975 (see Benson 1993:52) to inspire the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) in Peshwar, Pakistan (1988) and the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) (1990). The familiarity of individuals with the ACBAR experience later in 1995-6 fed into the review and revival of the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies in Sri Lanka.

3.3. Operational Coordination.

The aims and rationale for operational coordination are straightforward: similar standards of quality, the cost-effective use of resources, the rational allocation of tasks, working towards agreed priorities, all of which will contribute to impact. As such operational collaboration or coordination covers the various moments of the project cycle: assessment of needs, programme planning including the prioritisation of target groups, areas and sectors and the allocation of tasks, resource mobilisation, resource allocation and implementation to avoid duplication but also to avoid gaps, optimalising the use of the available logistics and communications, and monitoring and evaluating the impact of the programmes on the existing needs and capacities. It should also include the concertation of the efforts to strengthen local capacities.

We will not here go into the question of who holds the operational coordinating function, although in practice that is relevant. But the disputes over it also seriously distract from the question of what can be done to make the coordination function most effective?

Table 1 provides a list of the possible functions that a coordinating forum of aid agencies can fullfil. Key functions identified here are: serving as a contact point and providing situational updates, which are often the classical core of coordinating entities. But there can also be the provision of support services to members/participants in the coordination forum, and a function related to security, training and learning. Other potential functions are more task-oriented and concern programming, political analysis, representation and strategic decision-making.
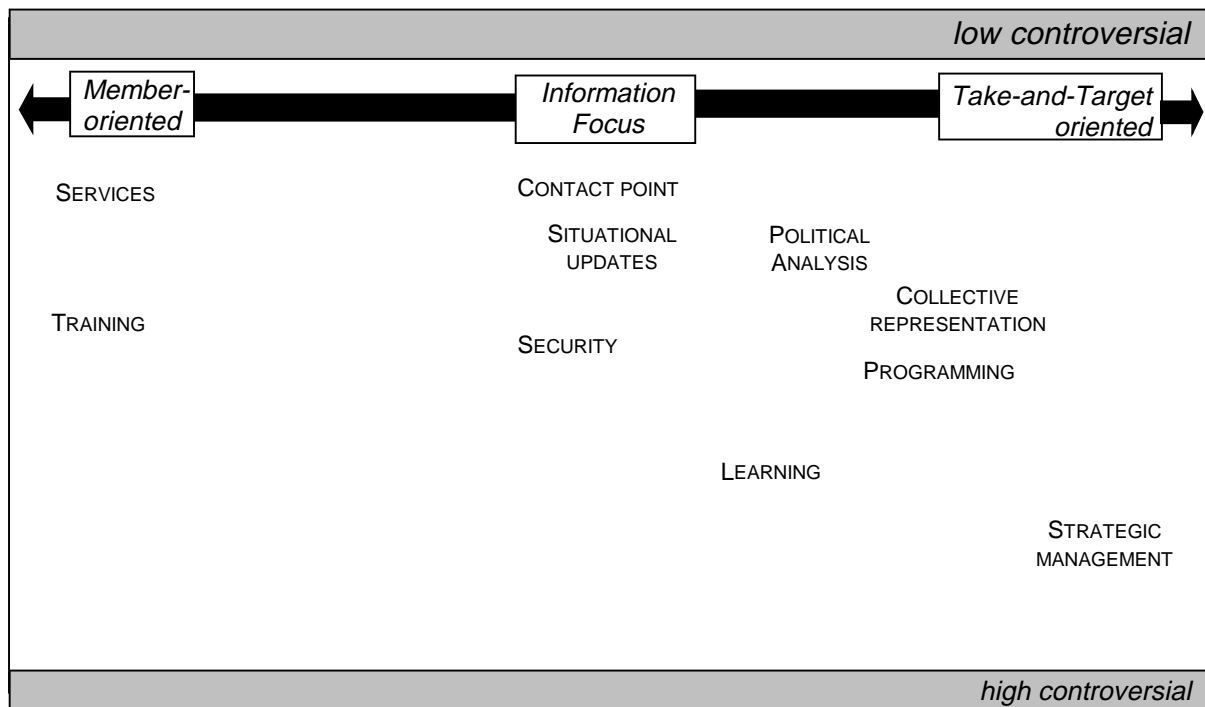
Table 1

services to members	- registration - import and income tax - labour legislation - legal advice - meeting rooms, resource centre - salary or transport surveys - maps
training for members	- training course broker/inventory - standardise training curricula - interagency training provider - organisational development specialist advice
information	- collective agency contact point - agency directory
situational updates	- produce situational updates - monitor and collate needs assessments - monitor and collate resource availability (financial resources and assets)
security	- information exchange on security situation - incident pattern analysis - coordinate contingency plans (hibernate/evacuate) - technical support service on security (radios...) - incident investigation - interagency security management
learning/evaluation	- collect programme reports/reviews - interagency discussion of reviews/evaluations - carry out reviews/evaluations - develop institutional memory of lessons identified
programming	- database of projects (sector/district) - sectoral policies/guidelines - facilitate interagency programme planning - review programming gaps/duplication - operational role to fill gaps
political analysis	- conflict analysis - actor analysis - agency positions in the political economy of conflict - scenario development
representation	- to powerbrokers for framework of consent - to donors/general public for resource mobilisation - to the media for public relations/information
strategic decision-making	- about division of labour/task allocation - about agency selection/vetting - about agency positioning in the conflict and terms of engagement/disengagement - about incentives or conditionalities

It is possible for those wanting to promote better coordination to turn this table into a two-dimensional diagram. The horizontal axis presents a continuum from functions that

primarily serve the interests of the humanitarian agencies, over information functions that can be conceived as a service to agencies or a building block for better programming, to clearer task- and target oriented functions. The vertical axis represents the degree of controversiality of the function for the participants in the coordination forum. The assumption is that the more task- and target-oriented the function becomes, the more substantive, but probably also the more controversial it will be. But strengthening coordination is precisely rendering it more substantive.

FIELD LEVEL COORDINATION

low controversial

← Member-oriented | Information Focus | Take-and-Target oriented →

SERVICES

CONTACT POINT

SITUATIONAL UPDATES

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

TRAINING

SECURITY

PROGRAMMING

LEARNING

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

high controversial

This diagram can then become a tool and a guide. One can perhaps do a participatory mapping exercise to get a feel for how controversial certain functions are perceived to be. If there is a high level of unease among aid agencies, it may be tactically wise to first build trust and cooperation starting with some less controversial functions, before moving into the more controversial domains.

It is important to note that each function can encompass various activities that themselves have different degrees of controversiality. The various agencies may for example welcome an inventory of trainings on offer, but be more hesitant when the coordinating entity tries to facilitate a standardisation of training programmes. For the coordinating entity itself to become a training provider may be highly controversial, certainly if there are also training providers among the participating agencies. As regards security for example, technical support particularly on communications, and security updates are likely to be welcomed. But for a coordinating entity to get involved in the investigation of a security incident, let alone to assume a stronger role in the coordination of the security strategies of various agencies would be more controversial.

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Field Level Coordination
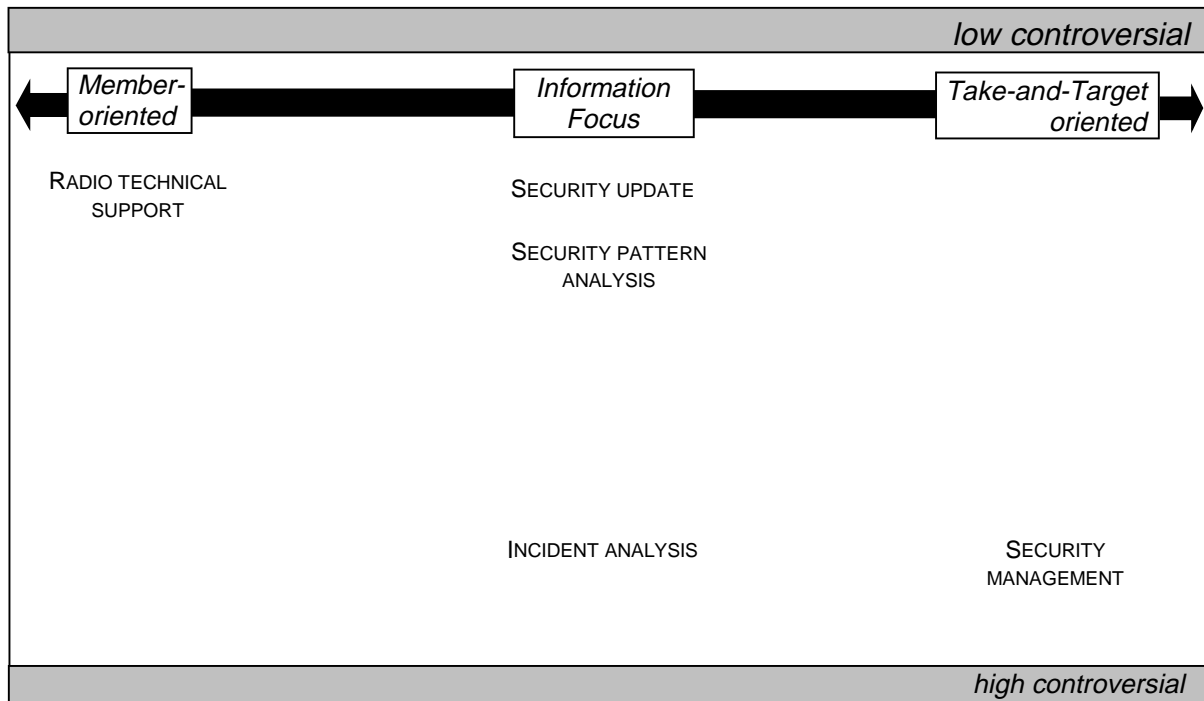
Underexplored is the potential of a coordinating forum to foster learning from interagency exchanges about programme approaches. Sectoral task forces however could be developed into thematic learning groups. A climate will have to be fostered whereby critical review is no longer perceived as threatening. The coordinating forum could become the central depository of reviews and evaluations and a locus of interagency institutional learning. Surely however, for the coordinating entity itself to commission reviews and evaluations would again be highly controversial. But where a good thematic inter-agency group exists, a grouping of agencies could take such initiative.

Very task - and target-oriented, but highly controversial, is strategic, or integrated and common programming. This would involve, in its most developed form, the identification of priority work, the screening and vetting of aid agencies for work in a particular area, the allocation of tasks and resources among various agencies. Ideally but not inevitably, this would require a pooling of financial resources even if the coordinating entity itself does not need to be the authority over fund control.

As mentioned earlier however, operational coordination of assistance and protection efforts in conflict situations, cannot be separated from the search for humanitarian space. There seems a role therefore for a coordinating forum to bring the aid and protection agencies together to develop the political analysis and to come to an orchestrated 'humanitarian diplomacy': what do the agencies request and from whom, what negotiation strategy and tactics do they pursue, is collective representation possible...? Such role is indeed recognised in the terms of reference of the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, but rarely in the field-based coordination fora, although it is primarily at field level that humanitarian space is

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negotiated (cfr. Lautze et al. 1998: 16-17).

3.4. Coordinating for Humanitarian Space.

Humanitarian space is ultimately determined by the warring parties. The assumption is that the chances to obtain or to enlarge the humanitarian space will be increased if the humanitarian agencies negotiate their demands in a concerted rather than individual and divided way, and if they get political support for their demands.

Before a concerted approach to the power-brokers of the conflict can be considered, there has to be clarity what 'humanitarian space' in practical terms would mean, and how comfortable agencies feel about pursuing certain demands, notably with the belligerents, and what they perceive to be the most effective tactics. These discussions often tend to become confused, so this section tries to indicate some lines of thought that can help create the required clarity.
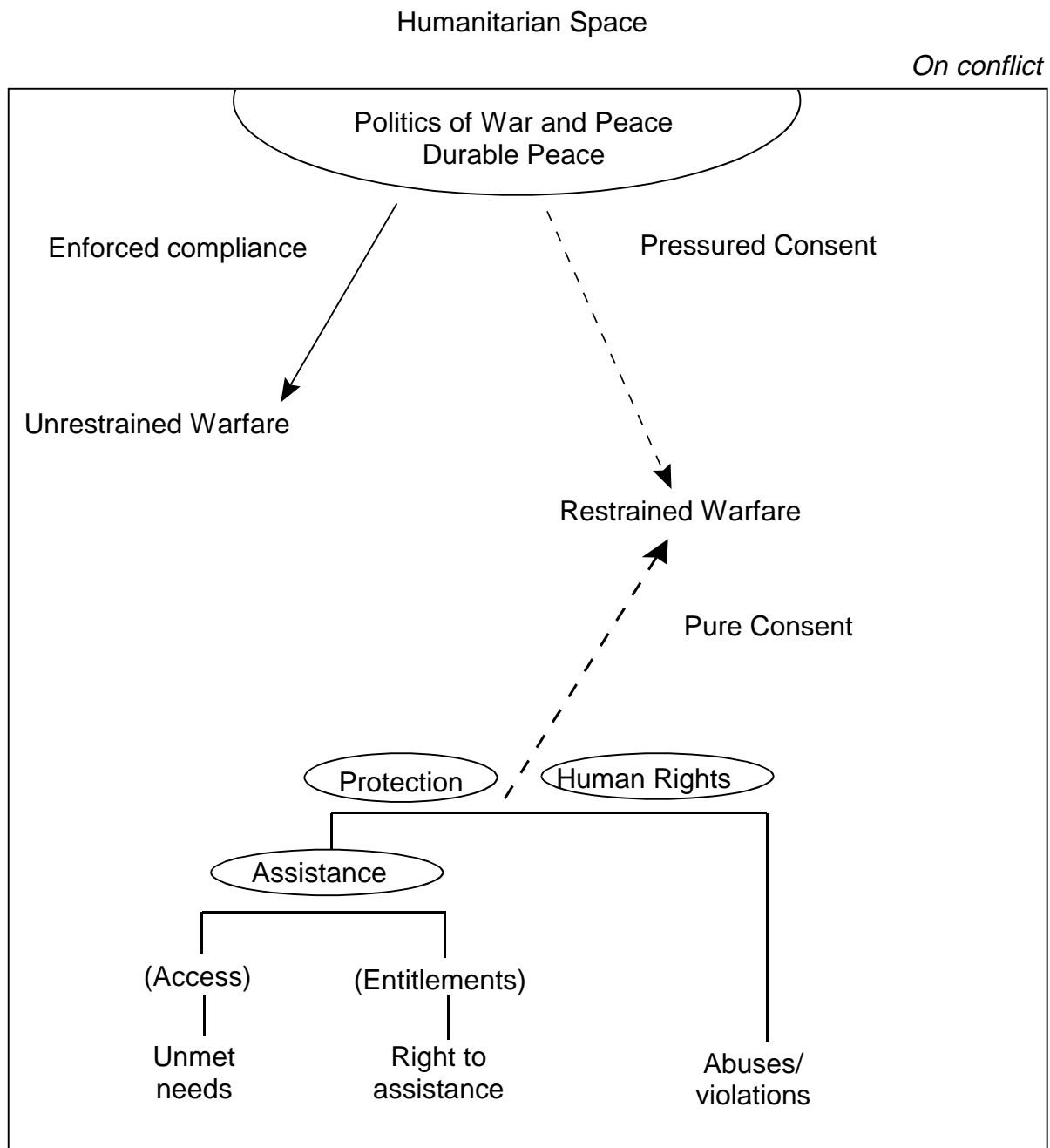
First a discussion can focus on what do we understand by humanitarian space? What is it that we want to negotiate or exercise pressure for?

The most common understanding of humanitarian space among aid agencies is unrestricted access (eg. Lanzer 1996:16; Van Brabant 1997b:11; Van Brabant 1998:22-23; von Pilar 1999). This implies that they have full freedom of movement and operation, and can make their own independent needs assessment. Another possible understanding of 'humanitarian space' is that the belligerents fight in line with the regulations of international humanitarian law, under which the integrity of civilians, non-combatants and aid workers needs to be protected, and non-military targets avoided. That is clearly the line of the ICRC. Note needs to be taken however that international humanitarian law recognises concerns of the belligerents that may lead to a restriction of access. A third possible understanding is that of a real, geographical space that is protected from fighting. Softer expressions of this are the notions of 'zones of tranquillity', 'humanitarian corridors' and 'safe areas', while a 'safe haven' has a more assertive tone to it (see Honig and Both 1996:104). Presumably, civilians, aid workers and peace-keepers are protected in such spaces. The risk is of course that the warring parties assume that they no longer have the obligation to respect and protect civilians outside the now delineated 'humanitarian space'.

A second area for discussion and clarification is that of the meaning of 'humanitarian space' for civilians. Aid agencies normally agree about access and security for their resources and personnel. Aid agencies tend to react differently where the question of protection of civilian populations is concerned, because this is seen as leading to human rights work with a potentially confrontational style and dangerous consequences. There is agreement that the physical integrity of civilians needs to be respected. But does one take a stance, and with what arguments, when civilians populations are forcibly displaced? Can their livelihoods be destroyed, houses shelled and crops burned? Can civilians be used as forced labour, forced into sexual services? Coordinating the negotiations appears to require that first clarity be established about what interpretation of 'humanitarian space' will be adopted.

What does an agency consider within its realm of responsibility? What guidance do headquarters offer to the field representatives? Graph 1 is a possible tool to try and structure the discussion at the level of principle and mandate.

Graph 1

Humanitarian Space

Politics of War and Peace
Durable Peace

Enforced compliance   Pressured Consent

Unrestrained Warfare

Restrained Warfare

Pure Consent

Protection   Human Rights

Assistance

(Access)   (Entitlements)

Unmet   Right to   Abuses/
needs   assistance   violations

In conflict

One possible interpretation of the 'humanitarian' mandate is that it responds to unmet needs. This is a widespread interpretation, that has led to a strong emphasis on humanitarian 'assistance' through the supply of goods and services, based on 'needs assessments'. A somewhat stronger position asserts that people afflicted by conflict have a right to assistance. Therefore the national government for example, even in a civil war situation, has an obligation to recognise and honour basic entitlements. If it cannot itself do so or does not want to, then it, or other warring factions, should allow aid agencies to provide. The right to assistance argument therefore supports a more normative demand for access. It can also be used towards donor governments as an argument for the allocation of more aid funds.

The right to assistance focuses upon social and economic rights. From there then it appears a logical step to move towards a broader 'protection agenda'. Logical, but often resisted by 'relief' agencies, as it brings them also into the realm of civil and political rights (the classical 'human rights' agenda) which warring parties tend to perceive as 'political' and -therefore- no longer 'neutral' (2). There is a relevant framework of reference however that comprises assistance and protection aspects, and that is international humanitarian law. Other relevant instruments are refugee law, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and more recently the 'guidelines for internally displaced people'. Beyond ICRC, UNHCR and UNICEF however, most staff members of humanitarian aid agencies are not very familiar with these instruments. Therefore they are not regularly drawn upon to help in the clarification of an agency's mandate and positioning. This lack of knowledge of available instruments of reference for example hampered the articulation of a clear inter-agency position towards the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, following the displacement of the population of Jaffna town in the autumn of 1995, and increased restrictions on access. (Van Brabant 1997b: 20) By contrast, a common humanitarian policy grounded in humanitarian law was developed with regard to the 'camps de regroupement' in Burundi (Lautze et al. 1998:48).

A next policy question is whether an agency sees it as within its mandate or not, to address the political and military strategies of the warring parties? This is not a theoretical question. It has profound implications for one's analytical perspective, for the position an agency may adopt, and for the nature of its advocacy. It is one thing, for example, to denounce the death of civilians in an air-raid by the Sri Lankan airforce an 'incident', and another to ask or allege whether indiscriminate bombing is part of the military strategy of the government. Similarly, it is one thing to consider the displacement of the total population of Jaffna in the autumn of 1995 as a 'potential humanitarian crisis', and another to view it as (also) part and parcel of the military and political strategy of the LTTE. The distinction also reveals itself clearly in the response of NATO to the criticisms over the civilian Serb casualties from its 1999 bombing campaign: NATO does not deliberately target civilians the way the Serb forces target the Albanian Kosovars.

Finally, there is the question of the socalled 'root causes' of conflict, and whether an agency considers it within its mandate to address these or not? The ICRC for example, does not, because its mandate is to bring humanity, and therefore restraint, into war, not to end war. With 'root causes' we understand the historical politics of

inclusion and exclusion, of patronage, humiliation, repression and impoverishment that have finally spilled over in organised violence. Including this in one's mandate implies engaging with the questions of equity, justice, good governance, 'democratisation' etc. As we progress in this reflection, we move from needs to rights, from the immediate to the longer-term, from the micro- to the macro-level and from working in conflict to working on conflict.

At each step, an agency also may have to delineate the nature of its engagement:
    it can consider certain steps in the above picture as outside its mandate;
    it can choose to recognise them and include the full picture in its analysis but limit its actions and advocacy to certain components or levels, or
    it can choose to 'act', practically or through advocacy, on all aspects of the conflict.

A problem is that few agencies seem to have clear positions and policies on this, and even among these that do, individual representatives often appear to turn their own personal judgment or preference into 'agency policy'. Trying to get some clarity about where agencies position themselves on this 'map', may be a useful first step towards a more concerted approach.

The discussion then has to take place at the level of practice. How practically can the protection of civilians and the access and security of aid providers be advanced with the warring parties? This is a difficult discussion about tactics and bottom-lines. What guidance does the field now have to offer to headquarters?

This discussion tends to get bogged down into quick assertions that humanitarian and human rights work are not compatible, or that it is not the role of the humanitarian actors to get involved in politics. The dilemmas are real and the complexities great, but the obligation remains to develop the argument, to be informed about the nature and rationale of each other's strategies and tactics, and to keep their validity and effectiveness under review. In recent years, there has been a recognition that humanitarian action may have been too 'pragmatic' and that a new, principled approach, is required. This is healthy, as excessive 'pragmatism' and 'fieldcraft' eventually become complicity. It is possible however also to err to the other side, and to forget that modern day conflicts are expressions of an 'unprincipled world', and that working under tremendous constraints and threat of violence will inevitably require adaptations. There are no easy recipes, but the mutual understanding can be deepened by more rational analysis of the constraints, and of the possibilities and opportunities to broaden the humanitarian space. That may help us explore middle-ways between being blind or remaining silent and public denunciation.

Analysis again comes first. The humanitarian actors too have to try and understand the political economy of the warring parties. What is their power base, their structure of command and control, what are their goals and aspirations, where lie their sensitivities, what are their strategies and tactics, do they recognise any social contract towards the civilians? Secondly, what are the views of the people that one wishes to protect? Do the displaced for example wish to return, or under what conditions? What do the target populations expect from the outside interveners, and

what do they recommend as best tactic? Thirdly, what are the implications of what aid agencies do and say for the political and military strategies of the belligerents? What is the bargaining power of the aid agencies, in whom can they find an ally in their negotiations with the warring parties? What will the negotiating strategy be, which arguments will be put forward, who speaks on behalf of the humanitarian actors? Where is there leverage, opportunity for influence? Interestingly, the work of the 'Emergency Group' of international humanitarian agencies confronted with war and a humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka in 1995-96, did not result in increased access, but stimulated a much greater awareness of the politics of war and of the political implications of their presence, actions and statements, and greater commonality therefrom, in their approaches to the belligerents (Van Brabant 1997b:20).

Finally, if humanitarian space is denied or increasingly restricted, what can the aid and protection providers do? How effective is discreet dialogue and private protest? Under what conditions does one speak out publicly, what are the potential risks and benefits for those one wants to protect and for those who speak out? What 'protocol' is adopted to minimise the risks: how will the message be phrased, will it first be presented to those at which it is directed before being made public, who delivers the message, to whom and when?

Is there a possibility for a combination of tactics, with an -orchestrated- division of labour? The argument has been made that agencies too quickly turn to denunciation as mode of action, before having exhausted the possibilities of persuasion. To a large degree that seems to have happened with the approach of the Western actors towards the Taliban in Afghanistan (Van Brabant and Killick 1999:40). Public denunciation however creates adversarial relations and risk hardening the attitudes of those denounced. There is room for both approaches, but their effectiveness would also be enhanced if they were pursued in more concerted ways (Bonard 1999).

Self-evident as these considerations may seem, in practice one sees few examples of agencies sitting together and really doing their home-work up to the level of detailed analysis, consideration and argument, or of 'coordination facilitators' structuring the discussions around these topics.

Discussion can also be facilitated to articulate what would represent the 'bottom-line'? Security of agency staff tends to be something that agencies on the ground agree on as a minimum requirement, although even there there tend to be divergences of opinion between NGOs and the United Nations. The ability to fulfil one's mandate is another. Can agencies still work independently, and have access to all those in need without discrimination or interference? That is seldom totally the case in a conflict situation, so what is the threshold beyond which one should question the continuation of one's work? Currently agencies tend to make these assessments in isolation. It is their right to make the decision individually, but it appears that all can benefit from a collective, critical and detailed assessment first. Critical, because questions must also be asked why sometimes agencies have different experiences? Why are NGOs interfered with by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ICRC far less so? Is it their international status, the history of their involvement in Afghanistan, the nature of their programme, or does it say something about the style of the agency and its representatives? Often the suspension of programmes or withdrawal of aid is

contemplated as a form of protest or pressure on a warring part. But has one reflected on whether that warring party cares at all? It is still the exception rather than the rule that aid agencies, as happened at a seminar in the Caucasus in the summer of 1998, discuss together to try and establish common terms of engagement and disengagement (Hansen and Minear 1998:5).

Humanitarian and human rights operators on the ground usually however have only limited bargaining power with belligerents. Where belligerents, like in Sri Lanka, are basically prepared to accept a certain regulation of war as embodied in international humanitarian law, these operators can have a certain influence through their arguments and negotiations. But where the belligerents engage in 'total' or unrestrained war, they are fairly powerless and need political backing. As the events in the Great Lakes have shown, humanitarian agencies cannot obtain much humanitarian space if they have to operate in a 'political vacuum' (Lautze et. al. 1998:2). This underlines the need for aid agencies to lobby the external political actors for concrete support, something that can best be done collectively.

This support is not automatically assured. From Angola it has been reported that in the period 1993-94 the Special Representative of the Secretary-General provided effective support when the humanitarian actors needed it. A not uncommon experience however is for the political agenda to dominate the humanitarian one. In 1993 in Liberia for example, the SRSG chose not to support the humanitarian agencies in their protests against ECOMOG restrictions on their access, and even attacks on humanitarian convoys, so as not to jeopardise the negotiations for the Cotonou peace accords (Scott 1996). Similarly, during the Bosnia war, humanitarian exemptions to the internationally imposed sanctions, tended to be subjected to political considerations. In North Korea, the international political agenda dominates and there is little political will to help the agencies get better access and the right to independent monitoring of the food assistance (Bennett 1999).

A problematic interpretation of greater 'coherence' between the political and assistance strategies is the demand, becoming popular among certain donors, that aid should 'build peace'. Whereas the Rwanda evaluation concluded that aid cannot substitute for political action (Eriksson 1996:46), this expectation or demand could imply that aid must substitute for political action. This issue cannot be discussed here but may increasingly have to be addressed by the aid agencies. The point is not to deny that aid can be manipulated by the warring parties into a political and economic resource for the war. But there is an issue of proportion: it has been said that if victims of conflict were really totally dependent on aid, they would be dead. Similarly, if aid were the mainstay of the war economy, the war efforts would probably soon come to a halt. The annual amount of aid spent on, not necessarily in, Afghanistan is in the order of US $ 300 million. Put this against the estimated US $ 2 billion of mostly illegal annual trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan alone, plus an additional US $ 1 billion in income from drugs (at the Pakistani border, not at the farmgate) and very significant amounts of Saudi funding for the Taliban, and it becomes clear that aid flows are not such an important resource (Van Brabant & Killick 1999:12-13;33). Further, there is definitely scope for addressing peace at local level. But in the absence of a effective political engagement and progress, it seems well beyond the control and power of aid providers to address the macro-dimensions

of war and peace. Again assistance providers can benefit from joining efforts to develop that analysis and argument.

Developing the strategies and tactics for more humanitarian space thus involves the analysis of the political, military and humanitarian agendas and their interrelationships, and the articulation of credible, and shared, arguments to obtain more humanitarian space, for aid agencies and for civilians alike, and to enlist external political powers in pursuit of that aim. It is still rare for the humanitarian and political intervenors to sit together and discuss their approaches and how they can mutually support each other. Such discussions have been facilitated in the Caucasus (Hansen 1998:62-67). They also were ostensibly the intent of the strategic framework exercise for Afghanistan (United Nations 1998a) but 15 months after its initiation, there is little tangible evidence of a closer dialogue between the political and the humanitarian actors (Van Brabant & Killick 1999:20; annex 2). This is an area then where a collaborative forum, and its facilitators, have an important role to play.

3.5. The Coordination of Political Actions.

Only in recent years are those in the humanitarian sector paying more attention to the political efforts to prevent or end conflict, a topic that used to be the domain of political scientists and specialists on international law. There are probably a variety of reasons for this, but the perception of many humanitarian actors of feeling themselves struggling against the odds in a 'policy vacuum', unsupported by energetic political back-up, appears an important one. Minimally they want support from the political actors to obtain a framework of consent for their actions from the local power brokers. Ideally, they want the political actors to help bring about an end to the conflict without which the humanitarian needs will not end. The implication is that the humanitarian actors need to include the actions and motives of the political players, not only of the conflict-entrepreneurs, but also of those attempting to 'resolve' the conflict, in their strategic analysis, and in their lobbying and advocacy (Lautze et al. 1998:16).

A first step would be to consider the direct political attempts towards conflict resolution, but also the other political considerations that shape the attitudes and actions of the major international political actors.

With regard to direct political attempts towards conflict resolution, the effectiveness of international efforts can be undermined by a lack of clarity or differences among international actors in their analysis of the conflict, in their perception of the objectives of the international efforts, and in the strategies to realise these objectives.

Some examples may help to illustrate this. The international response to the outbreak of war in Bosnia was complicated by the confusion about whether this represented a 'civil war' or an 'act of international aggression' (Gow 1997:8). Similarly, when the Belgian government in April 1994 withdrew its troops from the UNAMIR peace-keeping mission in Rwanda, the dominant 'analysis' was that 'tribal fighting' had broken out again, not that a prepared genocide was set in motion that was part of a political power struggle and that used 'ethnicity' as mobilising factor. In Sierra Leone,

the analysis of the conflict began to change when the Revolutionary United Front came to be seen as an armed rebellion that represented some genuine grievances, rather than as a predatory and ragtag militia (Sorbo et al. 1997:59).

There is generally quite some agreement among the political actors about the broad goal of their attempts to resolve conflict: an end to the fighting and durable peace. Where the difficulties arise is over the practicalities to achieve this goal. There can be different views over the specific political objectives that need to be pursued. When the Yugoslav war of dissolution started in 1991, there were divided opinions in the international 'community' about whether to try and maintain the Yugoslav Federation or accept the break-up into new states? At least with regard to Kosovo, there appears to be a shared view against further break-up. Political objectives can also evolve. The coalition that allied itself under UN auspices after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait did not seek the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. That subsequently became a policy-objective of the USA, that several other coalition members feel very uncomfortable about. Differences may arise between political actors over what should be the guiding principles: respect for the integrity of the national territory, or respect for the right to self-determination; peace as an end to violence or peace with justice? And what, in practice, would 'justice' mean? Differences may arise within the so-called international 'community', over the compromise of principle for reasons of 'realpolitik'? Does one accept the de facto 'peace and stability' that comes from a victorious war-leader or a victorious movement such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, or only the perhaps more fragile peace and stability that comes from elections and a broad-based government? Does one accept that non-Serb refugees from Bosnia cannot return to their homes in what is now the Republika Srpska in order to 'save' the Dayton Peace Agreements?

There may also be differences among the conflict-resolvers about what modalities can best be used to try and achieve the political objectives. In terms of political strategies, two major approaches are possible, one that uses incentives and another one that uses disincentives. In terms of instruments, essentially there are three: the political, economic and military instrument. One approach can be to pursue constructive engagement with a warring party, another can be diplomatic condemnation or exclusion. Different actors may adopt different strategies. Between the two World Wars, Britain sought to contain Germany through 'appeasement', while France adopted a strategy of 'encirclement' through political alliances against Germany. Today, the US and Britain adopt an aggressive stance towards Saddam Hussein, while France and Russia are more inclined to attempt constructive engagement. Canada advocated for stronger political action against Abacha's government in Nigeria, particularly after the execution of the Ogoni activists, while Britain preferred a less antagonistic stance. The military instrument can be used as an incentive: former colonial powers engage in 'military cooperation' with African countries, former East Bloc countries are incorporated into the NATO alliance. Or it can be used as pressure: In Bosnia, the US advocated for a 'lift (the arms embargo against the Bosnian government) and strike (with airpower)' policy to pressurise the Serbs, a strategy that the countries with peace-keeping troops on the ground were far from happy with. One can offer trade and funds for reconstruction and development as incentive. Or impose trade sanctions or put restrictions on access to international capital, and suspend or withdraw aid.

Clearly where different actors seeking to resolve the conflict use different approaches, the warring parties can play them off against each other and undermine the effectiveness of the approach.

It would be naive however to assume that the attitudes and policies of international political actors are only shaped by the desire to bring about an end to the conflict. There are other political factors that come into play, which tend to determine the degree of 'political will'. Individual countries may have their own 'national' interests, that influence their stance towards a particular conflict. These may be of a geo-political nature, or relate to economic interest or simply the wish to prevent an influx of refugees. Such factors tend to be fairly 'stable' or predictable in the medium-term. There is also coalition-politics. A coalition may have to be created, there may be a search for the right forum: the international efforts to manage the wars of dissolution of Yugoslavia led to a veritable odyssea from the European Union to the UN Security Council and the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia to the 5 nation 'Contact Group', with NATO and the West European Union as additional side-show. In the Kosovo war, NATO side-stepped the UN and the G8 made an appearance as another forum for political coordination.

But once established, coalition-politics continues. Some states may deliberately adopt a divergent position from their allies, to underline their importance as interlocutor in the coalition. There can be rivalries for leadership in the coalition. Who comes to appear as a 'grand power', who gets the credit for the resolution of the conflict? At the same time, there is also a great concern not to allow the differences among 'allies' destroy the coalition. NATO, the European Union, the Organisation of African States etc. have to be maintained and that is an important policy objective in itself. The result may be political approaches to a specific conflict that have little relevance for the realities of the conflict, but are highly appropriate for maintaining the coalition. Coalition-politics too is fairly predictable in the medium-term. More volatile might be domestic political considerations: what is the public support in a country for its government's involvement in conflict-resolution elsewhere? The media and lobby and advocacy groups play a big role here. The concern for public support makes many governments very wary about losses of life among their own nationals -of peace-keeping troops more than of aid personnel- and eager to find an 'exit' as quickly as possible.

Political Strategy

Objective: Conflict Resolution
- Analysis
- Objectives
- Strategies

	Political	Military	Economic
Incentive			
Disincentive			

- Influence, leverage?

Other Political Objectives
- Political will

29

Four conclusions stand out from this quick overview:

a. An analysis of the politics and of the political economy of the so-called 'international community' that tries to resolve a particular conflict, is relevant and required. This is well understood by the military, who have always been deployed under a political mandate and under political direction. But it is a fairly new exercise for the humanitarian actors, whose desire to be independent and not politically driven, has led them to neglect the importance of being 'politically informed'.

b. Such analysis should indicate where advocacy and lobby efforts may have to be directed: towards the analysis, objectives and strategies for conflict-resolution; towards mobilising political will, or towards indicating points of leverage on the warring parties.

c. When uncoordinated, the actions and approaches of the political actors trying to bring about a resolution of the conflict, are likely to undermine each other and can be played off against each other by the warring parties.

d. It is not because these actions do become coordinated, that they will ultimately be more effective. The ending of violence in many cases is ultimately a question of balance of force. Even where the political will is high, external actors may not be able to exercise decisive influence on the warring parties.
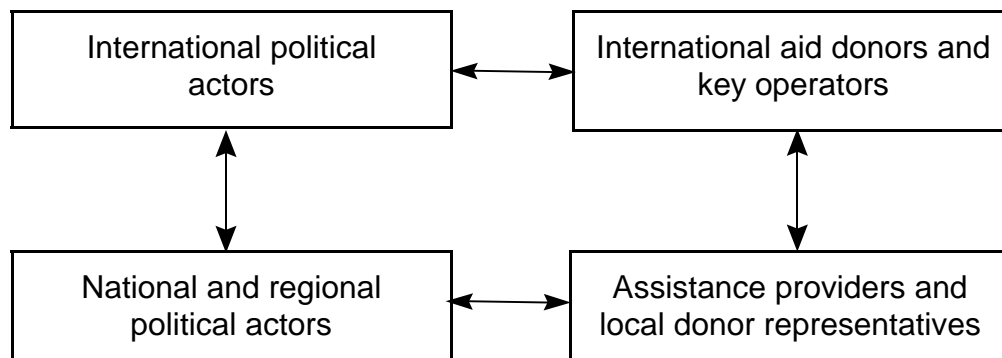
4. STRATEGIC COORDINATION.

A 'strategic framework' approach has been piloted by the Western aid community over the past 2 years in Afghanistan. A critical review of the Afghanistan experience so far, indicates major shortcomings: the exercise has yielded an expression of the shared principles and values of the Western community intervening in the Afghan conflict, but has not been based on a sound analysis of the multiple layers of that conflict. As a result some of the political and 'principled' approaches have been rather 'awkward', not to say inappropriate or counter-productive (Van Brabant & Killick 1999:27-30). Much attention has also been paid on 'integrating' the many assistance projects into a more programmatic approach. This is relevant, but more in the light of the fact that the international community has taken on roles and responsibilities of the 'state', than in the pursuit of policy changes from the Taliban or an end to the conflict. But the crucial issue of the modes and terms of engagement and disengagement, and therefore of strategies and policies, is only being identified after 15 months of meetings and debate (United Nations 1998b). That does not invalidate the efforts, which were recognised to be a pilot exercise. But the lessons learned from Afghanistan should be applied to Sierra Leone if that is where a next strategic framework exercise will be undertaken.

A review has also been undertaken of strategic humanitarian coordination in the Great Lakes region in 1996-1997 (Lautze et al. 1998). The Interagency Standing Committee which commissioned the review had made a distinction between operational and strategic coordination, which it correlated with the field and the headquarters level. The reviewers correctly challenge that correlation, among other arguments because much of the humanitarian diplomacy to obtain more humanitarian space is undertaken at field level (Lautze et al. 1998:17). Often there are also tensions and differences of perspective between headquarters and field. The advantage of sitting in headquarters can be that it is easier to see 'the broader picture'. The advantage of the field perspective is that it is easier to see the 'realities on the ground'. Clearly both need to be brought together, and that is the challenge for coordination fora and for coordination 'facilitators'. Still, an obstacle to more concerted approaches is the multiplicity of 'coordination fora'. Many meetings take place in different places, but the outcomes do not necessarily add up to an overall 'orchestrated' approach.

The argument here has been that a strategic, and coordinated, approach to complex political emergencies requires analysis, discussion, monitoring and review of the situation and of interventions at the three interlocking levels. Theoretically only four types of 'central' coordination fora would be required: that of the international aid donors which involves operational agency headquarter people but also field representatives; that of the field operators of operational aid agencies with in-country donor representatives, that of international actors involved in conflict management, and that of national and/or regional political actors with actual or potential influence on the power brokers in the conflict. In practice there will be more coordination fora and 'events', but a hierarchy should be established between them, with some designated as more central than others (the field not automatically being subordinated to headquarters though).

Diagram 5

International political actors	←→	International aid donors and key operators

(National and regional political actors ←→ Assistance providers and local donor representatives, with vertical arrows connecting top and bottom boxes)

The discussions should recognise institutional interests, but go beyond it to substantive issues. Situational analysis is and remains often a weak point, at each level, and investments are required to improve it. Secondly, the different intervening actors, political and humanitarian, will benefit from more explicit discussion about their strategies and policies in pursuit of the objectives. What works and what not will have to be explore through trial and error, and more than one strategy can be pursued at the same time. But crucial then is the critical and collective review of the relative impact of various strategies and policies. This does not normally happens, and even where it takes place, it requires courage and integrity to admit that one's approach may not have been the best one, and to change track.

If these arguments are generally accepted, then it should be clear by now that fostering more concertation and coordination and providing intellectual leadership requires the assimilation of a wide range of informations and perspectives. But it also requires the time and freedom from other tasks to sit back and reflect. Promoting coordination cannot be done as an 'add on' to an already full workload. And it requires the right persons who can match vision with attention to detail, and diplomacy with persuasive firmness.

Notes.

(1) A number of members of the US NGO umbrella organisation InterAction in 1996 adopted an NGO Field Cooperation Protocol, which commits agencies to at least discuss key issues with each other to try and reach a consensus. An evaluation in 1998 however revealed that the signatory agencies have not widely promoted the Protocol nor translated it into policy directives. As a result many field personnel were not aware of it, and did not refer to it (Kunder 1998).

(2) The hesitations to take this step in practice are also noticeable among the political actors: although Kosovo is recognised as a political problem for which a political solution needs to be found, the international political actors have been careful to describe the destruction of Kosovar villages and livelihoods as a 'humanitarian', not as a 'human rights' crisis.

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