

The Canadian Humanitarian Coalition: is three-tiered humanitarianism the making?

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In the last ten years, the Humanitarian Coalition in Canada has been changing some of the rules governing the humanitarian response of Canadian NGOs. Leading NGOs that it regroups have set up rules of governance and operations that hamper the admission of smaller organizations. Conversely, some major Canadian aid organizations are not inclined to join the Coalition (as of yet). The Coalition has received strong support from the federal government through the endowment of a Canadian Fund earmarked to respond to the forgotten or smaller scale humanitarian crises. After a ten-year cycle that has seen fifteen major humanitarian responses, Stéphanie Maltais and Yvan Conoir take stock of this innovative model in North America and speculate about the future of non-member Canadian aid agencies.

Following the international response to the 2004 tsunami and the introduction of humanitarian reform in 2005, the major humanitarian aid operators (UN, Red Cross, international NGOs, and governments) began striving for a more effective and better designed humanitarian response system. To bring this about, they adopted operational guidelines that would provide for improved coordination, more flexible financing, and implementation of the cluster approach. On this basis, national programs mainly dealing with aid coordination were launched in a number of countries. A few Canadian NGOs – Care-Canada, Oxfam-Canada, Oxfam-Quebec, and Save the Children-Canada – wishing to remain effectively operative on the world stage, strengthen their interactions with the public at large and the Canadian media, and minimize competition deemed unnecessary and meaningless on the national scene, decided to draw on the model of certain existing international humanitarian consortia by creating a joint response organization to deal with major disasters. Plan-Canada subsequently joined this organization. One of the objectives of this “Canadian Humanitarian Coalition”, is the establishment of strong partnerships with members of the Canadian media to assure that dependable information is consistently conveyed in times of crisis. This was followed by the setup of an emergency fund reserved for disasters, and, finally, by the development of a joint leadership approach on the management of major humanitarian crises to be fully agreed upon by all member NGOs. This consortium has recently received the Canadian federal government’s institutional funding. It is allocated to the Canadian Humanitarian Assistance Fund (CHAF) that earmarks the funds for “silent” crises that are overlooked by the media and often occur on a smaller scale.

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The Humanitarian Coalition has laid out criteria for membership and operating rules that restrict the admission of smaller structures. Aside from the benefits of adopting a common stance for the management of major international humanitarian crises, the implications of setting up a coalition of NGOs must be fully thought out. In its 2014 annual report, the Coalition stated that it wanted “to become Canada’s one stop shop for responding to the world’s humanitarian emergencies and for collecting donations”¹. Such an objective is likely to provoke anxiety in other NGOs that lack the power and the resources of the Coalition’s member agencies. After a ten-year cycle that has seen over fifteen major humanitarian responses, what conclusions can be drawn from this innovative model in North America? What lessons can be learned? What outlook can non-member humanitarian agencies expect?

The beginnings of an innovation

NGO consortia have always been around and the Canadian model is one of the most recent to have emerged². Looking back, in terms of joint calls for funding, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), active in the UK since 1963, served as the main model for creating the Canadian Humanitarian Coalition, since the actors and the economics involved were relatively similar. “Consortium 12–12”, founded in Belgium in the 1970s, is one where members work together in their quest for funding for humanitarian aid and to achieve quicker response times³. Its members, each with its own identity, seek to coordinate humanitarian responses to crises on the basis of specific terms and conditions established by the Consortium.

In 2004, the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia led to a paradigm shift in disaster response. In Indonesia, it eventually led to boosting innovation, strengthening humanitarian institutions, stimulating funding through unprecedented media coverage, and it saw the rise of new humanitarian practices⁴. In Canada, some NGOs came up with the idea of creating a decision-making and coordination process, so as to minimize the controversy and the competition that was prevailing in the field until then. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, a pilot project was launched. Before it began, one organization was operating a joint website, another was busy developing a common call center, and a third was managing the donor database. The idea of jointly agreeing and coordinating caught on and contributed to help set up the first joint emergency response in Lebanon in 2006.

Aware that humanitarian funding may give way to fierce competition between humanitarian NGOs⁵, the architects of the Humanitarian Coalition saw an interest in joining forces through the creation of a new model designed for collaborative fundraising and outreach with the Canadian public at large. More-over, this model would advocate province-wide and nationwide allegiances with the majors from the private telecommunications sector⁶. Admittedly, some private donors would have indeed declined to support one specific Canadian NGO directly. The Coalition is seen as providing a distinct advantage, since it can better attract donors to a cause than one single organization can. In fact, NGOs are essentially familiar with the pressure of having to draw on public and private funding, a task

¹ Coalition Humanitaire, *Rapport annuel 2014*, 2015, p. 6.

² Nicolas Moyer, *Together, saving more lives: joint appeals and the experience of Canada’s Humanitarian Coalition*, Grotius International, mars 2016, <http://www.grotius.fr/together-saving-more-lives-joint-appeals-and-the-experience-of-canadas-humanitarian-coalition/>

³ <http://www.1212.be/fr/1212/actualites>

⁴ IRIN news, *Aceb, dix ans après. Retour sur la réponse au tsunami*, 2014, <https://www.irinnews.org/fr/report/100967/aceb-dix-ans-apr%C3%A8s-%E2%80%93-retour-sur-la-r%C3%A9ponse-au-tsunami>

⁵ Nicolas Moyer, *Together... op. cit.*

⁶ Only *Radio Canada*, the public telecommunications network, still refuses to support the Coalition, most likely to stay independent.

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that eats time, energy, and money that could otherwise be allocated to management, operations, or the follow-up of their own activities. Although competition has its advantages and disadvantages, the Coalition's members have concluded that working together maximizes fundraising and, in effect, raises standards for Canadians on the quality and quantity of information pertaining to an emergency. In addition, the duplication of costs is impacted when expenses for collecting donations are split and when funds are channeled to one specific organization.

Taking stock of a 10-year cycle of interventions and of lessons learned

The first intervention coordinated by the Coalition was launched in the aftermath of the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005. In the following years, subsequent campaigns led to operations in a number of sub-regions/countries, including the Middle East (2006), Southern Africa, Myanmar and Kenya (2008), Haiti (2010), Pakistan (2010), Japan (2011), East Africa (2011), the Sahel (2012), West Africa during the Ebola outbreak (2014), the Philippines and Nepal (2015). It is during its response to the earthquake in Port-au-Prince that the Coalition decided to register itself as a public foundation in 2010⁷ and standardize the regulations governing the collective work of five participating NGOs. For the Coalition to decide to intervene, the disaster must reach a certain magnitude and must require immediate international humanitarian assistance. Member organizations should be able to provide this aid on the spot. The Coalition's calls for funding have the benefit of enhancing the visibility of member agencies, of increasing and broadening the base of potential donors, and of avoiding overlapping expenses. Implicitly, the Coalition also has the indirect effect of redrawing the map of the humanitarian sector in Canada by structuring its environment more collaboratively. The return on investment, meanwhile, is of the greatest interest. The Coalition has calculated a return of 100 Canadian dollars for every 6 dollars invested by a Coalition member agency⁸.

It is worth mentioning that 72% of donors to the Coalition are new, which means that each member agency continues to largely benefit from its own donors⁹. Surveys have confirmed that Canadians appreciate the fact that humanitarian organizations work together. That is, 65% believe it should be so, and 45% admit that they are more inclined to donate when agencies in fact do collaborate¹⁰. In addition, all interventions are evaluated either in real time (carried out three months after the onset of a crisis) or after completion, so that lessons can be learned collectively and the most successful emergency operations be better made known.

Since 2014, Global Affairs Canada (formerly, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development) and the Humanitarian Coalition have developed a highly innovative common financing mechanism known as the Canadian Humanitarian Assistance Fund (CHAF) that is designed to channel funds made available by Global Affairs Canada. This mechanism, endowed with nearly 10 million Canadian dollars over a three-year period, has successfully financed relief for minor crises that, having gone almost unnoticed by the media, would not have received adequate funding. The pilot phase of the project, which ran from April 2014 to September 2015, allowed at the time interventions to be launched for eight

⁷ Before being registered, the Humanitarian Coalition was administered as a project of Care Canada. This registration has provided it with a legal status and separate liability distinct from its members.

⁸ Coalition Humanitaire, *Canada's joint humanitarian appeal: (Re)claiming the narrative*, november 2015.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nicolas Moyer, *Together...*, *op. cit.*

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disasters. The government's budget of \$ 2.5 million has been totally spent for the year (average commitments per recipient agency remain rather circumscribed, at around 300,000 CAD). Limited interventions are funded up to 75% by the CHAF, 15% from Coalition members, and 10% from the Emergency Fund of the Humanitarian Coalition¹¹.

One special feature relating to these less intense crises is that funding is awarded to a single Coalition member agency, that is, the one which may be the most specialized, the most skilled, or the best positioned to intervene, and only a maximum of 350,000 CAD of funds can be earmarked. For example, in November and December 2015, when areas around Chennai in India were flooded, Oxfam-Canada was granted 275,000 CAD¹². Members collectively decided on the agency that had the best program to successfully carry out a targeted intervention. The CHAF has thus come to fulfill the NGOs' collective need for money during smaller crises, and it has today become one of the quickest means of mobilizing the Canadian federal government. It also has the benefit of leveraging partnerships to raise additional financing. Finally, the CHAF also provides the Coalition with a certain legitimacy and institutional recognition that other Canadian humanitarian operators cannot themselves benefit from.

How members of the Coalition are perceived

From the semi-structured interviews for this article conducted with members of the Humanitarian Coalition, it is clear that the Coalition's involvement is considered to be positive in terms of financing and in terms of its wish to shorten crisis response time. The Coalition obliges its member agencies to cooperate with each other and to be cognizant of what other members are doing. Also expressed was a desire to share knowledge and collaborate with like European counterparts in the *Emergency Appeals Alliance*¹³, which today brings together seven European members and the Canadian Humanitarian Coalition. Collaboration means avoiding work in a compartmentalized fashion and doubling up of certain operations, in addition to covering more regions operationally. Coalition members are aware of its positive impact on the reduction of expenses incurred for fundraising and of the fact that these savings can be spent to further serve people in need.

With additional human and financial resources made available, the Humanitarian Coalition also works before crises ever erupt to develop projects and instigate proceedings that can enhance the visibility of the organization and the sharing of knowledge between its members. This resulted, during the first two Canadian humanitarian conferences held in 2013 and 2014, in bringing together for the first time institutions and humanitarians. The fact that the Humanitarian Coalition has been a public foundation since 2010, that it occupies its own premises, and employs six permanent staff allows it to undertake a wider scope of activities and to better coordinate work between member agencies. It now runs more independently than when it was founded, since it has more greatly centralized its governance. As it now stands, the Coalition has been more effective not only in negotiating with the media industry that lends it support, but also in issuing announcements and managing procedures when launching calls for funding. Members must decide whether or not to launch a joint call within two hours. Once the call is launched, all of the Coalition's operations (communications,

¹¹ Coalition Humanitaire, *Rapport annuel...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹² Coalition Humanitaire, *Répondre aux catastrophes de faible étendue*, 2016, <http://coalitionhumanitaire.ca/nos-campagnes/repondre-aux-catastrophes-de-faible-etendue>

¹³ <http://www.emergency-appeals-alliance.org/>

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management, programming) are activated, and all members are marshalled to respond to the crisis.

Beyond its own permanent employees, its expertise, and special human resources capabilities in certain domains, those of member agencies are also available.

The CHAF is seen as a practical and effective tool, despite its rather heavy administrative procedures when considering the size of funds it handles and the fact that it is closed to other members of the Canadian humanitarian sector. As an innovation, the CHAF is more responsive when allocating humanitarian funds than traditional Canadian systems and is able to fill some of the gaps in the Canadian funding process. The CHAF's terms for financing could be fine-tuned, since, for example, "slow-brewing" crises, such as droughts, are not presently eligible. Overall, the CHAF is nonetheless a positive venture of cooperation between the government and NGO members.

One of the most sensitive aspects of the Humanitarian Coalition that was brought up during the interviews had to do with certain challenges dealing with the alignment of its mandates and its goals with those of the other large "families" of NGOs, whose specific policies and governance within their different confederations vary. Each organization must manage its position within the Coalition, while, at the same time responding to the network to which it belongs (be it Oxfam, Plan, Save the Children, CARE International). The fact that two members of a confederation, such as Oxfam-Canada and Oxfam-Quebec, are both members of the Humanitarian Coalition does not seem to be detrimental to other member agencies, because the two members of this family have each traced their own specific history in Canada. The same membership criteria for major institutional families apply to membership in the Humanitarian Coalition in that they do not permit any significant investment in advocacy and politics.

Our interviews helped identify the fact that promoting advocacy may be a difficult task when not all the major NGOs are members of the Coalition. Similarly, the recent departure of the informal discussion forum, Policy Action Group on Emergency Response (PAGER)¹⁴, left a void in this respect that neither the Coalition nor any other Canadian representative structure can come to fill the void.

Canadian humanitarian NGO Coalition members have multiplied their foreign interventions in recent years. Public funding, now having grown at the same time, may lead to having aid redirect-ed and to having humanitarian values re-examined as the State becomes more greatly involved in financing¹⁵. It is noteworthy that during the course of the interviews, we saw that most of the funding for the Humanitarian Coalition stems from public fundraising, while government funding represents a mere fraction of all financial resources. The amount of money collected by the Coalition, albeit significant, may seem relatively marginal compared to totals raised in the respective networks of its NGO members. Calls for funds for the Philippines and Nepal in 2014-2015 helped raise "only" 8 million CAD for each of these two emergencies¹⁶.

¹⁴ For years, PAGER allowed the leaders of Canadian humanitarian NGOs to initiate informal yet important discussions (following the Chatham House rules of confidentiality) with the Canadian Government. Another broader forum followed, the Humanitarian Response Network, which was more open and seemingly "less strategic".

¹⁵ Patrice Bouveret, « Les ONG, moteur du désarmement », *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2014/4, n° 96, p. 123-131.

¹⁶ Coalition Humanitaire, *Canada's joint humanitarian...*, *op. cit.*

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By comparison, in their respective networks, Oxfam-Quebec collected just over 370,000 CAD for the Philippines¹⁷ and Oxfam-Canada some 3.8 million CAD for all of its projects in Asia and the Middle East (Afghanistan, Indonesia, Israel, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Syria)¹⁸.

Finally, limiting the number of members within the Coalition may represent an impediment to the extent that it can restrict the Coalition's scope of activities and its numerical strength. Compared to the Disasters Emergency Committee¹⁹ in the UK (15 members), Aktion Deutschland Hilft in Germany²⁰ (24 members) or AGIRE in Italy²¹ (10 members), the Humanitarian Coalition appears to carry less political weight and be less represented in the humanitarian sector. An increase in the number of members would be possible, all while maintaining efficiency and manageability, but current membership criteria restrict the admission of other members either for economic reasons or on principle.

Three-tiered humanitarianism in the making?

The criteria for admission²² to the Humanitarian Coalition are legal, financial, and are standardized, as they must take into account the basic prerequisites for humanitarians. Members must adhere to the Code of Conduct of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Sphere Project's Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership²³, the Code of Practice of People in Aid, and the code of ethics and performance standards of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation. Admission criteria require that an NGO candidate be legally and financially registered as a recognized Canadian charitable organization for the past three years, and be able to substantiate annual expenditures of more than 10 million Canadian-sourced CADs during each of the three prior years. This financial requirement is the main hurdle to admission in the Coalition for the majority of NGOs. On the other hand, income from private donations (from individuals and companies) must exceed 2 million CADs for each of the previous three years. This is an additional constraint. The formula for the reallocation of funds gathered from members is based on a historical analysis of the two above-mentioned factors, with a ceiling imposed on each agency when funds are allocated in response to a crisis. Another fundamental principle states that an agency that has neither operations nor presence in a given country may not solicit financing in response to a crisis in that country.

¹⁷ http://oxfam.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/OXFAM_rapport_annuel_2014-15-web.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/oxfamar2015digital.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.dec.org.uk/>

²⁰ <https://www.aktion-deutschland-hilft.de/>

²¹ <http://www.agire.it/>

²² Coalition humanitaire canadienne, *Critères d'adhésion*, 2016, <http://coalitionhumanitaire.ca/a-notre-sujet/qui-nous-sommes/criteres-dadhesion>

²³ The HAP no longer exists. Its main principles are kept in the *Common Humanitarian Standards*.

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Allocation formula for funds of the Humanitarian Coalition in 2014²⁴

| Member agency of the Coalition | Amount allocated (%) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| CARE-Canada | 25% |
| Oxfam-Canada | 20.58% |
| Oxfam-Quebec | 13.15% |
| Plan-Canada | 25% |
| Save the Children-Canada | 16.27% |
| Total | 100% |

Currently, the Coalition comprises NGOs with similar guidelines and relatively comparable layout and size. As we have seen, they are also each a part of a large international “family”. The Coalition may appear as an exclusive, tight-knitted club that selectively restricts membership. However, our interviews helped us pinpoint the Coalition’s willingness to ultimately expand for better representation and an improved collective response from the humanitarian sector. The Coalition has thought-provokingly questioned what smaller groups could possibly bring. In summary, even though ethically speaking there is willingness to expand, smaller NGOs must nevertheless overcome a number of strategic hurdles for admission.

When comparing the Canadian Humanitarian Coalition with other NGO groupings in the country, such as the Quebec Association of Organizations for International Cooperation (AQOCI), it is clear that the mandates and objectives of various agencies differ. However, organizations do not necessarily compete directly, but rather complement each other in terms of their operations and their goals. We now see the Canadian humanitarian sector being gradually split into three tiers. At the first tier, we find “small” agencies that have no hope of ever fulfilling the Coalition’s admission criteria, because they lack membership in an international network. They still continue to run targeted humanitarian interventions, but receive no type of support that could lead to Coalition membership. At the second tier, we find “average” or “large” agencies that are members of the Coalition or who are potentially on the verge of becoming so. They come to strengthen the legitimacy and the value of being part of a strong, more representative Coalition that upholds clear principles, applies common rules, and speaks with one voice to a Canadian audience. Agencies, such as Handicap International-Canada, Médecins du Monde-Canada, and ACF-Canada, all having opened in the country at least 25 years ago, might one day aspire to acting at that level. However, others with a solid local base, like the CECI²⁵, have no inclination to see their contributions “diluted” in a common pot that would diminish their power over choosing and allocating. They have therefore declined to join the Coalition. Lastly, the third tier comprises the Canadian majors (UNICEF-Canada, MSF-Canada, Canadian Red Cross, World Vision) that possess substantial financial means and significant communication resources, but, for

²⁴ Coalition Humanitaire, *Canada’s joint humanitarian...*, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Centre d’Études et de Coopération internationale (Centre for International Studies and Cooperation), <http://www.ceci.ca/>

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institutional or political reasons, prefer staying clear from any ties with the Coalition. They carry on their work with their respective specificities.

An ever-changing model

As a model, the Canadian Humanitarian Coalition is unique. It is highly active in times of humanitarian crises. It works behind the scenes in quieter periods. It has been able to go through an entire year without having to respond to a major emergency, but its response capabilities are such that its efficiency can go from 0% to 100% within a few hours when a sudden crisis erupts. It is constantly evolving, and its rules, processes, and principles of governance have now reached full maturity. Five years after its legal incorporation and the launch of several calls for funding, it is now at a turning point in its existence. On the one hand, it can grow, not only by admitting more members for better representation, but also by developing a greater capacity for fundraising and communication. Such growth would generate improved visibility, wider commitment from the general public, and greater control when collaborating with the private sector, the government, and other organizations. On the other hand, it can stay on the same track when responding to a particular crisis, all the while extending its scope of operations to “forgotten” crises. In doing so, it can reinforce its power of advocacy without having the agencies that make it up lose their soul nor any part of their target audience. In the end, the Coalition must be able to be representative of an ever-growing number of humanitarians who are able to broaden the outlook of the Canadian civil humanitarian response.

Biographies

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