How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?

ALNAP

ABOUT ALNAP'S WORK ON HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

This briefing paper is part of an ongoing research initiative on humanitarian coordination. It outlines key issues and questions related to the participation of national actors in humanitarian coordination, one of the four themes that will be discussed at ALNAP's meeting 'Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination' in London on 30 June to 1 July 2016. In particular, it will concentrate on national participation within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism (Clusters, inter-Cluster and humanitarian country teams, or HCTs). Alongside this paper, ALNAP has also produced additional materials for background context: a video and a recording of a webinar on the same topic, which can be accessed at **www.alnap.org/coord-meeting**.

This briefing paper draws on a literature review and interviews conducted for the broader research initiative. It has also been informed by **ALNAP's previous work on humanitarian leadership and coordination** over the past several years.

The meeting will address four aspects of coordination:

1. How can humanitarians better coordinate across a response?

2. How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?

3. How to make the most of information management in coordination?

4. How can we improve decision-making in humanitarian coordination?

Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

CCPM	Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring
CSO	Civil society organisation
HCT	Humanitarian country team
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICS	Incident Command Systems
IM	Information Management
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

Why examine the role of national governments in humanitarian coordination?

UN General Assembly resolution 46/182 makes explicit that 'the affected state has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance' (UNGA resolution 46/182 1991:4) whilst, at the same time, recognising that 'Intergovernmental and non- governmental organizations working impartially and with strictly humanitarian motives should continue to make a significant contribution in supplementing national efforts' (ibid, 1991:5).

For many humanitarians, the primacy of the state in humanitarian response is not only a question of sovereignty, but also one of effectiveness. State mechanisms can often respond more quickly to emergencies, and they often do so in a way that better articulates with long-term development activities (Knox Clarke and Obrecht, 2016). At the same time, failure to work within a state planning or coordination mechanism can lead to wasteful duplication, a decreased legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the governed, and the accountability of the state to the governed (Ghani, Lockhart and Carnahan, 2005; Massing and Jonas, 2008; De Waal, 1997). It can also lead to a 'brain drain' of skilled staff to international organisations, which further diminishes the ability of the state to respond to future emergencies (Pfeiffer et al., 2008).

Despite the advantages of government coordination, governments of affected states have often been marginalised by the international humanitarian response system, which often appears 'over-resourced, unaccountable, and donor-driven' (Harvey, 2010: 11). While some scholars have argued that this marginalisation is by ideological design (see for example, Duffield, 2001), others have concentrated on the relational, financial, technical and organisational factors that prevent effective articulation of international humanitarian organisations and affected states (Harvey and Harmer, 2011). While ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System Report 2015 suggests that this is slowly improving (Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes, 2015), significant tensions around the role of the affected state in humanitarian response continue to exist in many places (Knox Clarke and Obrecht, 2016).

The humanitarian coordination architecture was designed primarily as 'a response to deficits in the international agencies'(Foley, 2011: 42). Concentrating almost exclusively on these agencies, has arguably, contributed to the separation between governments and international actors. While in some cases, such as Kenya and the Philippines, the system has adapted to government leadership, in others, it has contributed to the exclusion of government agencies from humanitarian decision-making (Morton and Mousseau, 2010; Patrick, 2011). Successive iterations of policy guidance have attempted to address this situation, with the latest Reference Module stating that Clusters should only be activated where 'existing national response or coordination capacity is unable to meet needs in a manner that respects humanitarian principles' (IASC, 2015: 10), and that 'efforts should be made as soon as appropriate and possible to hand over coordination to the relevant authorities.' (IASC 2015: 7)

What are the main issues around the participation of national governments in coordination mechanisms?

Where governments are party to a conflict, coordination by state actors may lead to challenges to the providing impartial humanitarian relief and protection. As the Reference Module for Cluster Coordination suggests (IASC, 2015), international humanitarian organisations can be wary of government coordination where the government is party to a conflict and are using aid to achieve conflict goals (Cairns, 2012; Cosgrave, 2010). Even when aid is not used in this way, the legitimacy of governments engaged in conflict is generally contested, and therefore a decision to work within government coordination systems may lead to agencies becoming involved in political competition. The consequences can be timeliness of response and access.

As Maxwell notes, 'In exceptional occasions, governments cannot or should not lead, but these are exceptions' (Maxwell and Parker, 2012: 10). However, increasingly the bulk of international humanitarian activities occur in situations of conflict or fragility (Stoddard et al., 2015; Swithern, 2015). The 'basic choice' of whether to work with or in parallel to the state (Massing and Jonas, 2008: 8), is one that the international system must make increasingly often. Even where the coordination architecture is kept separate from government bodies, however, it is important for Clusters and HCTs to remain in communication with government (Steets, Darcy, Weingartner and Leguene, 2014a). In these contexts, it may be possible to work with civil society actors, or to establish the coordination mechanism in such a way to mirror government structures and allow for more successful integration at a later date (Harvey, 2010; Massing and Jonas, 2008). Interviewees also pointed out that government-line ministries in conflict can often be less political than government-security agencies, offering possibilities to engage at Cluster level.

Governments may not have sufficient capacity to coordinate or participate in coordination mechanisms.

Government coordination is most likely to be successful 'in contexts characterised by chronic or recurring disasters, [where there are] governments with relatively strong capacities' (Steets et al., 2014: 33). Evaluations suggest that in a number of cases the desire of governments to coordinate relief activities has outstripped their capacity to do so effectively. Coordination of multiple actors can be extremely resource intensive, and often these resources do not exist, or are needed elsewhere. This lack of capacity has been particularly noticeable at a local operational level (Achakzai, Shepherd-Barron and Bokhari, 2011; Neseni and Guzha, 2009; Salomons and Dijkzeul, 2008; Steets et al., 2014b; Steets, Grünewald, Binder and Geoffroy, 2010; Slim, 2012).

International humanitarians are often not fully aware of the structures, capacities and activities of government systems, which can lead to duplication and poor coordination. As figures on government spending on emergency preparedness and response activities (including spending in areas such as health, agricultural and veterinary activities, and response activities conducted by domestic

military and security forces) are generally not readily available to humanitarians, the contribution of governments to response can be routinely underestimated (Flint and Goyder, 2006; Swithern, 2015).

The structure of the IASC coordination system does not always fit well with government structures. Government structures vary significantly from one country to another. As a result, it can be hard for both parties to identify interlocutors in an emergency, particularly where government ministry structures do not follow the same sectoral divisions as the IASC Clusters (Achakzai et al., 2011; Beúnza, 2011; Maxwell and Parker, 2012). In addition, very few international agencies are trained in, or operate Incident Command Systems (ICS) or similar Emergency Management Systems. While this approach to disaster management is becoming increasingly common among many government response agencies (Saavedra and Knox Clarke, 2016), the information management (IM) systems used by international actors may not be designed to articulate with government systems. If international organisations wish to make a reality of increased government coordination, they may need to be prepared organise themselves in such a way that they can better integrate with these structures.

Governments are not monolithic, and may experience internal coordination problems themselves. In some cases, the challenges faced by the international coordination system are mirrored by the affected state themselves, which can struggle to coordinate a response across ministries and levels of government (Featherstone, 2014; Knox Clarke and Ramalingam, 2012). This can lead to situations where 'each different part of government demands that all efforts are coordinated with them and sometimes make contradictory demands of humanitarian actors' (Cosgrave, 2010: 33).

Governments and international actors may be, or may perceive themselves to be, in competition for donor funding. Currently, only very limited amounts of recorded humanitarian funding are channelled directly from donors to governments of countries affected by crisis (Swithern, 2015). This may lead to government actors perceiving that international actors are receiving funding which should rightfully be channelled to the state, which has a negative impact on coordination (Jelinek, 2006). The desire of government National Disaster Management Agencies (NDMAs) to receive increased support is understandable: where donor funds have been used to build state capacity for emergency preparedness and response, the results have often been extremely positive (Harvey, 2010).

Government leadership of, or participation in, coordination mechanisms may be a disincentive to civil society to participate in these mechanisms. The transfer of authority and funding to civil society organisations in crisis affected countries is a priority for many international organisations (see section below). The concept of 'national actors', which can conflate government with civil society actors, often hides significant differences of orientation between government and sections of civil society. Tensions between government and civil society organisations have been evident in a variety of responses (Beer, 2009; Donini and Brown, 2014; Saavedra, 2016) and these may mean that governments do not wish to include national NGOs or faith groups in emergency planning and coordination. Conversely, these NGOs may not wish to participate in forums where government actors are present.

International humanitarian actors do not consistently create handover/transition plans for returning coordination functions to government once the 'peak' of the crisis has passed. The Cluster Reference Module is clear that 'IASC Clusters are a temporary coordination solution and efforts should be made as soon as appropriate and possible to hand over coordination to the relevant authorities' (IASC, 2015: 7). However, interviews and self-assessments conducted as part of Cluster Coordination Performance Monitoring (CCPM) suggest that the creation of these transitional plans is often not prioritised, and that in many cases, transition plans do not exist. This failure to plan for phased government ownership highlights the amount that still needs to happen to integrate the IASC coordination system and the state in many places.
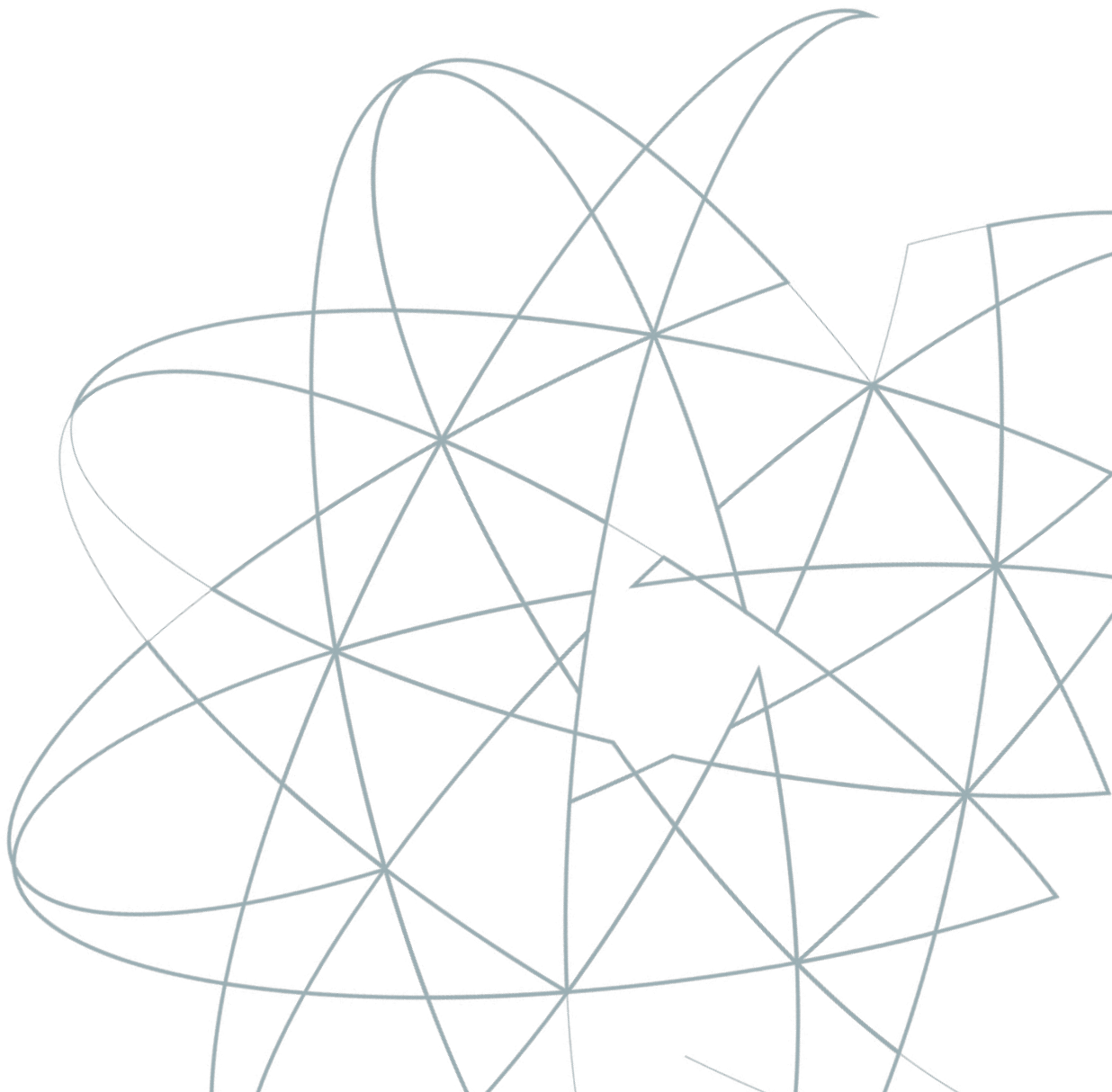
Suggested questions for the meeting

Coordination with governments in conflict:

• What is good coordination practice when governments are not willing to provide impartial humanitarian assistance to people in need?

Coordination with governments which have limited capacity:

• How can governments ensure inclusion in coordination mechanisms in situations where they do not have the capacity to lead coordination activities themselves?

• Should the international humanitarian community invest more in developing the emergency preparedness and response capacities of governments? Is this a good investment in extremely poor or fragile states, where capacity is limited in all areas of government?

• What are the most successful approaches to capacity building?

Understanding of government capacities, structures and activities:

• What are the most successful approaches to understanding government capacities, structures and activities?

• How can these be made a regular feature of international humanitarian activities?

Fitting the IASC coordination mechanism to national government structures:

- Is it possible to have an international coordination structure that is sufficiently standardised to be used in all contexts, but sufficiently flexible to adapt to national structures?

- If so, how might this be achieved?

Competition between governments and international actors for funding:

- How might competition between international actors and governments be addressed?

Supporting the inclusion of civil society in coordination systems that are run by governments, or where governments participate:

- Where governments and civil society organisations do not wish to coordinate with one another, what options are available to the international humanitarian coordination system?

Transition planning:

- How can the Clusters, and the IASC coordination architecture more generally, be incentivised to put a higher priority on transition planning?

Why examine the role of national civil society in humanitarian coordination?

A large body of evidence recognises the important role that national civil society can play in preparing for, responding to and recovering from crises in the humanitarian sphere. The lead-up to the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 has given momentum to this issue (UNGA, 2016), as have a number of key research initiatives and evaluations (including Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015; Gingerich and Cohen, 2015; Hussein, 2015; Cairns, 2015; Featherstone, 2014; Ramalingam et al., 2013; Poole, 2013; Nightingale, 2012; GHP, 2010; Telford et al., 2006).

A great deal of this discussion has focused on funding relationships and partnerships between national civil society and international actors, which is of course an important issue – but not the only one. Recent research by ALNAP (Saavedra, 2016) emphasises the complexity of the discussion on the engagement of national civil society in humanitarian action. Part of this complexity is around how national actors relate to and work in a coordination system that has been largely developed and maintained by international actors.

The IASC-led Cluster-based coordination system has been criticised for the 'marginal' involvement of national actors (Steets et al., 2010). A significant body of research and evaluations support this finding (including Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015; Steets et al., 2014; Patrick, 2011).

There are many reasons why this failure to effectively engage national civil society is a problem for Clusters. Ultimately, it results in the undermining of local ownership of the response (Steets et al., 2010) and is potentially a missed opportunity to make the Cluster more effective (Knox Clarke and Campbell, 2015). In particular, Clusters are unable to gain the broader perspective on the crisis that national civil society could offer (Steets et al., 2010).

The key guidance document for Cluster coordination, the IASC reference module for the implementation of the humanitarian programme cycle, makes several references to the role and importance of national actors; however, in most places the focus is on national authorities alone. The document does not specify how Clusters should engage with national civil society beyond a footnote suggesting that they 'may need to' (IASC, 2015). Similarly, the guidance document for HCTs simply states that both national and international NGOs 'may' be HCT members (IASC, 2009).

What are the main issues around the participation of national civil society in humanitarian coordination mechanisms?

There is a lack of understanding by national civil society actors of what the humanitarian coordination structure looks like, and how or why they might participate in it.

In many instances national civil society actors are unaware of the architecture that is used to coordinate humanitarian responses, such as Clusters and HCTs. If they do become aware of the existence of these mechanisms, the potential benefits of such mechanisms should they participate may not be clear, as is how they might contribute to these mechanisms (Steets et al., 2014).

This lack of understanding can result in national civil society actors lacking incentives to participate. They may perceive meetings to be focused around funding processes to which they do not have access (Steets et al., 2010). Even if they do recognise some potential benefits to attending, these may be outweighed by the barriers to and costs of participation outlined elsewhere in this paper.

International actors have few incentives to ensure the participation of national civil society actors in coordination mechanisms. Few incentives currently exist for international actors to prioritise the inclusion of national civil society actors in Cluster mechanisms. Clusters are able to carry out their work (albeit at a potentially lower level of quality/credibility) even if national actors are excluded. On the whole, while Clusters and their members support the involvement of national civil society actors in principle, it is easier to share information and prevent gaps/overlaps when working with a smaller, more homogeneous group – and therefore they tend not to actively pursue the participation of national civil society.

Existing coordination mechanisms used by national civil society and other national actors are marginalised when international humanitarian coordination mechanisms are introduced.

In many places national actors have their own pre-existing mechanisms for coordination, which are sidelined during an international humanitarian response. This creates missed opportunities to work with and support existing networks (Scriven, 2013), and can also harm national civil society organisations (CSOs) in the long run by 'choking their potential' (GHP, 2010), because when Clusters leave, the pre-existing mechanisms may have lost their resources, connections and momentum.

It is unclear which national civil society actors should engage with Clusters or what the criteria for such engagement might be. In many countries there are thousands of national civil society actors. Due to their size or the nature of their work, many of them would not find it beneficial or relevant to become involved in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. It would also be impossible to involve all CSOs in a coordination mechanism and still ensure that the Cluster has 'targeted and

decision-oriented discussions' (Steets et al., 2014: p.39). However, in any geographical area there will be active national CSOs who would benefit from or provide benefits to the response as a whole, were they to be involved in coordination mechanisms. At present no established criteria exist for identifying which actors should or should not be engaged in Clusters or HCTs – the question is generally avoided by encouraging/allowing any actor to participate should it wish to do so.

Further complicating this matter is the fact that national civil society actors often respond to the crisis as funded partners of international organisations, who may themselves participate in the Cluster. It is not clear whether national actors who are funded partners of international actors should also participate in coordination meetings, and if so what responsibility the international actors have for ensuring that the activities of their national civil society partners are effectively coordinated in the Cluster mechanism.

Clusters may not be the best forum for building the capacity of national civil society.

At the moment, Clusters are expected to perform a long list of functions, one of which is capacity building. This function is seldom prioritised, and when it is, it can reduce resources for or conflict with coordination functions. Some observers have questioned whether capacity building might not be better achieved through other forums or mechanisms.

Coordination meetings are typically conducted in English using humanitarian abbreviations/ acronyms and jargon that are unfamiliar to national and local actors.

A large number of evaluations and research initiatives[1] have commented on the language barrier that is almost always present at humanitarian coordination meetings. Conducting meetings exclusively in English (or sometimes in French) is a significant barrier to the participation of national civil society actors. Even those who do speak the 'international language' may not be able to keep up with fast-paced meetings containing people with different accents and using technical jargon. Documents circulated around Cluster and other coordination meetings are also typically not translated into national language(s). Although it is a fairly obvious point to make, in most cases this is not something that the Clusters so far have been able to effectively address.

National civil society actors face limitations in terms of their time, access to technology and ability to travel that are significant barriers to their involvement in coordination mechanisms.

Another perhaps obvious point is the disparity between national and international actors in terms of access to time, technology and transportation, which makes it very difficult for national and local civil society actors to participate in coordination mechanisms in the same way that international

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1 | For more sources, see Knox Clarke and Campbell (2015) and Steets et al. (2010).

actors can. National CSOs are more likely to have fewer staff, and therefore attending meetings uses proportionately more of their resources. They are less likely to have consistent and reliable access to the internet and are not always likely to know where to find information (unlike internationals, who are generally familiar with online coordination platforms such as www.humanitarianresponse.info/ and the Global Cluster websites). Finally, they face further barriers when travelling to meetings, particularly those in cities/capitals far away from their local offices, which are often located close to the communities where they work.

Suggested questions for the meeting

Lack of understanding of Clusters:

- Do Clusters have a responsibility to reach out and explain their structure, purpose and opportunities for participation to national civil society actors?

- If so, what are the most effective methods of doing so?

Incentives to participation:

- Are the incentives for the participation of national civil society actors clear, both for CSOs themselves and for international Cluster members and lead agencies?

- How can these incentives be communicated to individuals during a response?

- Are these incentives sufficient? What more could be done?

Marginalisation of existing coordination structures:

- How can humanitarians identify and work with existing, in-country coordination structures while also working within the established international coordination architecture?

- What is the best way to achieve alignment among various coordination mechanisms?

Criteria for engagement:

- Is the Cluster – and broader coordination architecture – a mechanism for coordinating the humanitarian response or for coordinating the international response? What are the implications of each?

- Should formal criteria be established for participation in Clusters/HCTs that are applicable to both international and national actors? If so, what would they be? How would this be assessed?

- Should national civil society actors who are funded partners of international agencies participate in Clusters? If not, what responsibility do their international funders have to include their work in coordination mechanisms?

Capacity building:

- Should Clusters be responsible for capacity building? Is this the right forum? Or should other forums or mechanisms be established?

Language:

- Do Clusters and HCTs have a responsibility to conduct meetings/produce documents in local languages?

- What can be done to improve language accessibility to Cluster processes and products?

Time/technology/travel barriers:

- How can Clusters continue to improve the technology they use, but remain accessible to those with less technical capacity, such as some national CSOs?

- Do Clusters have a responsibility to locate meetings close to the ground or provide alternatives for those unable to physically participate in centralised coordination processes?

- How much time is required of national civil society actors wishing to engage in Clusters? Is this reasonable?

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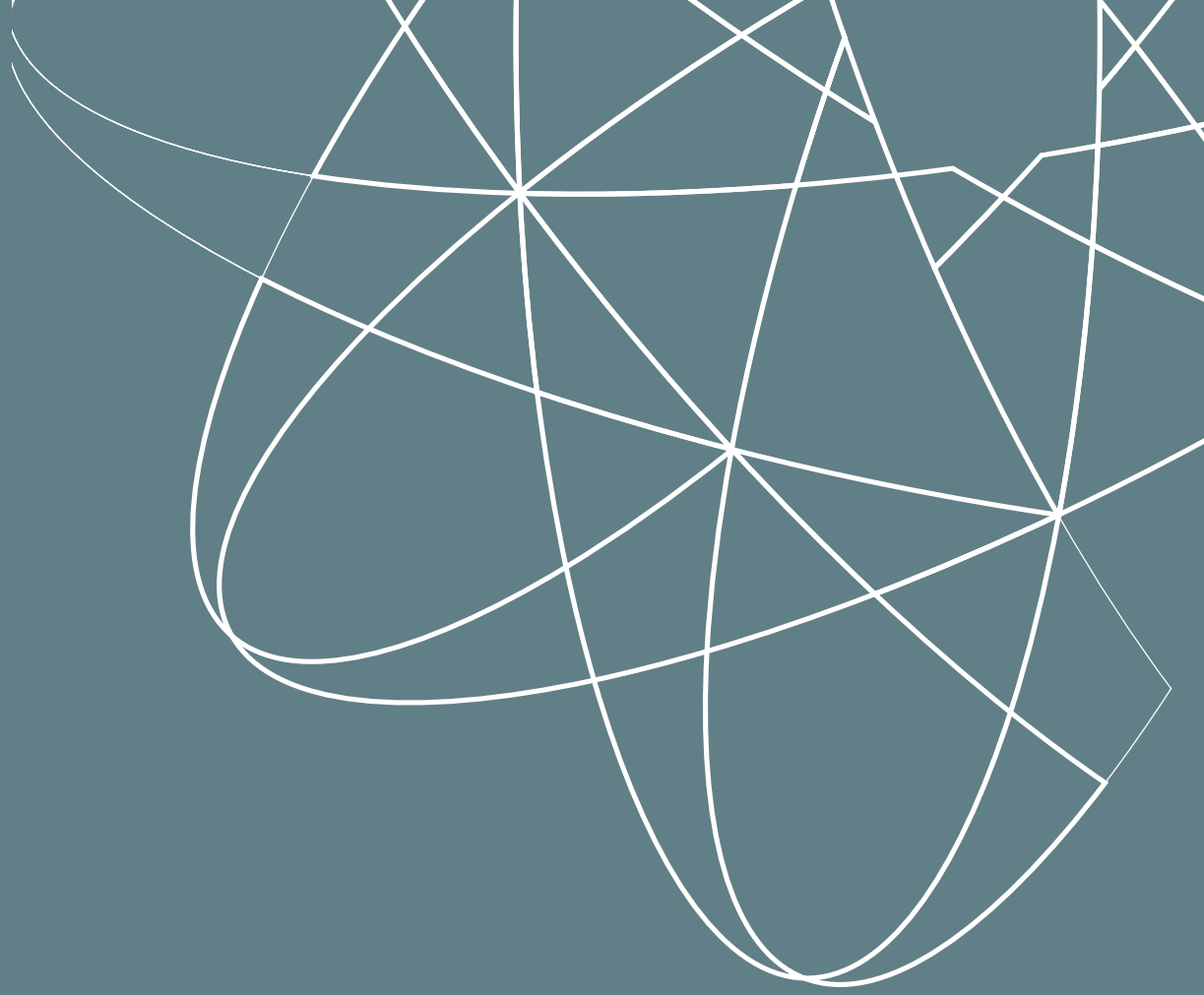
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