Crisis Coordination Unit (CCU): Playbook

(work in progress)

Crisis Coordination Unit Global

Feb 2025

Summary page

A Crisis Coordination Unit serves as your humanitarian command centre, creating vital connections between local response efforts and the broader humanitarian ecosystem in times of crisis. At its core, a CCU bridges the gap between grassroots initiatives – including mutual aid groups and diaspora communities – and institutional support from NGOs and donors. This connection is essential for effective crisis response.

So you want to set up a CCU to support the response in your country, region, locality? This is a guide to share what we had learned at Shabaka in our work with diaspora and mutual aid groups, also supporting the response to the crisis in Sudan. It is not a definitive guide, rather, a playbook to help you with your planning- it is work in progress and we will seek to update it regularly.

Core operations

Information hub

Your **Information Hub** is your command centre – think of it as the nerve centre of your operation. Set it up to collect and share critical information about the crisis, ongoing needs, and who is responding where. Please keep it simple but effective: gather key data, understand what is happening on the ground, and ensure everyone needing information can get it quickly and clearly. This means collecting data about ongoing needs and responses, and making this information accessible to all stakeholders in transparent, actionable formats. Remember that effective information sharing does not need to be complex – it needs to be reliable for a wide range of responders.

Resource coordination forms another crucial pillar of your operations. Your role here is to facilitate connections rather than manage resources directly. Focus on linking organisations with funding opportunities, identifying efficient distribution routes, connecting complementary groups that can support each other's work, and giving support in the understanding and recognition of the roles and contributions of and for stakeholders. Think of yourself as a matchmaker in the humanitarian space.

Document everything along the way. Capture what works and what does not through case studies, maintain simple but effective knowledge management systems, and share evidence-based practices that others can use. This helps everyone learn and improve their response capabilities.

Core operations

2 Technical support

Start with the **Technical Advisory Group**, which understands humanitarian response and logistics. They will help develop safety protocols, operational guidelines, and risk management frameworks that match your context. Your technical team should be ready to provide quick, practical guidance when teams need it most.

Build **capacity** by focusing on practical, immediate needs. Develop **training** that local responders and diaspora groups can use immediately. Create spaces where groups can share what they have learnt and help each other solve problems. Keep it hands-on and relevant to the current crisis.

Consider **surge support** to enhance response effectiveness – deploying skilled diaspora and other volunteers familiar with the context – which often brings both technical expertise and cultural understanding that can significantly enhance response effectiveness.

For **Resource Coordination**, position yourself as a facilitator rather than a manager. Your role is to help connect the dots: link groups with funding opportunities, identify efficient distribution routes, and connect organisations that can help each other. Remember, you are not handling the funds directly, but instead ensuring that everyone knows where resources are and how to access them.

When it comes to **Network Building**, think of yourself as a bridge-builder. Map out who is doing what in the response, connect complementary groups, and help build sustainable partnerships. Encourage community-led initiatives and help different sectors work together effectively.

For **Impact Monitoring**, keep it focused and valuable. Track what matters most: are the coordinated responses working? Are needs being met? Are groups working together effectively? Use this information to help everyone adjust and improve their real-time response efforts.

Remember, your role is to **facilitate and support**, not to control. Keep your systems lean and adaptable, and always prioritise what helps local responders do their work better.

Core operations

3 Secretariat

Keep your digital infrastructure light and accessible: prioritise mobile-first solutions and low-bandwidth options such as WhatsApp and SMS. Enable offline functionality wherever possible and maintain non-digital backups of critical information. Remember that the most sophisticated system is not always the best choice – choose tools your stakeholders already use and trust.

Digital infrastructure

Here is your practical guide to setting up digital infrastructures in crisis settings, with special attention to connectivity challenges.

Digital Platform Essentials – Keep it Light and Accessible

- Design for low bandwidth: create a simple, text-based interface that loads quickly. If you design a website, ensure it is not graphics-heavy. It is more optimal to have a LinkedIn or Facebook page.
- Make the platform mobile-first: most users will access your platform via their phone, so WhatsApp, Telegram, and similar tools might be the optimal communication tools.
- Enable offline functionality: allow users to download and sync when connected.
- Support multiple languages: include options for local languages.
- Consider SMS fallback: include essential functions that work through text message.

Smart Data Management for Challenging Environments

- Use lightweight data collection tools that work offline.
- Implement secure but accessible storage solutions.
- Keep data encrypted but easily retrievable.
- Create simple backup systems for when connectivity fails.
- Remember, less is more – collect only what is essential.

Communication Tools that Work Anywhere

- Set up multiple channels: WhatsApp, SMS, email, and web.
- Prioritise low-bandwidth options.
- Enable group messaging that works with intermittent connectivity.
- Create downloadable resources for offline access.
- Keep file sizes small for easier sharing.

Resource Repository – Making Information Accessible

- Design for easy downloading when connection is available.
- Create compressed versions of important documents.
- Implement simple search functions that work offline.
- Use clear folder structures for easy navigation.
- Keep critical resources available in multiple formats.

Pro tip

Always have a non-digital backup plan! Technology can fail, especially in crisis zones, so maintain essential information in offline formats as well.

Remember, the best digital system is one people can use and are familiar with. When in doubt, choose simplicity and reliability over advanced features.

Start small and scale gradually over six months: begin with the most urgent needs in your context, then expand as your capacity grows. From day one, plan for eventual handover to local partners and become an independent entity or close. This means documenting your processes clearly and building local leadership capacity throughout your operations – do they have the credibility and necessary experience to take it over? Establish what are main needs and gaps, and how you will exit and handover.

Build an independent structure: prioritise local leadership and clear decision-making processes. Create simple, transparent protocols that new team members can quickly understand during a crisis. Consider long-term sustainability by blending different funding sources and planning for cost recovery without making services unaffordable.

Core operations

4 Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement from outset and throughout: effective stakeholder management requires understanding and early consultation with stakeholders, **acknowledging human complexities, careful planning, and building trust-based relationships**. Success depends on finding acceptable compromises between different expectations, understanding varied definitions of success, and ensuring clear governance. The entire project team should take responsibility for stakeholder engagement rather than leaving it to a single person.

Start with clear Engagement Protocols. Set up communication channels that work for everyone – remember that different groups might need different approaches. Make sure you are supporting diaspora-led initiatives and offering cultural guidance when required. Think practical: WhatsApp groups for quick updates, regular email briefings for detailed information, and clear contact points for urgent matters.

Focus on making the work of Mutual Aid Networks easier. Help these groups coordinate with each other, build their capacity where needed, and ensure local knowledge drives decisions. Keep it community-based – these networks know their communities best.

When working with Local NGOs and Civil Society, **provide direct support that makes sense for their context**. Help them access resources, develop their teams, and strengthen local leadership. Remember, your role is to support, not direct.

With International NGOs, keep it structured but flexible. **Set up straightforward ways to share information and work together**. Help them understand how to best complement local efforts rather than duplicate them.

For Donors, **keep communication clear and consistent**. Show them the impact of local responses, help them identify smart investment opportunities, and maintain transparency about resource use.

Pro tip

- Assign specific liaison officers who understand the needs of each stakeholder group.
- Hold regular check-ins that respect everyone's time (i.e. for many volunteers, this type of work is 'second shift', after office hours and on weekends).
- Create feedback loops so you can adjust quickly when needed.
- Make decisions collaboratively – get input from all sides before moving forward.

Remember, good stakeholder management is about building trust and making it easier for everyone to work together effectively.

Engagement Protocols

- Communication channels
- Resource mobilisation support
- Cultural competency guidance
- Diaspora-led initiatives support

Mutual Aid Networks

- Coordination mechanisms
- Capacity strengthening
- Local knowledge integration
- Community-based approaches
- Sustainable support systems

Local NGOs/ Civil Society

- Direct support mechanisms
- Training and development
- Resource access facilitation
- Local leadership promotion
- Context-specific guidance

International NGOs

- Coordination mechanisms
- Capacity strengthening
- Local knowledge integration
- Community-based approaches
- Sustainable support systems

Donors

- Reporting frameworks
- Accountability mechanisms
- Impact demonstration
- Investment opportunities
- Strategic alignment

Final thoughts

Remember that your role is to facilitate, not control. Actual local ownership means giving local leaders control, not just participation. Keep your systems adaptable and your processes simple. Most importantly, plan your exit strategy from the beginning – the best and most successful CCUs eventually make themselves unnecessary by building lasting local capacity.

The success of your CCU will not be measured by its complexity but by how effectively it supports local crisis response efforts. Stay focused on what works in your context, and always prioritise practical solutions over perfect ones.

Key implementation considerations

Setting Up Governance – Keep it Local, Keep it Clear

- Build an independent structure that puts local leadership first.
- Create simple, transparent decision-making processes.
- Make sure everyone knows who is responsible for what.
- Keep accountability straightforward and meaningful.
- Remember, local ownership is not only about participation – it is about control.

Making it Sustainable – Plan for the Long Run

- Blend different funding sources: core funding plus service-based revenue.
- Be smart about resource use – every dollar/pound/rial counts.
- Plan for cost recovery without making services unaffordable.
- Think ahead: what will you need in six months? A year?
- Build reserves when possible.

Staying Adaptable – Because Every Crisis is Different

- Create clear protocols for different types of crises.
- Keep your structure flexible – what works today might need to change tomorrow.
- Make scaling up (or down) easy.
- Stay open to new ways of doing things.
- Learn and adjust as you go.

Protecting People and Data – Do No Harm

- Put strong data protection measures in place.
- Keep private information private.
- Follow clear ethical guidelines.
- Make safety a priority in all programmes.
- Always ask: could this cause unintended harm?

Pro tip

write down your protocols, but keep them simple enough for new team members to understand quickly in a crisis.

Remember, your framework should help, not hinder. If a process is getting in the way of helping people, it needs to change.

CCU six-month timeline: from start to handover

When	Main Tasks	What We'll Have Done
Month 1	• Get the team together • Set up basic working systems • Start research on local needs • Begin talking to community groups	• Assembled a working team • Basic office setup (remote, physical, or a combination) • Initial research findings • List of key community contacts
Month 2	• Research local crisis response practices • Map out who is doing what locally • Start working with local groups	• Research report on local practices • Map of local organisations • First partnerships started
Month 3	• Share research findings • Test your ways of working • Find potential partner organisations • Check what is working and what is not	• Published research results (can be report format, blog, podcast – whichever is most straightforward and accessible for your communities) • Feedback from testing • List of possible partners • Short progress report, which can be in different, accessible formats
Month 4	• Choose the best local partner • Plan how to hand over your work • Share what you have learnt • Start training others	• Selected partner organisation • Handover plan • Training materials ready • Knowledge sharing started

Month 5	• Train partner organisation • Hand over main activities • Document everything you have learnt • Help partner take the lead	• Partner staff trained • Main work handed over • Complete guide written • Partner-leading activities
Month 6	• Support partner as needed • Finish any remaining tasks • Share final research findings • Complete the handover	• Everything handed over • Final research report • All documents shared • Project properly finished

Do you need further help? Who to contact

Shabaka: contact us to help you get underway: info@shabaka.org

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About Shabaka

Shabaka was established in 2014 to help fight the injustices that leave entire communities disadvantaged and shut out from socioeconomic and political progress. The current humanitarian legal and aid architecture is under increasing strain. Established in a bygone era, it no longer has the tools to respond to contemporary issues and resulting crisis. Issues such as climate change mean the 'North/South' paradigm is no longer applicable. A new approach is needed to tackle these critical issues. Shabaka believes that diaspora and migrants are critical stakeholders to formulating and delivering this new model.

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