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## Concept Note v 3.0

# Proposal to Establish an IASC Task Force on Information Management (includes proposed Terms of Reference)

As requested by the 71<sup>st</sup> IASC Working Group  
at Session: 5.1 - 15:30-17:00 on 19 June 2008

*Circulated 28 November 2008*

## I Rationale

The purpose of this Concept Note is to outline the role of the proposed IASC Task Force on Information Management.<sup>1</sup> The overarching objective of the Task Force is to strengthen the management of information in humanitarian emergencies by improving the inter-agency processes and tools for the collection, processing and dissemination of information to support improved decision making in emergencies.

This revised note reflects the comments received from the IASC WG on version 1.0 that was circulated to the IASC WG on 22 August 2008 by the Director of OCHA Geneva. The initial Concept Note, which was requested by the IASC-WG during its 71<sup>st</sup> meeting in June 2008, was developed by OCHA in consultation with members of the *ad-hoc* Inter-Agency Information Management Working Group (IA IM WG).

## II Background

### 2.1 Information Management and the IASC

Information Management (IM) was first raised at the IASC-WG during its 8<sup>th</sup> meeting (February 1994) where participants recognised the importance of IM, particularly in the context of early warning. The issue was raised again at the IASC-WG's 54<sup>th</sup> meeting (September 2003) where WHO presented a proposal for the establishment of an *IASC Task Force on Strengthening Field Information Management Capacities in Support to Coordination* (September 2003). Specific outputs of the Task Force included: a desk survey on humanitarian IM in recent crises, identification of recommendations on best practice in IM, and the development of an agreed inter-

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'information management' covers 'the various stages of information processing from production to storage and retrieval to dissemination towards the better working of an organization; information can be from internal and external sources and in any format.' Association for Information Management 2005 (See <http://www.aslib.co.uk>).

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agency metadata standard.<sup>2</sup> However, of these outputs, only the desk survey was completed. The IASC WG agreed to close the Task Force after 12 months due to the limited level of participation in the Task Force, as well as competing priorities, particularly the Iraq crisis.

To address deficiencies in managing information in emergencies that were identified by humanitarian partners in early 2006,<sup>3</sup> OCHA and the IASC membership were requested by the IASC-WG at its 65<sup>th</sup> meeting to implement ten recommendations to address the identified weaknesses. By December 2007 all ten recommendations were substantively implemented by the members of the IASC through the IA IM WG.<sup>4</sup> One of the most important outputs of the IA IM WG was the development of an inter-agency agreement on the responsibilities of Cluster/Sector leads and OCHA in managing information emergencies: the *Operational Guidance on Responsibilities of Cluster/Sector Leads & OCHA in Information Management* (hereafter referred to as *Operational Guidance on IM*). This Operational Guidance was endorsed by the IASC Task Team on the Cluster Approach in September 2007 and presented to the IASC at the 71<sup>st</sup> IASC WG meeting.

Intended for use at the country level, the *Operational Guidance on IM* was developed to help Cluster/Sector Leads and OCHA, as well as other humanitarian partners, ensure that relevant information was provided to the right person, at the right time, in a usable format that facilitated situational understanding and decision-making. The Operational Guidance also outlines IM responsibilities for *intra*-cluster coordination by the Cluster/Sector Leads, as well as OCHA's IM responsibilities for *inter*-cluster coordination.

Building on the outputs of the IA IM WG, in the first quarter of 2008 participating agencies confirmed the need for continued efforts to improve humanitarian IM at the global level. Various coordination options were explored by the IA IM WG, with the preferred option being a subsidiary Task Force of the IASC that would support Cluster/Sector leads and OCHA, particularly in the area of defining common information needs and standards across clusters. The IA IM WG also placed emphasis on the requirement for the Task Force to have a clear Terms of Reference including a requirement to develop and maintain strong linkages with complementary humanitarian reform inter-agency initiatives.

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<sup>2</sup> Metadata is the information that describes the content, quality, condition, origin, and other characteristics of data or other pieces of information (see [dggis.dc.gov/dggis/cwp/view,A,1191,Q,494476.asp](http://dggis.dc.gov/dggis/cwp/view,A,1191,Q,494476.asp)).

<sup>3</sup> In June 2006, at the request of the IASC-WG, OCHA hosted an Information Management Workshop in Geneva where 29 representatives from the IASC participated (FAO, ICVA, IFRC, IOM, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNJLC, WFP, WHO, VVAF, and World Vision International) and came to this agreement on the role of humanitarian information management

<sup>4</sup> See Background Note, *Implementation of Inter-Agency Framework for Information Management in Emergencies*, presented at the 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the IASC-WG.

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### 2.3 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the IASC-WG

At Session 5.1 of the 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the IASC-WG (June 2008), OCHA presented an overview of progress made in 2006-2008 by the IA IM WG and recommended that an IASC Task Force on Information Management be established to strengthen inter-agency information exchange before and during emergencies.

Members of the IASC-WG expressed their support for the establishment of an IASC Task Force on Information Management, pending the submission of a Concept Note with clearly defined outputs. The discussion at the meeting also raised a number of issues related to IM – including the implementation of the *Operational Guidance on IM* – and requested that OCHA ensure that they be appropriately addressed in this Concept Note. The IASC-WG also requested clarification on the relationship between information management and needs assessment.

Based on extensive consultations in 2007, the Cluster/Sector leads and OCHA determined that the conduct and design of needs assessments should primarily be the responsibility of the Clusters/Sectors and individual operational agencies. The technical expertise and knowledge in determining what the ‘right question’ should be asked in a need assessment, resides within each Clusters/Sector and operational agency. Notwithstanding this, members of the IA IM WG also recognized the potential of information management, as an academic discipline, to improve the efficiency of needs assessments by improving the process by which individual agencies, clusters and the wider humanitarian community plan, collect, organize, use, control, store, disseminate, and dispose of information. In doing so, the humanitarian community can ensure that the value of information that is collected is identified and leveraged to the maximum extent possible.

This potential to improve the efficiency of needs assessments can often be realized through the adoption of simple information management measures. For example, information management can support the adoption of a common list of settlement names and encourage inclusion of latitude/longitude coordinates in assessment forms. If agencies adopt these measures when conducting needs assessments, the results of agency or cluster assessments can be more easily compared to other assessments conducted in the same geographic area over time. This also supports the mapping of aggregated assessment information using Geographic Information Systems. Similarly, the identification and promotion of a minimum set of information to be provided by each Cluster /Sector and OCHA in an emergency [including the technical standards to allow the information to be inter-operable] facilitates a more predictable response. Information management can also support the processing of needs assessments data through the design of databases, as well as aiding the interpretation and analysis of the data through the design of structured database queries. This requires the technical subject matter experts [e.g.: epidemiologists in the Health Cluster], to work closely with information management practitioners throughout the needs assessment process [and vice-versa]. Through the establishment of an

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information management network at the field level, Cluster/Sector leads and OCHA can also better coordinate the different needs assessment initiatives to identify complementarities between the data sets, as well as improve coordination of data collection [to prevent the same data being collected twice].

Although this potential exists, information management in isolation cannot improve needs assessments. Information management is multi-disciplinary and cross-cutting, and therefore needs to be integrated into the business processes and systems of the Cluster/Sectors and OCHA and not seen as the sole domain of technical staff. Informed decision-making thus relies upon expert analysis, which, in turn is based upon appropriate needs assessments. Information management supports this process and has the potential to make it more efficient.

### **III Proposal**

In order to provide the members of the IASC, including global and field Cluster/Sector leads, with improved information management guidance and tools, the primary outputs of the IASC TF on IM would be:

1. Review of current Inter-Agency IM and implementation of the Operational Guidance Note on IM to identify best practices;
2. Update the *Operational Guidance Note on IM* (based on the Inter-Agency review);
3. Produce agreed guidance and tools to implement the revised *Operational Guidance on IM*; and
4. Framework developed for monitoring effectiveness of the *Operational Guidance Note on IM*.

### **Proposed Actions by the IASC-WG:**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Endorse the establishment of an IASC Task Force on Information Management with a timeframe of 18 months.</li><li>2. Endorse the proposed Terms of Reference (Annex A) for the Task Force, which outline the outputs to be achieved on the basis of the <i>Operational Guidance on the Responsibilities of Cluster/Sector Leads and OCHA in Information Management</i>.</li></ol> |
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Prepared by: OCHA, November 2008

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## Annex A

### **Proposed Terms of Reference for the IASC Task Force on Information Management**

1. The purpose of this Terms of Reference [ToR] is to outline the objectives, outputs, and timeframe of the IASC Task Force on Information Management. In doing so the IASC-WG seeks to establish a realistic time bound plan for the Task Force in order to strengthen the management of information in humanitarian emergencies.
2. This ToR was developed by OCHA in consultation with the *ad hoc* Inter-Agency Information Management Working Group (IA IM WG) and Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group (IASC-WG) representatives to address issues raised in discussions at the 71<sup>st</sup> meeting of the IASC-WG. This revised ToR reflects the comments received from the IASC-WG on versions 1.0 ToR, which was circulated to the IASC WG on 22 August 2008 by the Director of OCHA Geneva.

#### **Objective**

3. The objective of the Task Force is to strengthen the management of information in humanitarian emergencies by building on and improving existing inter-agency processes and tools for the collection, processing and dissemination of information to support improved decision making in emergencies.

#### **Outputs**

4. The expected outputs of the Task Force are as follows:
  - a. Review of current Inter-Agency IM and implementation of the Operational Guidance Note on IM. The Task Force will undertake an inter-agency review of IM efforts at the global and the field levels. The review will identify good IM practices; relevant guidelines developed by Cluster/Sectors, as well as seek to guide the clarification of the linkages between information management and needs assessments. The review will be coordinated with Cluster/Sector Leads, IM practitioners with experience from the cluster environment, and OCHA's Humanitarian Reform Support Unit (HRSU). The review will serve as a basis for activities and issues to be addressed by the IASC TF on IM. The review will also be informed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the Cluster Evaluation.
  - b. Update the Operational Guidance Note on IM. Based on the review the Task Force is to revise *Operational Guidance Note*, with a particular emphasis on clarifying the linkages between information management and needs assessments,

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as well as the modalities for a field based network of inter-agency information management practitioners.

- c. Produce guidance and tools to implement the revised *Operational Guidance on IM*. The Task Force is to produce guidance materials to support the implementation of the *Operational Guidance Note on IM*, including:
- i. Development of an online “*toolkit*” for field practitioners on how to implement the *Operational Guidance Note on IM*. The audience for the toolkit will be information management practitioners, as well as programme and management staff. This online resource is to provide a consolidation of available resources, including compiling an online handbook, to support both *intra*-Cluster/Sector and *inter*-Cluster/Sector programming, coordination, and decision-making. The handbook should also include an explanation of how information management supports analysis undertaken by the Cluster/Sectors and OCHA.<sup>5 6</sup>
  - ii. Development of an improved inter-agency web-platform to support and manage the exchange of operational information in emergencies, taking into account relevant existing web platforms and avoid duplication of existing agency web based resources. This web tool is to build on the [www.humanitarianreform.org](http://www.humanitarianreform.org) site, as well as other initiatives.
  - iii. The design and delivery of inter-cluster information management training to Cluster/Sector members. This training is to be developed as an integral component of the Cluster/Sector Lead Coordination Training (individual cluster and inter-cluster) to allow for a common standard of understanding and expertise and is to promote the ‘Train the Trainer’ approach.
  - iv. As required update or create new information management solutions to meet unforeseen gaps arising from the inter-agency review of information management efforts.
  - v. List of the minimum set of data and information that will be consistently shared between Cluster/Sectors and OCHA in emergencies [this set will

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<sup>5</sup> An example “handbook” is the OCHA IM Toolbox: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/IMToolBox/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Analysis being “the breaking down of informational materials into their component parts, examining (and trying to understand the organizational structure of) such information to develop divergent conclusions by identifying motives or causes, making inferences, and/or finding evidence to support generalizations.” Bloom, *Major Categories in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* <http://hsc.usf.edu/OCME/pace/files/Taxonomy.html> [accessed 22 October 2008].

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vary between clusters]. This list should include guidance on the processes and standards for exchanging data and information [e.g. formats, templates etc].

- vi. Specific guidance on information management and linkages to early recovery and transition is to be provided.
  - vii. A communications strategy to promote the practical application of IASC guidance materials related to IM.
- d. Framework developed for monitoring effectiveness of the *Operational Guidance Note on IM*. The Task Force is develop a monitoring framework, including standard indicators, to supporting monitoring of the effectiveness of the *Operational Guidance Note on IM* to promote use of the Note after the Task Force is finished.

### **Participation**

- 5. Given the multi-disciplinary nature of information management (IM), participation in the proposed Task Force will vary according to the topic being addressed. This requires that the members of the IASC and the Cluster/Sector Leads are invited to participate in the Task Force. Selection of staff to support the various activities of the Task Force should be based on the topic and not restricted to information management practitioners [e.g. some issues will require programme staff, other issues will need more technical IM staff].
- 6. To ensure appropriate representation in the Task Force, IASC Member Agencies, and Cluster/Sector Leads are requested to appoint a staff member at the Director or Manager level to coordinate their involvement in the Task Force. This staff member may designate a focal point(s) through which Task Force correspondence can be channelled.
- 7. Linkages will be made with other Inter-Agency initiatives related to information management, including the IASC Sub-Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning, Sub Working Group on Gender, OCHA's Assessment and Classification of Emergencies (ACE) Project, the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and its Needs Analysis Framework (NAF), among others. The Task Force will thus consider past experiences and conclusions made, when updating and creating new information management solutions.
- 8. The Task Force will be coordinated through OCHA Geneva and will convene on an as required basis [approximately on a bi-monthly basis in Geneva]. OCHA's Field Information Services Unit will provide the Secretariat of the Task Force and will coordinate the substantive implementation of the Task Force work plan.

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**Timeframe**

9. The timeframe to produce the outputs listed above would be 18 months from the time of IASC WG endorsement of the Task Force. Upon expiration of its mandate, the Task Force will report to the IASC WG on the results obtained in accordance with its Terms of Reference.

**Expected costs**

10. OCHA resources will accommodate, within reason, the funding of some substantive Task Force outputs, including the development of the toolkit and an improved inter-agency web-platform. Once established, the IASC TF on IM will develop a work-plan that also outlines expected costs of each activity.