

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE-WORKING GROUP
51st MEETING**

25-26 November 2002

**WHO, Headquarters, Geneva
Room M505**

**Agenda Item: Review of the Work of the IASC Subsidiary Bodies: Reference Group
on Telecommunications**

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**Areas requiring Support from/Action by IASC Working Group and other IASC
subsidiary bodies**

The application and implementation of the recommendations and concepts developed by the IASC-RGT depend in most cases on a policy decision within each agency. Typical examples are

- The introduction and implementation of the Minimum Standards of Telecommunications for the Safety and Security of Personnel in the Field (approved by the ACC in December 2000) is an essential element of safety and security for all field personnel. These standards have so far been made mandatory by some agencies (including WFP and UNHCR), while others (e.g. OCHA) do not comply.
- The concept of the Telecommunications Coordination Officer (TCO) was successfully applied in several natural disasters (e.g. Mozambique in 2000 and in 2001) and in complex emergencies (e.g. during the initial phase of the Afghanistan and Central Asia operations in 2001/2002). In many cases, however, the concepts of coordination and distribution of tasks among agencies did not give consideration to the need for a consolidated approach to Telecommunications and Information Technology.
- The increasing use of public networks (e.g. by deploying temporary GSM mobile phone networks) requires mechanisms for cost sharing and a clear definition of responsibilities. The development of such mechanisms is presently in progress in the RGT, but the application of the concepts, which are expected to be defined by the IASC-RGT, will depend on respective policy decisions on higher levels. Such an agreement is in particular a precondition for the use of the contributions from the private sector obtained through the RGT secretariat in 2001/2002.
- For the inter-operability and for gateways between the different proprietary (private) networks of the various partners in international humanitarian assistance, the RGT has developed standards and agreed on procedures. Their implementation, however, has consequences in respect to procurement and other administrative matters and thus requires corresponding policy decisions and administrative compliance with the defined requirements. The respective levels within each agency are not represented in the RGT, but the IASC-WG and higher IASC mechanisms can reach them.

Different from some of the other subsidiary bodies of the IASC, the RGT is not primarily a consultative body. The RGT has functions in the operational/technical as well as regulatory/policy field, and the introduction of concepts and the indispensable cooperation with partners outside the IASC require a continuity, which can only be provided by a convener who is willing and able to maintain a secretariat. OCHA (and its predecessor DHA) convened the RGT since 1994. OCHA also maintained the secretariat, which was however gradually abolished since early 2001, and for which sufficient resources were no longer available in 2001 and 2002 and cannot be expected for 2003. The IASC-WG may wish to review this situation and to identify a new solution, which will allow a resumption of the secretariat functions.

Justification for extending the Mandate of the Group for 2003

To an increasing degree, telecommunications are becoming an integral part of Information and Telecommunication Technology (ICT) rather than a stand-alone element of support to humanitarian action. The IASC-WG might therefore consider creating a Reference Group on ICT (RGIC) instead of the present RGT. Such a reference group could internally still split into two dedicated sub groups, a group on IT (i.e. an IASC-version of the former ISCC or parallel to an IASC/SIG-TAG successor) and a group on Telecommunications (i.e. the present RGT).

In view of the continuous technical developments and new applications, a continuation of the work done in the RGT since 1994 appears as appropriate. In the same way as outlined above, practical results beyond a discussion of problems and suggestions for solutions will however depend on the continuity, which only a secretariat can provide.

A summary work plan for 2003 (for a continuation in the present form) is attached. It is based on the work plans approved by the RGT in its meetings in 2001 and 2002. The corresponding 2003 cost plan, submitted for a continuation of the project, under which OCHA so far convened the RGT and maintained its secretariat, was however drastically reduced to comply with the requirement zero growth vis-à-vis the already insufficient and only partially funded 2002 cost plan. The IASC-WG therefore needs to consider new arrangements if it considers a continuation of any inter-agency work beyond consultative discussions on telecommunications and possibly on the overall field of ICT as desirable.

Hans Zimmermann
17 October 2002

Proposed Actions/Decisions required by IASC-WG

- Endorsement of the extension of the mandate of the RG on Emergency Telecommunications in 2003, under a new name: Reference Group on Information and Communication Technology.
- Adoption of the Work plan for 2003.
- Provision of policy support. Recognition and implementation of the recommendations made by the IASC RG on Emergency and Telecommunications to improve the coordination of telecommunications in emergencies (referring n specifically to procurement and different administrative measures).
- Provision of support for the proposals for the development of mechanism for cost sharing with the private sector.