

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
PRINCIPALS MEETING

**The Humanitarian Coordinator System:
Issues for Discussion**

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The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) function is crucial in ensuring a well-coordinated response to humanitarian needs in a country. The HC is supposed to serve the broader humanitarian community. S/He is responsible for establishing comprehensive coordination mechanisms that are inclusive of all actors involved in humanitarian response at the country level. The collaborative response to IDPs relies heavily on the abilities and leadership of the HC to establish an appropriate and effective mechanism that brings together the humanitarian community to identify gaps and responses to the needs of IDPs.

In too many instances, the UN’s preferred option of appointing Resident Coordinators (RCs) as HCs seems to have resulted in inexperienced HCs leading the humanitarian response. As the IDP Protection Survey illustrated, the failures of the collaborative response to IDPs can, at least in part, be attributed to the inability of HCs (not to mention RCs) to effectively lead such a coordinated response. The authority and leadership required is often lacking; the humanitarian experience is often missing, including when it comes to working with actors outside the UN family; and the ability and/or desire to call governments to task, when necessary, is simply not there at times.

There is general agreement that there needs to be reform of the HC system. Steps taken by OCHA, UNDG, and others (e.g. DFID) in recent months seem to be taking as a given the need to appoint RCs as HCs and therefore are looking at ways to make RCs into better HCs. While as a long-term strategy this approach is perhaps desirable, the changes that will come about as a result of this strategy will take years, if not decades. What would be more effective for the humanitarian system would be to explore options of ensuring that the people with the appropriate profile and right skills’ set are appointed HCs, which should also mean bringing in actors from outside of the UN system.

I Previous IASC Decisions

Interestingly, many of the issues that are being discussed now have been a point of discussion in past IASC WG meetings. In 1994, the Chair of the IASC indicated that he would

consult members of the IASC in appointing coordinators, and in establishing a pool of candidates with the appropriate profile who were ready to serve as Humanitarian

Coordinator at short notice, and for a clearly defined period. (Eighth Session of the IASC, 27 June 1994).

When the Terms of Reference for the Humanitarian Coordinator were discussed and a paper on the “Profile of Humanitarian Coordinator” was adopted by the IASC Working Group in November 1994, there was also a discussion on the Roster of Humanitarian Coordinators. One of the decisions resulting from that discussion was that DHA would “discuss the issue of the organization of inter-agency meetings to discuss the selection of Humanitarian Coordinators.” It would be interesting to know what the outcome of that discussion within DHA was.

At the 10th IASC meeting (December 1994), a paper on the “Establishment of Roster of Persons Qualified for Appointment to Position as Humanitarian Coordinator” was adopted, thus, presumably, establishing such a roster. What happened to this roster is another point of interest, as it would seem that qualified persons should have been on this roster to be appointed at short notice, for a limited time period.

The roster was again revisited by the IASC Working Group in February 1997 where

It was decided to maintain a roster of 10-15 qualified and experienced professionals who could assume the function of Humanitarian Coordinator on a temporary basis, in cases where it is decided that the Resident Coordinator does not have the right profile, until a person able to perform both functions is found. (IASC Working Group Ad Hoc, 12 and 13 February 1997)

There was an agreement at the same meeting to move towards a “humanitarian coordination arrangement on the basis of the Resident Coordinator system,” but there was text that addressed issues around the procedure of designating HCs, which noted that the RC would only be appointed as HC *if s/he* had the necessary profile.

II Reforming the HC System

It seems that many of these decisions, which attempted to ensure that qualified candidates with the requisite humanitarian experience were appointed HCs, seem to have been abandoned. A better understanding of where these decisions failed may be useful in any attempts to reform the current HC system. At the same time, there are a number of issues that should be addressed in attempting to reform the HC system:

2.1 Recruitment and Selection Process:

2.1.1 Criteria

Currently, there is little clarity as to how a person is chosen to be an HC other than being the sitting RC in a country. Whereas the designation of an HC is a decision that requires IASC endorsement, the qualifications or profile required for the position are unknown to members of the IASC (at least to ICVA).

If the HC system is to be strengthened, there is clear need to have a transparent set of criteria for selecting a person to the post. These criteria should be derived from the HC’s TORs, with the necessary qualifications and experience to be clearly defined. In proposing a candidate for an HC position, the ERC should provide an explanation to the IASC of why in his (or her) view the candidate has the required qualifications. This explanation should refer to the set of criteria.

2.1.2 Decision-making process

While the appointment of HCs is formally an IASC endorsed decision, the reality is that the “consultation” with the IASC is more of a rubber-stamping exercise with usually only days given for “objections” to be raised. The process by which HCs are suggested for appointment is an opaque one, at least for non-UN members of the IASC. If such a process is in place, it takes place somewhere “deep” within the UN system and does not bring in the broader humanitarian community, which is also to be served by the HC.

Such appointments of RCs as HCs are often done even when the person has little or no humanitarian experience. In 1994 and 1997, as noted above, the IASC decided that a separate HC would be appointed should the RC not have the necessary profile to be a Humanitarian Coordinator.

The recent case of the appointment of the RC in Niger as HC has served to reinforce the perception of the HC appointment as a rubber-stamping exercise. Concerns were raised about the experience, qualifications, and track record of the RC. While these concerns were acknowledged, and there was a commitment to have the person appointed *ad interim* with a new process to be undertaken to identify a more qualified candidate, the person was still appointed as HC, “effective immediately.”

A transparent recruitment process for HCs needs to be put in place, which includes an open call for candidates, an interview process, and a clear appointment process.

2.2 Dual-hatted (RC/HC) vs. Separate Roles (RC and HC):

Currently, as noted above, the rule seems to be that RCs are appointed as HCs, regardless of humanitarian experience. While the argument is often made that having a relationship with a government (resulting from the RC position) makes it easier to negotiate on the humanitarian side, it is rarely convincingly argued how such a dual-hatted role can ensure impartiality and neutrality in conflict situations where the government is a party to the conflict.

Additionally, in such dual-hatted roles, there is the risk that development programmes may have to be sacrificed for the sake of humanitarian programmes. Whether the RC/HC is willing to make such a sacrifice can have a huge impact on the humanitarian response.

Related to this dual-hatted function is also the issue of triple-hattedness, which comes into play in integrated missions where a person can be RC, HC, and the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG). The implications of this triple-function are a discussion more suited to the broader integrated missions’ discussion.

2.3 Accountability:

Even though the function of an HC is a difficult and challenging one, there needs to be some sort of accountability system put into place. The accountability of HCs is an area where much improvement needs to be made. The OCHA/DFID paper suggested a 270 degree evaluation should be put into place (a 360 degree evaluation would probably be better). Currently, it seems that there is no performance appraisal in place for HCs. HCs are not called to task if they fail to ensure implementation of the collaborative response. Coordination failures, in general, do not result in any kind of sanction.

2.4 Proposed Next Steps:

- The proposed expansion of the pool of HCs by OCHA is a welcome one, as is the proposal to provide more training for HCs.
- The proposed improvements in the selection procedure by OCHA should go much further and address the concerns raised above under “The Recruitment and Selection Process”.
- There should be analysis done into the impact of having dual-hatted roles vs. separate HCs and RCs.
- The roster of HCs (as decided by the IASC) should be reinstated, unless clear reasons can be shown as to why it failed in the first place, which would make such a roster unviable.
- Accountability mechanisms for HCs (and RC/HCs) should be put into place, such as performance appraisals.

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