**INTER–AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP
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Humanitarian Common Services: HIC Statement of Intent

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"Humanitarian Information Centres (HIC) support the delivery of humanitarian assistance through the provision of information products and services products and services."

I. Humanitarian Common Service

1. HICs are a Humanitarian Common Service (HCS), defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group (IASC-WG) as *"A Humanitarian Common Service is a support function, provided by one agency/organization, to facilitate the work of the humanitarian community in emergency response, operating at the request of the HC/Country Team under the auspices of the IASC."* (pending final endorsement at the 59th IASC WG).

2. In all likelihood when an HIC is present other HCSs are as well. In this case co-location should be undertaken where feasible and activities must be very closely coordinated to ensure no overlaps, particularly with the UN Joint Logistics Centre.

II. Background

3. Accurate and timely information is crucial to the effective provision of humanitarian assistance. For example, strategic and operational decision making and prioritisation require accurate and timely information on the humanitarian situation; Information concerning the needs of affected populations and the capacities and locations of humanitarian actors is critical for coordination. Quantifiable information on the conditions and needs of affected populations – collected and updated on a regular basis and in a consistent format – is required for analysis and the identification of trends.

4. Developed at field level to meet recognized needs in collaborative information exchange, HICs aim to ensure that individuals and organizations at both the operational and strategic level have access to the benefits of information management (IM) tools to assess, plan, deliver, coordinate and monitor humanitarian assistance.

5. Nine HICs (until recently, with differing names) have been deployed or developed locally since 1999, providing significant lessons learned and creating a body of experience that has defined the current HIC minimum standard of products and

services. With a single exception (2000 Sierra Leone), OCHA has taken the lead in establishing all HICs, with varying levels of input from other partners.

III. Objective of this Document

6. The objective of this concept document is to establish an agreed understanding amongst humanitarian partners on the characteristics and activities expected of a Humanitarian Information Centre, as well as its deployment, management and accountability structures and mechanisms.

IV. Management and Accountability

7. The IASC-WG has endorsed OCHA as the steward of HICs. By this it is meant that OCHA has the responsibility, on behalf of and in consultation with its partners, to:

   • continue to develop the concept of the HIC, including training, advocacy, and representing HICs e.g. inter-agency of technical meetings;
   • carry out the deployment of new HICs, according to agreed criteria;
   • provide operational support to HICs during the emergency phase.

8. In the field, in theory, all HCS report to the Resident or Humanitarian Coordinator (R/HC). In practice, in all previous instances, the R/HC has delegated the oversight of the HIC to others; where one exists to the OCHA Head of Office. While not prejudging future decisions it is assumed that the many demands placed on an R/HC during an emergency will ensure that this practice will continue.

9. A local steering committee will be established as early as possible by the HIC Manager, preferably chaired by the R/HC. Membership of the committee should ideally number no more than 10 members and include the key stakeholders of the country's humanitarian community, reflecting the membership of the IASC plus donors and, where appropriate, the national government.

10. The steering committee will play the critical role in defining the priorities and strategy for the HIC, including approving its workplan. This will be the key mechanism through which partners on the ground ensure the HIC's priorities reflect those of the humanitarian community. Members of the steering committee will also be expected to act as advocates in the wider community on issues related to information management, including data standards, collection, analysis and dissemination.

11. OCHA remains accountable for the effective management and performance of HICs due to the risks associated with assuming financial responsibility for the projects and the obligations inherent in establishing stand-by arrangements. Opportunities for input into the overall direction of the HIC concept as well as specific country operations will be made through the local steering committee, the existing Geographic Information Support Team (GIST) network and regular reporting to the IASC-WG.

V. Deployment

12. Unlike natural disasters, most complex emergencies do not have a fixed 'start date', increasing the difficulty of implementing rigid deployment procedures. However, experience has helped identify three conditions that, when they exist, have made an HIC deployment appropriate:

- A rapidly changing humanitarian operational environment;
- A large number of new humanitarian actors entering the operational area;
- A poor or degraded communications network.

13. When these conditions come to exist in an emergency environment, or look likely to occur, OCHA will engage the Resident or Humanitarian Coordinator (R/HC) and the UN Country Team (UNCT), ensuring awareness of the HIC concept and deployment mechanisms. If an HIC request is forthcoming, OCHA will engage with donors and other partners – using pre-existing inter-agency mechanisms - to ensure that adequate financial, human and other resources exist to support a deployment.

14. In situations where the need for an HIC is uncertain, OCHA or one of its partners will carry out an assessment to determine if a deployment will be necessary. The key components of this assessment will be an evaluation of the already existing IM capacity in the country and the requirements of the operational partners for HIC type products and services.

15. OCHA has negotiated standing agreements with donors and other partners for the rapid implementation of HICs. An HIC emergency deployment fund is made available to OCHA on an annual basis by OFDA and equipment is on stand-by with DFID. However, both of these mechanisms must be approved on a case-by-case basis, which necessitates a time delay of at least several days. OCHA has also taken advantage of its stand-by partner arrangements (e.g. DFID, SRSA) for emergency staffing deployments for HIC start-up.

16. If an HIC deployment is likely or imminent, OCHA will utilize the network created by the GIST, which includes most of the key operational agencies and donors, to solicit input on plans and support for the HIC (personnel, financial, equipment, space, data etc.). This mechanism will also be used to keep headquarters focal points regularly informed of ongoing activities.

17. The initial priority activities, size and make-up of the HIC will be set through consultations with partners at the headquarters and field level, particularly the R/HC and UNCT.

18. In most cases OCHA's Field Information Support Project will deploy staff to lead the initial establishment of the HIC, incorporating any support available from partner organizations and stand-by arrangements. For reasons of financial accountability, OCHA senior management will need to approve the deployment plan.

VI.   Characteristics

19. While all HICs deployed will by necessity (e.g. already existing capacities, physical space, security etc.) have some differences, the following characteristics are a minimum expectation of an HIC:

- A **physical space** where the humanitarian community can share and access information resources;
- A **provider of information products and services** to the humanitarian community;
- A **focal point for data collection** and dissemination;
- An **advocate** for improved information-sharing and data standardisation in the humanitarian community.

Additionally, an HIC:

- Is a **common resource** of the humanitarian community;
- Is **an integral part of the co-ordination structure**, seeking to avoid duplicating existing initiatives and maximizing resources;
- **Works in full coordination with specialized agencies** to support, if required, sector-specific work;
- Is **service-oriented** and **demand-driven**, serving the operational and strategic information needs of clients – as defined by them.

20. The HIC is a resource for the entire humanitarian community and is not the property of any single individual or agency. All data and information products are the collective property of the HIC partners – not the property of the HIC - under the guidance of the R/HC and the steering committee.

21. The HIC will not normally be involved in primary data collection; rather it serves as an information exchange platform, providing a neutral service for the collation, processing, analysis and dissemination of data. The HIC's role in analysis will usually be limited to processing and presenting data in a such a way as to make it usable for decision makers, who need to add the relevant context and technical expertise.

VII. Functions

22. Based on previous experience, the results of the 2002 Symposium on Best Practices in Humanitarian Information Exchange, and the recently completed independent evaluation of HICs, the core functions would normally include:

- Provide a range of **information products and services** such as GIS, database development, website maintenance for dissemination etc. as the context dictates;
- **Promote**, and develop where necessary, **data standards**;
- Collect, maintain and make available a range of **data sets** from all sources, processing and disseminating this data as appropriate to support humanitarian operations;
- As required and possible, **provide technical support** and advice to improve the information management capacity of the humanitarian community, particularly at the sectoral level;

- **Engage with local actors** to support and improve existing information infrastructures, particularly government counterparts.

VIII. Post-Emergency Phase

23. In addition to its close working relationship with all members of the humanitarian community, the HIC must engage reconstruction and development actors as early as possible and ensure that all activities undertaken will be compatible with future development needs so as to best ease transition, if that is required.

24. While OCHA is responsible for managing HICs on behalf of its partners during the emergency phase, most of them endure long beyond pure relief efforts have ended. Of the nine HICs that have been created over the past five years OCHA is only currently involved in three; two have closed and four continue under different management (local NGO, government or UNDP managed).

25. From its inception, an HIC's strategic planning must include development of an exit or transition strategy. The strategy will be based on existing needs and capacities in the field, although it is understood that financial and other concerns will always play a part. The R/HC and the HIC Manager, in consultation with OCHA and the steering committee, are responsible for deciding when and how the project should be transitioned or terminated.

Proposed Actions by the IASC WG members:

- Endorsement of HIC Statement of Intent

Prepared by: OCHA, November 2004