

61st IASC WG meeting, 22-23 June 2005: Fourth background document on agenda item:
IASC Task Force on Natural Disasters

IASC Task force on Natural Disasters

*Review of the disaster response capacity of IASC agencies and
organizations in selected disaster prone countries*

Synthesis Report

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Introduction

This synthesis report outlines the main findings and recommendations emerging from the review of the disaster response capacity of IASC agencies and organizations in selected disaster prone countries carried out during the second half of 2004 as part of the work plan of the IASC Task Force on Natural Disasters (TFND).

The review was launched in mid-June. It included a first phase of desk research (until mid-July) and the following five country visits: Armenia (early August), Nepal (late August), Ecuador (mid-October), Iran (mid-November) and Madagascar (early December).

The report is structured around the two major, overarching “strategic issues” identified during the study, namely the dramatic weakness of the national systems for disaster response and the equally dramatic lack of a systematic approach to disaster management by the international community in disaster-prone countries. Each of the two issues will be “unpacked” in its multiple dimensions. General recommendations will be formulated as “desired outcomes” and specific policy and/or implementation issues will be highlighted.

The general recommendations and the specific issues highlighted in this document are meant to serve as the basis for the upcoming work of the TFND, which is expected to formulate detailed recommendations for improvement at national, regional and global levels and suggest concrete methods of implementation as well as corresponding time-frames.

National-level concerns

Firstly, in reviewing the disaster response history of the five countries, the study confirmed that the attitude of the governments can have a dramatic impact on the possibility for the international actors to deliver assistance, and such an attitude may in some cases depend upon lack of knowledge and proper information.

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The most striking example came from Iran, where, when a devastating earthquake caused over 40,000 deaths in June 1990, the Government declined international assistance and the response operation was handled internally. Conversely, following the December 2003 Bam earthquake, despite being able to count on very strong civil defense capacities, the Government was quick to welcome the assistance provided by third countries and later appealed for international assistance through the United Nations. The ensuing massive international response operation was later regarded by the authorities themselves (and by many Iranian civil society organizations) as a very positive experience.

Secondly, the national legal framework for disaster response in all countries except Iran appeared weak, fragmentary and generally inadequate.

In Armenia, for instance, disaster management was dealt with by as many as eight separate laws and over 300 resolutions and normative acts by the Government. Similarly, the situation in Ecuador was one of almost complete legal and institutional chaos, with legislative and executive powers creating superimposing laws and structures.

Thirdly, four of the five highly disaster-prone countries considered by this study suffered from a very weak national set up for disaster response. In general, such weakness appeared to be based on a combination of lack of institutional clarity (linked to weak/absent legal frameworks) and lack of resources (very modest provisions available from the national budget) rather than from a lack of capacity/knowledge of the national disaster managers.

In Nepal, the governmental structure for disaster management appeared to exist on paper but not in reality. Many partners lamented the lack of cooperation and a very low implementation capacity on the part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, officially mandated in this area, whilst the Ministry of Local Development was unanimously recognized as a much more effective partner but with very limited mandate and practically no resources. In Ecuador – whose situation is particularly complicated and is described in detail in the report – the yearly budget for the Civil Defense was lowered from USD 500,000 to an almost ridiculous USD 50,000. A severe lack of resources was also lamented in Armenia. The situation was, at least in perspective, slightly better in Madagascar, where a soon-to-be-implemented plan of action foresees a considerable strengthening of the civil defense capacities and a thorough process of decentralization and where budgetary resources for disaster management had been recently substantially increased. In Iran, the study found comparatively much stronger governmental and non-governmental structures and institutions.

Fourthly, and on a positive note, this study highlighted again the extraordinary role that national Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies play in disaster preparedness and response. In all countries, national Societies appeared as strong and credible partners, with an

implementation capacity at times greater than the one of the mandated governmental bodies.

Addressing the national-level concerns

1) The attitude of governments can heavily influence the possibility for international actors to provide assistance in the aftermath of major disasters. The knowledge of national authorities about the international system for disaster response is often very limited.

The TFND should therefore devise a system whereby information and advocacy initiatives are carried out - in depth and regularly - in order to inform the national authorities of the potential benefits of international assistance not only for the actual victims of natural disasters but also for the authorities themselves in their pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness in disaster response.

Issues the TFND should consider in this respect include:

- How to “systematize” such initiatives so that they become a regular feature?
- Should they be carried out as part of the normal work of the UN Country Teams?
- In this case, how to ensure that the necessary capacities and commitment are there?
- Should they instead be carried out through experts sent by headquarters?
- In this case, who should take leadership for and manage the process?

2) Simple but comprehensive national disaster response laws, with clear attribution of roles and responsibilities for all national (governmental and non-governmental) partners, is an essential pre-requisite for effective national disaster management and, notably, for the seamless integration of international assistance.

The TFND should identify ways and means to make legal reform in this sector one of the pillars of the technical assistance provided by international actors - especially the United Nations - to disaster-prone countries.

Issues the TFND should consider in this respect include:

- How to ensure that UNCTs pay due attention to this issue?
- How to support the UNCTs in this highly specialized area of work?

3) The role of the international actors - bilateral and multilateral alike - in building and, notably, in providing resources to strong and effective national disaster response institutions is absolutely paramount.

The TFND should devise a strategy - including “internal” advocacy with the IASC members and “external” advocacy with donor and recipient governments - for ensuring that significantly more attention and resources are invested in this key area

of development cooperation. The ambitious strategic aim should be to somehow re-center the focus of the broad development assistance to disaster-prone countries around the issue of disaster management - seeing disaster management as a true pillar of sustainable development.

Among the multiple issues that the TFND should consider in this respect are:

- The specific role of the IASC agencies in ensuring a greater commitment of the international community towards this particular sector of development assistance;
- How the advocacy role of the ERC can be best utilized;
- How the IASC TFND can advocate in this sense within the humanitarian community itself.

International-level concerns

In its most important finding, this study revealed a resounding lack of systematic approach to disaster management on the part of the United Nations Country Teams in particular and of the international community in general.

First of all, the emphasis placed on disaster-related activities varied considerably, even if the five countries considered show a broadly similar level of risk. At the strategic level, although disaster management was included as an objective in the UNDAF in four out of the five countries, the actual resources allocated were variable and in some cases very limited.

In Armenia, the study identified very few disaster-related activities, mostly the responsibility of a single national Program Coordinator. None of the objectives of the UNDAF related - even marginally - to technical cooperation in the field of disaster management. In fact, the words "natural disaster" do not even appear in the entire final narrative of the UNDAF document. The IFRC maintained a small representation office, to be closed in early 2005, and the presence of international NGOs was modest.

In Nepal, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP and WHO in particular engaged in several activities, but all that was spent for disasters during the last 14 years was approximately USD 4 million. Outside the UN family, the IFRC maintains a low-profile presence through one Representative. Several international NGOs (CARE and Save The Children in particular) are active in the flood-affected districts with immediate relief and, especially, community-based disaster mitigation programs.

In Ecuador, natural disasters are clearly a major focus of the activities of the international community: UNDP and WFP are the agencies most involved in the implementation of the comprehensive strategies set forth in the UNDAF. The Pan American Health Organization is also present and is very active, particularly through support to local institutions. The presence of international NGOs is

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massive: the UN Contingency Plan lists as many as 54 different NGOs, including some small ones and many of the large international networks. Many of these organizations are active at community level in disaster prevention and disaster preparedness.

In Iran, the UNCT had much greater engagement on natural disasters, but that was found to be a development of the recent past, particularly following the Bam earthquake. The IFRC had a small delegation, located within the IRCS headquarters, and worked in close cooperation with WHO and MoH. The presence of international NGOs, for political reasons, was very limited.

A stronger engagement of UNCT in disaster-related activities in Madagascar was also a recent development, following a recent season of devastating cyclones (at the time of the visit, FAO, UNICEF and WFP were still active in recovery/rehabilitation activities). The budget for disaster-related activities in the 2004-2009 UNDAF was, however, only USD 450,000. A few major international NGOs were also active in the disaster management sector. The IFRC does not have a permanent presence in the country, but provides support from its regional base in Nairobi.

Secondly, the attitude towards disaster management of UN Country Teams and other international partners also varied markedly. UNCTs in particular appeared to be better or worse equipped/prepared for and knowledgeable about disaster response depending upon unpredictable factors, such as the personal interest that the UN Resident Coordinator and/or other members of the Team take in the subject and the recent occurrence of large scale disasters.

In Armenia, knowledge of the international system and tools for disaster response appeared limited. None of the members of the Disasters Working Group, for instance, seemed to have ready knowledge of the UNDAC system and of the services it can offer.

In Nepal, most of the UNDMT members had had previous working experience in natural disasters and were aware of the institutional arrangements for the overall coordination of international assistance following natural disasters. Knowledge of UNDAC and other tools available at inter-agency headquarters level (MCDA, Brindisi warehouse, HIC) was somewhat sketchy. INSARAG was practically unknown.

In Ecuador, all the UNCT interviewees demonstrated an in-depth (in some case extraordinary) knowledge of disaster management issues, both at their national and international level. There was obviously interest (in some cases one would say even *passion*) for the subject of disasters. A few of the agency focal points were actually active UNDAC members.

Given a long-standing involvement in refugee assistance, all the members of the UNDMT in Iran were knowledgeable about humanitarian issues in general.

However, it was reportedly only the recent large-scale operation in Bam which brought them to work closely with “specialized” natural disaster parts of the international response system.

In Madagascar, the study team had the clear impression that one could identify a “pre-Gafilo” and a “post-Gafilo” period. Whilst during the immediate response to the devastating cyclone of March 2004 it appeared that international responders showed lack of preparedness, capacity, and, in a sense, culture for disaster response, it was clear that during the following months a number of important steps were taken and many of the weaknesses were addressed.

Thirdly, the review of coordination mechanisms for disasters in the five countries considered by the study also highlighted the lack of a systematic approach by the UN and, more in general, by the international community. Although equivalent mechanisms existed in all countries, the UNDMT model *per se* (established as a requirement in disaster-prone countries by the UN General Assembly) was far from being consistently applied. Furthermore, the in-country coordination mechanisms appeared to vary across a broad range in terms of membership (which includes, notably, the inclusion or not of national and international non-governmental partners and of government representatives), consistency in the participation by the members and clarity of the ToR.

Nevertheless, the study found three “role model” examples, the application of which is strongly recommended:

- The two-tier UNDMT setup found in Ecuador, in which a technical group composed of the disaster focal points of the member agencies meets more often and deals with all the operational aspects of disaster coordination (including all preparedness measures inbetween disasters). The technical group reports to a Heads of agency group, which provides guidance, “political” support (within the UN system), and interfaces with the government and the international community at policy level.
- The donor coordination mechanism also found in Ecuador under the name of “GMGR”, through which the multilateral donors design their cooperation strategies in a concerted fashion and communicate with the Government through a single channel.
- The overall coordination system found in Madagascar under the name of “CRIC”, owned by the Government and clearly placed, from the institutional point of view, within its disaster management system and including ALL the partners in disaster management: the Government, the UN, national and international NGOs and major bilateral donors. The “CRIC” appeared to also provide an effective mechanism for the international partners to support the

coordination functions of the Government in a flexible way without undermining its overall leadership.

Fourthly, while - with the exception of Armenia - the situation as far as mechanisms and tools for risk analysis available to the local IASC are concerned appeared satisfactory and does not require special attention by the IASC TFND, the situation concerning early warning systems appeared problematic. This had partly to do with technicalities (early warning for seismic risks is not an option and its usefulness for tsunamis is somewhat limited). Otherwise, systems for meteorological hazards - which are definitely a possibility at the technical level - were often found to be weak.

Fifthly, contingency planning was another area where striking differences were found across countries with comparable risk levels - from "no plan" in Armenia, to "not yet" in Madagascar, to "too theoretical" in Nepal, to "good" in Iran, to "excellent" in Ecuador.

In Armenia there was no consolidated UN contingency plan. In Nepal, a plan existed and an Emergency Operation Center was being constructed. Respondents, however, agreed that the Disaster Response Preparedness Plan was still a mostly theoretical document and efforts are needed to pursue these activities. The UN country team in Ecuador has elaborated (and regularly updates) an excellent document that includes all components of a comprehensive contingency plan. Respondents in Iran agreed that the existing (and regularly updated) plan is a generally good document, but, in order to become a truly "living" and useful tool, it should be tested through drills. No plan existed in Madagascar. However, following a recent mission of the IASC Reference Group on Early Warning and Contingency Planning, the UN Country Team was about to embark in the development of a comprehensive contingency plan targeting the 2005/2006 cyclonic season.

The situation concerning in-country capacity (pre-positioning of emergency supplies and emergency telecommunications systems) appeared generally satisfactory and does not require the attention of the IASC TFND.

Addressing the international-level concerns

The study acknowledged that addressing the evident lack of a systematic approach to disaster issues, even in highly risk-prone countries, is a crucial, sensitive and complicated matter. Although the general recommendations may be simple in their formulation, their implementation will require far-reaching practical measures as well as some reconsideration of the general approach to development in such highly risk-prone countries.

Firstly, the TFND should consider ways and means to ensure that:

a) Disaster management is consistently treated as a primary strategic objective of the IASC partners in all disaster-prone countries;

b) The level of engagement of the individual partners, and the level of disaster-related activities they undertake, are commensurate with the level of risk of the country;

c) Resources allocated to such activities should reflect the real needs.

Among the multiple issues that the TFND should consider in this respect are:

- How to ensure that staff with the right profile (including Resident Coordinators) are posted in high-risk countries?
- How to provide adequate training and headquarters support (reform of DMTP, “compulsory” training)?
- How to ensure performance and accountability (regular reviews, “watchdog” entity)?
- How to ensure that future UNDAFs reflect the needs in this sector? How to amend existing ones?

On a more practical level, when investigating the disaster-related activities of the IASC partners in the five countries, it also emerged that in some cases most of such activities depended on (or at least were greatly facilitated by) a single individual who acts as a “disaster focal point” within the UN Country Team. This finding was specifically discussed with all the UN Resident Coordinators and many members of the various Country Teams and a strong agreement emerged that:

An officer-level position of Disaster Response Advisor should be created within the office of the Resident Coordinator as a permanent feature in disaster-prone countries. This person would support the RC in his/her coordination activities, ensure day-to-day liaison among the UN agencies, between the UN and the other partners and – significantly – with the governmental counterparts, provide secretariat functions for the UNDMT, monitor the implementation of the disaster-related activities included in the UNDAFA, and perform other support functions.

Among the issues that the TFND should consider in this respect are:

- Should the proposed officers be national or expatriate?
- Which agency should administratively manage them?
- Whom would they report to, apart from the RC?
- Could these functions be performed by a higher number of non-resident Regional DR Advisors?

In terms of the in-country coordination mechanisms,

The TFND should consider ways and means to ensure that:

- a) As recommended by the General Assembly, a UNDMT expanded to key non-UN partners is a permanent feature in every disaster-prone country;**
- b) Bilateral and multilateral donors are encouraged to set up and utilize strategic coordination mechanisms;**
- c) A broadly standard model of overall disaster management coordination, “owned” by governments and supported by international actors, is implemented in all risk-prone countries.**

The TFND should have an in-depth discussion on how to reach these “desired states”, considering in particular that a) a similar, most authoritative recommendation by the UNGA seems to have failed, b) IASC partners can only play an advocacy role vis-à-vis donors and c) the set up of national-level coordination mechanisms depends upon a large number of factors, some of which are beyond the control of IASC partners.

Finally, the TFND should identify ways and means to ensure that:

- a) Where they do not exist, the establishment of effective early warning systems are a component of the technical cooperation strategies of the local IASC with governmental and non-governmental partners;**
- b) IASC partners have ready and consistent access to existing systems in all disaster-prone countries;**
- c) The Ecuador model (an existing, detailed contingency plan regularly updated and soon to be transformed following an “algorithm” model) becomes the norm and not the exception for UNCTs in disaster prone country.**

This set of recommendations should be tackled in close consultation with the IASC Reference Group on Early Warning and Contingency Planning.