

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP

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IOM (Geneva)

**IASC Task Force on Natural Disasters:
*Final Report of the IASC WG Task Force on Natural Disasters***

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I. Preamble

The IASC WG Task Force on Natural Disasters (TFND) was established in July of 2003 and mandated with a finite set of tasks by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group. These tasks have now been completed, and the Task Force is set to be disbanded in June 2005. This report highlights the key findings resulting from the work of the Task Force.

The Task Force benefited from the active involvement and extensive consultations of a wide cross-section of humanitarian and other organizations. During its two-year existence, the Task Force conducted consultations at headquarters level within the broad membership of the IASC. In addition, country visits were undertaken to five different field locations where interviews were conducted with IASC In-Country Teams and their counterparts within governments, donors, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, national and international NGOs and independent disaster management experts. The Task Force also benefited from the participation of some active members of the IASC Task Force on Contingency Planning within its membership.

The Task Force recognizes that the general efforts to improve the capacity of IASC In-Country Teams to respond to natural disasters need to feed into the broader spectrum of activities for disaster risk reduction and management. This requires a synergised systems' approach to sustained pre-disaster activities such as overall strategies, policies, institutional commitment, management structures, as well as advocacy, risk and vulnerability identification and monitoring, impact assessment, functional early warning systems and contingency plans. In this context, the Task Force has taken note of the related debates on disaster risk management, which have been launched since its inception¹ and recognizes that the outcome of its work cannot be treated in isolation from such debates, particularly those which have been taking place "post-tsunami", such as the Kobe World Conference on Disaster Reduction. The WCDR's main agreed outcome, the "Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters" stipulates as one of five priority actions to strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels, and asks for its implementation and follow-up. The TFND proposes some practical steps in an effort to help the high-level rhetoric ensure that the disaster response preparedness moves from the periphery to the core of IASC In-Country Teams activities.

¹ *Vide*, in particular, the "Kent Study": Looking to the Future: Practical Steps to Strengthen the United Nations Relevance and Value-Added in Disaster Risk Management", OCHA, December 2004.

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The Task Force identified a number of concerns, many of which touched on areas outside of its remit, such as the need for adequate national legal frameworks, institutional disaster response preparedness architecture in the host-country etc. These largely depend on national political will and internal processes. While high-level advocacy is needed to address these issues, the TFND was determined to remain focused on what was within its immediate area of influence i.e. devising practical measures to advance a holistic, integrated, systematic, long-term and joint IASC approach to improving the disaster response preparedness measures on the ground. The resulting proposal includes benchmarks which can support the IASC In-Country Team self-assessment, taking into account that effective disaster management and response require a preparedness phase to strengthen capacities at all levels and to undertake appropriate and timely actions aimed at reducing the impact of hazards on populations and their livelihoods. Coordinated actions in this area can contribute to improving risk and disaster management work at country level. They should also consider already existing mechanisms and tools, such as the Common Country Assessment and the UN Development Assistance Framework.

In concluding, also in the context of the importance being attached to the WCDR by the international disaster response and risk reduction community, as well as the current trends to elaborate more cohesive, seamless and strengthened UN-system wide capacities for responding to disasters and reducing risks, it is suggested that natural disasters should remain firmly on the IASC WG agenda in 2005, duly linking the work of the Task Force to the outcome of Kobe World Disaster Reduction Conference.

Last but not least, members of the TFND recognize that an additional corollary of its findings is the possibility of these fitting in the wider context of the global Humanitarian Response Review, currently being conducted under the IASC auspices. Thus, the TFND recommends that the results of TFND's work should feed into the ongoing deliberations of the HRR.

II. Background

In 2003, the IASC WG, noting with concern the increase in human suffering and material destruction caused by cyclical natural disasters, identified the area of natural disaster response as one of its priorities. Drawing on the previous work of the Reference Group on Natural Disasters, the IASC WG decided to establish a Task Force for Natural Disasters with the objective of conducting a critical evaluation of the status of preparedness of the IASC system to responding to natural disasters at field level. The IASC WG requested that the evaluation should propose concrete measures to make improvements to the existing mechanisms, as required. Subsequently, Terms of Reference and a workplan for the TFND for 2004 were approved by the IASC WG in November 2003. The Task Force, composed of such IASC members as FAO, IFRC, IOM, OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO in addition to ISDR, has since its inception in 2003, met nine times and conducted field studies at five different locations. This report outlines its progress and the final recommendations being put forward. This Final Report of the TFND is to be read in conjunction with the following documents:

1. IASC In-Country Team Self-Assessment Tool
2. Implementation Guidelines
3. Synthesis Report on the Pilot Project.

III. Progress to date

Since its inception in 2003, the Task Force:

- Conducted a review of recommendations put forward by the Reference Group on Natural Disasters in 2000.
- Elaborated a list of most disaster prone countries based on commonly agreed upon criteria².
- Devised a common methodology for evaluating the IASC mechanisms of disaster response and response preparedness at country level.
- Elaborated a Plan of Action for conducting the evaluation in the form of the Pilot Project of the IASC, subsequently approved by the 57th IASC WG meeting in February 2004.
- Commissioned and jointly financed the implementation of the Pilot Project, to consist of initial desk-top study of five highly disaster-prone countries, followed by in-country visits by study teams.
- Between April and December 2004, conducted a Pilot Project in five selected most disaster prone countries (Armenia, Ecuador, Iran, Madagascar and Nepal) through an independent Consultant together with participating Task Force members staff from headquarters and/or the field.
- Studied the resulting Reports of the five piloted countries as well as the consolidated Synthesis Report and conducted a debate and analysis of its main findings, duly linking it to the post-tsunami and post-Kobe processes and consulting the five study-case countries on its findings and recommendations.
- Based on the recommendations emanating from the Pilot Project Synthesis Report, elaborated the proposal enclosed therein for IASC WG approval and follow up.

IV. Accomplishments

The major accomplishment of the Task Force has been the initiative to establish a set of “minimum standards” of disaster response preparedness (DRP) measures for the UNCT to use for monitoring its capacities in this regard. The first version of this tool, under the provisional name of the “IASC In-Country Team Self-Assessment Tool”, has now been drafted and is attached to this report. The Task Force believes that the drafting of the tool is in itself a long-overdue necessity. As the study demonstrated, and the numerous post-tsunami analyses confirmed, the IASC actors themselves often lacked awareness of what mechanisms exist at both the national and the international levels for the basic elements of DRP to exist and function adequately. Awareness raising on what was already available in terms of DRP – IASC system wide - was found to be one of the

² These include: high susceptibility to natural disasters, social vulnerability, absence of complex emergency, and value added in terms of enhanced emergency response capacity of UN/international assistance.

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primary areas of concern to be addressed. As national and international concerns in this area were almost always inter-linked and inter-dependent, the IASC In-Country Teams should have access to a repository of resources of DRP-related actions, linked to the entire disaster management cycle. As a first step, and answering that need, a way of disseminating information on activities which can support the country team in ensuring adequate DRP systems are in place should be devised. This should cover the whole palette of activities which can directly support the country team and, through it, the national capacities in the DRP area. Such instrument - the "Self-Assessment Tool" should be perceived as a living, generic document, to be used as a checklist of what activities and mechanisms should be put in place, and how to resource them, for the minimum standards of DRP to exist at the country level. This information should be then disseminated in a systematic manner to country teams who would themselves be able to identify gaps and to seek adequate support. This tool would serve as a set of benchmarks against which each country team would be able to measure its own and national DRP mechanisms in place, and seek improvement accordingly. It should be perceived as a generic tool, to be tailored and adapted to each country specific situation.

Further, the TFND reflected on ways in which such a tool should be promulgated to priority disaster-prone countries and proposals for this have been elaborated under the attached "Implementation Guidelines".

If the above proposal is endorsed, the IASC WG should then agree on concrete mechanisms on how to systematically implement it in order to address DRP gaps and deficiencies in a systematic manner.

Importantly, the TFND would also like to propose that the concept of an IASC In-Country Team should be promoted. It is acknowledged that often, at country level, institutional structures vary in different degrees and are not always fully representative of the non-UN leading humanitarian partner agencies members of the IASC. The fully participatory manner is vital to ensure the systematic, holistic and inter-agency approach to Disaster Response Preparedness by the full membership of the IASC both at headquarters and country-level.

Proposed Actions by the IASC-WG

- 1. Endorse the draft "IASC Country Team Self-Assessment Tool" and corresponding "Implementation Guidelines" as the first step in addressing gaps in Disaster Response Preparedness at country level.**
- 2. Actively promote this tool by disseminating it to all country offices, using this opportunity to advance the concept of an IASC In-Country Team, fully inclusive of non-UN entities.** (A letter to this effect to be sent from the ERC to all country offices).
- 3. Agree on a monitoring mechanism for the implementation of the Self-Assessment Tool.** (OCHA and IFRC to jointly monitor the implementation of the Self-Assessment Tool and report to the IASC WG annually on progress).
- 4. Maintain strong focus on natural disasters response on its future agenda.**

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Annex I: IASC In-Country Team Self-Assessment Tool

Annex II: Implementation Guidelines

Annex III: Pilot Project Synthesis Report

Prepared by: IASC Task Force on Natural Disasters