

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
WORKING GROUP XVITH MEETING
30 November 1994

DEFINITION OF COMPLEX EMERGENCIES

BACKGROUND

1. Historically there have been a number of crisis which could have been defined as "complex" due to the political considerations e.g. Biafra, Sudan,... However, the United Nations has become increasingly involved in "complex" emergencies, as defined below, as a consequence "both of its mandate to maintain international peace and security and its role of mobilising international assistance in emergencies" Responding to Emergencies: The Role of the UN in Emergencies and Ad Hoc Operations. A Study Commissioned by the Nordic UN Project: Report no. 14:1990, p. 10
- . In the context of the post-Cold War era, the former has led to a growing number of situations in which UN peacekeeping and peacemaking forces are part of a "dynamic link" to humanitarian assistance Annual Report to the 47th Session of the General Assembly by the Secretary General
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2. UN responsibilities to mobilise international humanitarian assistance is growing as ethnic rivalry, religious extremism, micronationalism, population pressures, poverty, environmental degradation, and economic marginalisation increasingly lead to life-threatening situations for significant numbers of people. Finally, UN "blue helmets" often undertake heavy responsibilities in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, linking the two objectives, political and humanitarian.
3. IASU has based the proposed definition on the valuable inputs provided by UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, IFRC, UNDRO, UNDP, FAO as well as other reports footnoted where relevant.
4. Annex A presents a consolidation of definition of "emergencies", "disasters" and "complex emergencies".
5. IASU is suggesting the following points for consideration by the IASC-WG to assist the working group in future emergency management and coordination.

DEFINITION OF COMPLEX AND MAJOR EMERGENCIES

We have wanted to find a pragmatic, specific and operational definition which would help the IASC to decide when emergencies require the nomination of a Humanitarian Coordinator. Issues of a policy nature are noted in point 7 for the WG's consideration and eventual decision.

6. A **Complex Emergency** is defined as:
 - a) a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression;
 - b) a humanitarian crisis which requires an international response which goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency;
 - c) a humanitarian crisis where the IASC assesses that it requires intensive and extensive political and management coordination.
7. From the comments received from agencies, three other definition components have also been proposed and are listed below. As these are of a policy nature, the WG is asked to consider whether it wants to include them in the base definition as given in point 6 above.
 - 7.1 the United Nations Security Council becomes seized of the situation;
 - 7.2 the Security Council authorises the use of peace making, peace-keeping forces or other major political initiatives and action;
 - 7.3 the Secretary-General appoints a Special Representative for the country affected by the crisis.
8. Based on the above definition, some characteristics of "complex" emergencies will be:
 - 8.1 There are large number of civilian casualties, populations who are besieged or displaced quickly and in large numbers, human suffering of major proportion. There is therefore a requirement for massive humanitarian assistance but it is

seriously impeded, delayed, or prevented by politically or conflict motivated constraints;

- 8.2 high security risks for relief workers attempting to provide humanitarian assistance;
- 8.3 situations that require a high degree of external political support to enable humanitarian response, including negotiated access to affected populations;
- 8.4 international and cross-border dimensions that require intervention by a range of participants beyond a single national authority; such interventions are characterised by political differences between those concerned and may therefore require political mediation and coordination.

Points of Reference

- 9.1 An effective response to a "complex emergency" normally requires active political support for humanitarian interventions, usually from the Security Council. It also requires a coordinated response among organisations, both humanitarian and political.
- 9.2. Mechanisms for support in "**complex emergencies**" require strong headquarters support capacity as well as enhanced field capacity for an extended period of time. This need not be the case in major emergencies where strengthened field capacity for a short period of time is usually the principal factor.

MAJOR EMERGENCIES

- 10 A **Major Emergency** is a situation threatening the lives and well-being of a very large number of people or a very large percentage of a population and often requiring substantial multi-sectoral assistance. It is normally characterised by:
 - 10.1 not being caused by politically motivated decisions nor is humanitarian access to affected populations impeded by political calculations. Governments, within the limits of their capacity, try to facilitate delivery of aid to affected population. In most cases, governments will try to respond to these emergencies with their own resources, with UN and/or bilateral assistance if necessary;
 - 10.2 the inadequacy of local and national capacities to respond to the relief needs of affected populations;

10.3 international and cross-border dimensions that require intervention by a range of participants beyond a single national authority but which are at the same time not characterised by political differences between those involved;

10.4 a situation in which the size of the emergency and the amount and types of required relief resources transcend the capacity of single agency to provide adequate assistance;

10.5 the need for, and delivery of, relief resources that are themselves sufficiently large-scale and therefore complicated so that standard agency responses would not be adequate;

10.6 a great demand for logistical capacity which may require special coordination arrangements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

11. As the mandate of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, as defined in GA Resolution 46/182, and by implication of the IASC, covers complex and major emergencies, any participating agency and organization can request the IASC to discuss an emergency whenever it is felt that a coordinated system-wide response is required.
12. It is important to maintain the distinction between a "complex emergency" and a "major emergency", as it clarifies those issues and problems for which the Department of Humanitarian Affairs should have the leading role in facilitating the response of the international humanitarian relief system. In addition, a different profile for the Humanitarian Coordinator will need to be considered based on the type of emergency.
13. The duration of a complex emergency should be considered. The IASC will define a period of appointment for the Humanitarian Coordinator in a given Complex Emergency. The IASC will, before the period expires, review the situation to agree whether there is a continued need to have a Humanitarian Coordinator.
14. An emergency which falls clearly within the overall competence and capacity of a single UN agency should not be treated as a complex emergency the IASC is requested to consider it as such.

ANNEX I

VARIOUS DEFINITIONS OF EMERGENCY, DISASTERS, COMPLEX EMERGENCIES

Each organization has its definition which relates to its mandate. As background information, DHA has compiled the definitions most often encountered. Definitions are presented in organisations' alphabetical order.

IFRC

Disasters: situations resulting from natural or other calamities.

Emergency: none

Complex emergency: none

UNDP

Disaster: occurrences when hazards, whether natural or human-made, interact with vulnerable populations.

Emergency: occurrences when the dimensions of the disaster exceed the coping capacity of the affected community. The international community is called upon to respond when the disaster's effects exceed the coping capacity of the country concerned.

Complex emergency: occurrences in a country or society when:

- a) total or considerable breakdown of law and order happens as a result of civil conflict or foreign aggression leading to civilian casualties, displacement of population and human suffering of major proportions and when the government either does not exist or is not in a position to fully exercise its role;
- b) United Nations Security Council becomes seized by the situation and authorizes the use of peace-keeping, peace-keeping forces or other major political initiatives and action;
- c) massive international humanitarian response is required;
- d) the Secretary General declares the state of complex emergency.

UNDP/DHA DMTP

Complex Emergency: a form of human made emergency in which the cause of the emergency as well as the assistance to the afflicted are bound by intense levels of political calculations. This sort of emergency is normally associated with the problems of displaced people during times of civil conflict or with people in need caught in areas of conflict.

UNDRO/DHA

Disasters: a serious disruption of the functioning of a society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which exceed the ability of affected society to cope using its own resources. Disasters are often classified according to their speed of onset (sudden or slow), or according to their cause (natural or man-made).

Emergency: a sudden and usually unforeseen event that calls for immediate measures to minimize its adverse consequences.

UNHCR

Disaster: none

Emergency: any situation in which the life or well-being of refugees will be threatened unless immediate and appropriate action is taken, and which demands an extraordinary response and exceptional measures.

UNICEF

Disaster: none

Emergency: a situation of hardship and human suffering arising from events which cause physical loss or damage, social and/or economic disruption with which the country or community concerned is unable to fully cope alone. It may result from a "natural disaster"- either high impact (e.g. earthquake) or slow onset (e.g. drought) - or be "man-made" causes (e.g. war, civil unrest)

Complex Emergency: none

WHO

Disasters: occurrences that cause damage, ecological disruption, loss of human life, deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected community or area.

Emergency: a sudden occurrence demanding immediate action that may be due to epidemics, technological catastrophe, strife or to natural or man-made causes.

Complex emergency: a form of man-made emergency in which the cause of the emergency as well as the assistance to the afflicted are bound by intensive levels of political considerations.

WFP

Disaster: none

Emergency: urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event has occurred which causes human suffering or loss of livestock and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale. The main characteristics are:

- human suffering demanding urgent action;
- dislocation of community economic activities, social life or both on an exceptional scale;

- the suffering, disruption and food scarcity which is observed is clearly the result of a particular event, or series of events, which is itself abnormal;
- the government concerned has insufficient resources to provide the remedy. Without outside assistance, the immediate physical, social and economic survival of the afflicted are severely at risk.

ICRC

Disaster: none

Complex Emergency: Complex Emergency is not a concept within the realm of the International Humanitarian Law applicable in armed conflicts.

However, for operational purposes, the ICRC considers there is an emergency as long as the fundamental needs of vulnerable categories of clearly identified war victims are not met. Comprehensive solutions to humanitarian problems must be sought to restore the conditions needed for people affected by conflict to survive and live with dignity. Programs must be designed to ensure that the affected population is provided with the following services simultaneously: shelter from the elements, sufficient food and water, satisfactory hygiene conditions, medical care and protection against attacks or threats to physical and mental well-being.

It is important to position the various stages of assistance, from emergency aid to sustained recovery. Emergency aid must not block the road to development. The ICRC considers certain emergency rehabilitation programs an integral part of the emergency phase of assistance.