

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP  
XLI MEETING**

**Geneva - 18-19 May 2000**

**IASC Reference Group on Natural Disasters**

**REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS**

**FOREWORD**

**A. Scope of Work of the Reference Group**

During the IASC WG Ad Hoc Meeting on Natural Disasters, held in Geneva on 28 January 1999, it was decided to convene a Reference Group to identify and recommend methods of improving the IASC response to natural disasters within the context of the overall international response efforts and mechanisms. The intention is to improve those aspects of response, which are within the control of IASC members. Given below are the Terms of Reference of the Reference Group:

1. Examine existing response tools, capabilities and mechanisms available to the IASC members and recommend measures to improve them.
2. Examine the procedures followed by IASC members for disaster response and recommend measures to utilise them in the most coordinated fashion, and shorten the response time. This should include recommendations for the conclusion of the ERC's involvement.
3. Examine current assessment capacities available to IASC members and recommend measures to improve them.
4. Examine various immediate funding mechanisms available and suggest measures to improve the availability of funds to IASC members as well as to accelerate the release of funds.
5. Suggest measures to improve the capacity of the IASC mechanism to assist the country teams to deal with the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster.
6. Recommend measures to improve information sharing and coordination at both HQ and field levels during the response phase.
7. Recommend measures to effectively utilise existing assets and procedures in logistics and telecommunications available to IASC members during the emergency response. In these areas, review interaction between OCHA and IASC members from the outset of natural disasters and make recommendations for better coordination from the outset of the emergency.

8. Suggest measures to improve coordination between the UN DMTs of affected countries and the use of existing capacities within the region.
9. Examine the relationship between coordination of relief and recovery activities and recommend measures to improve it.

The Reference Group will produce recommendations in bullet-points format on the above.

During its early meetings, the Reference Group decided to limit its discussions and deliberations to sudden-onset natural disasters, which require a multi-agency response, and to issues that IASC members have the capacity to address directly.

Points 8 and 9 of the Terms of Reference were therefore deferred to discussions at a later stage.

## **B. Framework**

The Reference Group agreed that it would consider issues and formulate recommendations concerning overall coordination and six “task categories” of disaster response, including specific coordination support for these tasks:

1. Overall Coordination
2. Pre-disaster contingency planning
3. Assessment
4. Targeting and Implementation
5. Logistics Management
6. Funding
7. Reporting and Information Sharing

For each task category, the Reference Group agreed to review problems and areas for improvement related to the following three groups of “issues”:

1. Interagency Mechanisms - already established to support collective action;
2. Policies, procedures, guidelines and instruments
3. Response capacities of member organisations.

The report of the Reference Group will therefore be structured around these categories. For each one, problematic issues will be identified, general recommendations formulated and specific action points indicated for the IASC to consider. The action points will be presented in an annex.

Recommendations of the Reference Group will aim at improving the collective response of the IASC members to natural disasters, as measured by:

1. Greater impact
2. Greater speed of response
3. Better efficiency (minimum gaps, minimum duplication/overlapping)
4. Greater visibility for the actors

The Reference Group decided to focus on sudden onset disasters and would attend primarily to "large-scale" disasters. It was noted that different response requirements are placed upon IASC member agencies depending upon the "nature and dimension/extent of the disaster". In this context, the nature and extent of involvement of member agencies and the support of OCHA would be expected to vary.

## **1. OVERALL COORDINATION**

In the course of the discussion held by the Reference Group, some issues kept surfacing which cannot be "pigeonholed" under any specific task/category and seem to impact the overall capacity to respond. These issues are mentioned here, under "Overall Coordination", for lack of a better term.

### **Issues:**

1. High rates of staff rotation over time, and at different points of time, lead, in *many* ( is this correct?-shouldn't we say: "have led, on a number of occasions, to ...") cases, to non-existing/non-functioning Disaster Management Teams (DMT).
2. When existing, DMT's performance is sometimes hampered by an insufficient willingness among agency representatives to become active and supportive members of a multi-agency operation and by different opinions on the degree of desirable inclusiveness of membership (too broad or too limited).
3. A larger number of bilateral donors respond to requirements following natural disasters than following complex/man-made emergencies. The relative importance of the response of the UN system organizations is thus reduced and the coordination with the numerous donors becomes more complicated.
4. The primary responsibility of national governments to respond to natural disasters tends to be overlooked by UN System actors, as well as the fact that, within the UN system, the ERC is responsible for the overall coordination of UN System emergency response to natural disasters.

### **Recommendations:**

1. DMTs representing the aggregate capacity of their agencies should be a permanent feature of the UN presence in disaster-prone countries, functioning effectively before, during and after the event of a natural disaster.
2. Members of the DMT should be well aware of:
  - a) their roles in the coordination process, the need for active support of the coordination process and shared responsibility for decision-making;
  - b) the need to strike a balance between inclusiveness and operational relevance, and
  - c) the need to maintain effective working relations with national authorities with a view to optimizing their contribution.

3. DMTs should keep close contact with the representatives of major bilateral actors as part of the contingency planning, so that these are fully aware of UN system capacities in assessment and overall coordination. During the response phase, the DMTs should liaise closely with in-country representatives of major bilateral organisations, with the aim of minimising duplication and avoiding gaps in assistance.
4. The existing guidelines on the role and functioning of DMTs, should be updated and training coordinated between member agencies should be provided to DMTs based on these guidelines, including team building and management, focusing, as a priority, on establishing effective DMTs in countries most at risk to disaster.
5. IASC members should reiterate to their country representatives the need for effective inter-agency cooperation within the DMT framework.
6. Wide publicity should be given within the UN system, including country teams, to the primary and central role accorded by the General Assembly to national governments in the response to natural disasters and the ERC's role as being responsible for the overall coordination of the UN System emergency response to natural disasters. Similar publicity within the UN system should also be given to the responsibilities of the UN Resident Coordinator vis-B-vis the ERC, as outlined in the joint memorandum of the UNDP Administrator and the ERC of 26 March 1999.

## **2. PRE-DISASTER CONTINGENCY PLANNING**

In discussing the need for contingency planning, the RG determined that risk and vulnerability assessment, early warning and overall disaster preparedness contingency planning, including national capacity building in these areas, were beyond the scope of the agreed-upon TOR for the Group. While each of these aspects, like disaster reduction and prevention programmes, would ultimately have an effect on the need for international response and the ability of member agencies to meet that need, the RG was most concerned with contingency planning in the context of immediate pre-event planning (upon expectation/notification of an imminent disaster).

### **Issues:**

1. In disaster-prone countries, DMTs often do not set up contingency plans as part of their ordinary duties. As a result, when a disaster strikes, the capacity of these DMTs to operate is insufficient and response is not as prompt/effective as desirable.
2. Contingency plans and response capacities of local actors are frequently not identified/ assessed and hence not taken into account by DMTs during their own contingency planning.

### **Recommendations:**

1. A list of countries where risk of and vulnerability to disaster are high, especially those countries subject to frequent and recurrent disasters, should be agreed upon by the IASC member agencies.
2. In those countries, DMTs should draft and regularly update a contingency plan a copy of which should be forwarded to the ERC (DRB, OCHA Geneva). This plan should take into account the planning on the part of the government and the capacities it could mobilize itself, and be based on Risk and Vulnerability Assessment. Existing preparedness guidelines should be followed. Major bilateral actors should be invited to participate in the process. The DMTs should specify various disaster risk levels in the Security Plan, to ensure operationality even in case of a major disaster.
3. DMTs, agency headquarters and regional offices should be fully aware, and make full use of, Early Warning Systems and other national, regional and international disaster information sources.
4. Both DMTs as a whole and agency representatives individually should be fully aware of capacities available with IASC members for immediate response. In this respect those agencies having sectoral contingency plans available should act as catalysts in multi-agency contingency planning.
5. In the preparation of the contingency plan, DMTs should seek to benefit from the research and findings of other international/regional/national bodies working in natural disaster response/mitigation.
6. As part of their contingency planning, DMTs should establish collaborative mechanisms with local actors and seek to use their capacities upon the occurrence of a disaster..
7. Existing IASC guidelines for pre-event contingency planning should be periodically reviewed/ updated.
8. A procedure should be established to ensure support from the IASC agencies' headquarters and regional offices to DMT during the pre-event contingency planning. Procedures for periodic monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the DMTs should be set up.

### **3. ASSESSMENT**

The Reference Group's discussion focussed mainly on three issues: the coordination of assessment activities at the field level, the focal point responsibility of individual IASC agencies in specific areas of competence, and the role of the UNDAC mechanism.

#### **Issues:**

1. The central role of the Resident Coordinator (RC) in ensuring overall coordination in assessment activities is not always fully recognised and appropriately supported by member agencies.

2. Sectoral assessments are carried out by IASC members at times without appropriate coordination between them and information-sharing. Well established effective assessment and information-sharing mechanisms co-sponsored by the IASC and bilateral actors are even more infrequent.
3. The mandates and competence of IASC member agencies in specific areas/sectors are not always recognised by sister agencies in time and to the extent required by the emergency.
4. The capacity and competence of DMTs to carry out assessments vary widely from country to country.
5. The RCs/DMTs are not always fully involved in the decision to field an UNDAC team. IASC member agencies have not always been informed in an appropriate and timely manner on the fielding and TORs of such teams.
6. UNDAC teams are not always fully integrated in or utilized by the DMTs.
7. Country Teams are not always fully informed of the crucial role that UNDAC teams can play in the early phases of emergency response.
8. On occasions, insufficient use has been made of the multi-sectoral expertise of DMTs in the assessment of needs of IDPs.

**Recommendations:**

1. The roles of the RC/DMT in the overall coordination of assessment activities and of focal point IASC member agencies in sectoral assessment activities should be further emphasised. A stronger coordination at local level should favour streamlining of the assessment activities carried out individually by the various agencies and contribute to a pragmatic consolidation of their findings. Bilateral actors should be familiar with the IASC assessment process, and should be involved, as much as possible, in the coordination process in the field. The ERC should write to RCs and agency headquarters re-stating the crucial role of the DMTs in coordinating assessment activities.
2. Recognition that assessment remains a joint responsibility of the DMT agencies, under the overall coordination of the RC.
3. An UNDAC team is usually deployed at the request of the RC/DMT, the national government or following a decision by the ERC. The RC and agency headquarters should always be informed on the fielding of an UNDAC mission.
4. Awareness of UNDAC team members, especially those who are not UN staff, of the need to cooperate and integrate efforts with the DMTs should be enhanced.
5. Awareness of the UNDAC mechanism should be strengthened at the field level with stronger collective advocacy provided in support of this mechanism; concomitantly the current trend of increased participation by IASC agencies in the UNDAC process should be maintained.

6. Compilation of a comprehensive information note on the UNDAC mechanism for dissemination to Country Teams in disaster-prone areas and agency headquarters and their regional offices.
7. IASC agencies should provide the opportunity to OCHA to make presentations on OCHA's role in support of the overall coordination of natural disasters response and the UNDAC system at meetings of their country representatives.

#### **4. TARGETING AND IMPLEMENTATION**

##### **Issues:**

1. There is often confusion in determining/communicating numbers of people affected by a variety of consequences of the disaster and the number of beneficiaries of a specific humanitarian action (e.g. different sources indicate different figures for each category of beneficiaries such as number of children vaccinated, number of people treated in hospitals). These figures keep changing throughout the phases of a disaster, creating potential problems in the dialogue with most country governments and donor governments. Also, information about damage/casualties is often communicated to the media and donors in an uncoordinated fashion, and its political significance is often overlooked.
2. There is often an acute lack of immediately available qualified staff during the response phase. Although this is largely an internal problem of individual agencies, its consequences can seriously affect the delivery and overall coordination of humanitarian assistance of the IASC System and their bilateral partners.
3. The existing response capacities of local networks are not always adequately utilised.
4. More could be done to limit the extent and consequences of the well-known lack of coordination on the part of bilateral actors.
5. In the aftermath of various natural disasters, inappropriate or untimely donations have occurred that have overburdened emergency management systems and hampered the coordination and implementation of relief operations.

##### **Recommendations:**

1. Consensus should be reached among the members of DMTs, starting from the early phases of assessment, on data sources to be utilised to quantify affected population groups, integrating information from governments, local organisations, UNDAC teams and the individual agencies to a maximum extent.
2. Maximum clarity should be achieved in identifying different beneficiary groups for different kinds of humanitarian assistance. Data should be reviewed on an ongoing

basis - throughout all phases of a disaster - and communicated with one voice by DMTs.

3. Wherever possible, a common strategy for targeting should be derived taking into account local conditions and different types of assistance to be provided.
4. All agencies should have available mechanisms to deploy qualified and suitably experienced personnel at short notice and in sufficient number in the aftermath of a natural disaster. DMTs should also be encouraged to establish a roster of locally/regionally available professionals that can be mobilised at very short notice. Travel plans for agency representatives and key staff should be carefully reviewed when a natural disaster is looming or is actually taking place.
5. Bilateral actors usually play a more important role in the response to natural disasters than the IASC System. DMT coordination with them is therefore essential. In disaster-prone countries, RCs should strengthen contacts with the representatives of major players as part of the contingency planning, so that these players are fully aware of capacities existing within the UNDMT, particularly in assessment and implementation. During the response phase, the DMT should liaise closely with major bilaterals, with a view to consolidating more efficiently the overall response to the disaster.
6. Global campaigns should be set in place, to educate the media, the institutions (unclear :what is to be understood by “institutions”?) and the public on best practices for appropriate emergency relief donations .

## **5. LOGISTICS MANAGEMENT**

### **Issues**

1. Lack of standardisation in equipment and procedures for the joint use of emergency telecommunications, and lack of appropriate training in their utilisation, often lead to serious problems during the response phase after a natural disaster.
2. The rapid mobilization of appropriate transport capacity, particularly airlifts, at local/regional level tends to encounter numerous impediments.
3. The transport capacities existing locally with local networks are not always fully utilized by the aid community.
4. The absence of pre-drawn logistics arrangements tends to lead, at least during the initial stages of a relief operation, to the ineffective utilization of existing resources.
5. The coordination of logistics arrangements (both national and international resources) is not always adequate.



## **Recommendations**

1. The work of the Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications, dealing with the standardisation in emergency telecommunications equipment and procedures, should be reviewed with an IASC perspective and up-to-date recommendations for inter-agency use of equipment formulated.
2. In order to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness in the utilisation of logistics resources, a transport/logistics focal point, reporting to the RC, should be established to undertake operational coordination, taking into account local conditions and existing national and regional resources, and direct the transport/ logistics component of the inter-agency response - from the country's point of entry via warehousing/storage/handling to delivery to the final distribution points.
3. UNDMTs in disaster prone countries should develop regional and national stand-by arrangements for air transport capacity, under the leadership of WFP.

## **6. FUNDING**

The Reference Group discussion focussed on appeals and the use of resources made available by donors in the "heat of the moment", triggered by frequently exceptional media attention.

### **Issues:**

1. A more standardized approach for launching appeals in response to natural disasters should be developed, ensuring maximum speed and effectiveness in resource mobilization and building on the experience gained in complex emergencies. OCHA should seek advice from the ongoing IASC-CAP Sub-Working Group on this matter and review the possibility of applying the model of the "Flash Appeal" for natural disasters.
2. The channelling of donors' contributions which are earmarked for individual agencies through OCHA slows down the availability of resources during the critical response phase.
3. In some cases, there is a lack of (or delayed) response by agencies or the country team as a whole to offers of grants from donors in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
4. Due to the complex procedures involved (and possibly to the of awareness on the availability of this mechanism) the release of funds from the CERF for natural disaster relief operations is often delayed.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Undertake a review of the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for rapid resource mobilisation. Fast and flexible mechanisms should be considered, such as the *alerts* issued by the Red Cross (ICRC- Federation?) to mobilise/channel available donor funds.

2. Request the CAP sub-working group to examine the possibility of a more standardised approach for the resource mobilisation to respond to complex emergencies and natural disasters. The possibility of using “flash appeals” in response to natural disasters should be reviewed.
3. A communication arrangement should be established between agency headquarters, regional offices and country offices, to ensure that:
  - a) DMTs be informed of the donation received and
  - b) Earmarked donations received through OCHA be forwarded to the agencies without delay.
4. Procedures for the release of CERF funds should be made substantially less cumbersome.

## **7. REPORTING AND INFORMATION SHARING**

The Reference Group did not identify specific clusters of issues or formulated specific recommendations under this heading. During the discussion, a number of indications emerged however:

1. The importance of the timeliness and regularity of inter-agency / information- sharing meetings chaired by OCHA at the Geneva level – as convened following recent natural disasters – was strongly emphasized.
2. The feasibility of establishing a system for financial tracking/reporting on natural disaster response similar to that employed in respect of complex emergencies should be explored.
3. DMT members should regularly forward data / up to date information to a designated focal point at the field level responsible for drafting situation reports. The essential contribution for the contents of such reports should therefore come from the country offices. At headquarters level, the agencies’ emergency response offices should also ensure that information on their activities be regularly provided to OCHA Geneva for inclusion in situation reports.
4. Particular attention should be paid by the country offices to the reporting on prospective donor contributions and to the reactions of donors during in-country briefings. OCHA should also prepare summary reports on donor information meetings and systematically circulate these to IASC agencies.

## ANNEX I

### Action Points

**A) Letter by the ERC to the Resident Coordinators, circulating the Report and asking to give particular attention to the implementation of the following recommendations:**

1.1, on establishing the DMTs as a permanent feature of Country Teams in disaster-prone countries,

with references to 1.2, 1.3, on the organisation and management of DMTs;

2.2 on the drafting and regularly updating pre-disaster contingency plans,

with reference to 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, on the characteristics and modalities of the contingency plans;

3.1, on emphasizing the central role of the RC/DMT in the coordination of assessment activities;

4.1 and 4.2, on identification of affected population;

4.4, on seeking and maintaining contacts with country representatives of major bilateral actors;

5.2, on establishing a transport/logistics focal point within the Country Teams;

5.3, on developing regional and national stand-by arrangements for air transport capacity.

**B) Letters by the Chairman of the IASC WG to the chairpersons of the IASC Task Force on Training (on recommendation 1.4, on guidelines and training for DMTs) , of the Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications (on recommendation 5.1, on standardisation of equipment and procedures), and of the sub-WG on Improving the CAP (recommendation 6.2, on resource mobilisation for Natural Disasters).**

**C) Agency Representatives to the IASC-WG to ensure broad circulation of the report on the respective Headquarters, drawing particular attention to the following recommendations:**

1.5, on promoting inter-agency coordination in DMTs

2.8, on providing support to DMTs in pre-disaster contingency planning;

4.3, on quickly deploying qualified and suitably experienced personnel;

6.3, on the management of donor contributions.

**D) OCHA (DRB) to follow-up on the following recommendations:**

2.1, on drafting, in consultation with IASC members, an agreed-upon list of countries where risk and vulnerability to disasters is high;

2.4, 2.5, 2.6, on various aspects of the UNDAC mechanism;