

IASC's Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Virtual Meeting

30 March 2020

Summary Record

INTRODUCTION

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) held its first virtual meeting on 30 March 2020. The primary objective of the meeting was to discuss how the OPAG could step up efforts to support the IASC's response to COVID-19. This was also an opportunity to discuss the resulting impact of COVID-19 on priority areas of work assigned to the IASC Results Groups. The meeting participants aimed to ascertain what activities would continue, be postponed, or re-oriented to support the COVID-19 response.

Ms. Reena Ghelani, Chair of the IASC's Emergency Directors Group (EDG), joined the meeting to provide a brief update on the work of the EDG in support of the response. The co-Chairs of the IASC Results Groups were also invited to share their views on the impact of COVID-19 on their respective workplans.

SESSION 1: OUTCOMES OF IASC PRINCIPALS AND EDG MEETINGS ON THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

In their introductory message, the OPAG co-Chairs, Ms. Valerie Guarnieri and Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, expressed special thanks to the OPAG members and the co-Chairs of the Results Groups for their continued dedication and hard work despite the challenging circumstances. They took note of the various Interim Guidance documents endorsed by the Principals and the engagement of OPAG members in its development. The co-Chairs invited Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Head of the IASC secretariat, to share a quick summary of the actions emanating from the Principals that were directed to the OPAG.

Ms. Shelbaya set the tone for the discussion by sharing that the OPAG was tasked with several issues by the IASC Principals, namely: (i) to develop and share the best possible new or adapted response modalities for settings where implementing testing, tracing, treating and distancing measures are particularly hard to achieve; (ii) to consider, in relation to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), the preparation and dissemination of further guidance to address/ mitigate the increased risk of gender based violence and sexual exploitation in the COVID-19 context; and (iii) to consider specific measures to strengthen the mental health and psychosocial support needs of the response, with the support of the IASC's Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MPHSS) Reference Group.

Ms. Shelbaya also shared that five IASC interim guidance were endorsed by IASC Principals, namely: (i) Scaling-up COVID-19 Outbreak in Readiness and Response Operations in Camps and Camp-like Settings (jointly developed by IFRC, IOM, UNHCR and WHO); (ii) Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak (developed by the IASC's Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support); (iii) Adjusting Food Distributions in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak (developed by WFP); (iv) Interim Key Message and Action for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools (jointly developed by IFRC, UNICEF, and WHO); and (v) COVID-19 Outbreak in Readiness and Response in Prisons (led by OHCHR and WHO). In addition, the following Interim Guidance documents were being prepared for fast-track endorsement by Principals: (i) Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Gender Alert (developed by the IASC Reference Group for Gender in Humanitarian Action); (ii) Interim Guidance on

COVID-19: Technical Note on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) (developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, IOM, OCHA, CHS Alliance, InterAction and the UN Victims' Rights Advocate); and (iii) Joint messaging to donors on quality financing (developed by IASC Results Group 5 on Humanitarian Financing).¹ She underscored the importance of providing timely support in support of the IASC Principals with regards to the response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Ms. Reena Ghelani, Chair of the IASC's Emergency Directors Group (EDG), thanked the OPAG and Results Groups for timely and agile support for the operational needs. The EDG has been diligently following up on the tasking from the Principals, including around operational support, programme criticality and preparedness. The EDG has also been engaged in supporting the production of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, which benefitted from unprecedented system-wide efforts. The leadership of WFP has been critical in maintaining and further strengthening the logistics infrastructure to enable the system to sustain operations (including in terms of MedEvac support). Work around duty of care, humanitarian exemptions, access and monitoring is also ongoing. She noted that the EDG is going to also be focusing efforts on practical ways to sustain operations during the COVID-19 outbreak in contexts where tracing, testing and social distancing will be challenging (e.g. in camps and camps-like settings). In terms of the IASC System-Wide Emergency Activation Procedures ("Scale-Up" Protocols), the EDG is considering a practical and lighter approach, tailored to the COVID-19 response for the Principals consideration.

In the ensuing discussion, members shared the overwhelming view that the fast-track endorsement process should be maintained to avoid additional layer of approvals or bureaucracy. They expressed appreciation to the IASC secretariat for facilitating the fast-track endorsement of Interim Guidance documents to support the COVID-19 response. Several members queried how the OPAG would capture guidance around issues related to the use of key tools and services such as biometrics and cash programming; whether the revisions to Interim Guidance documents will be carried out through Results Groups or through a few agencies working together; the need to focus on localization as an opportunity to strengthen the response; and the need for strengthened efforts around advocacy from the OPAG.

The Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (COAST) noted the extreme difficulty that certain populations were facing in trying to abide by WHO Guidelines on COVID-19, particularly social distancing in rural areas and camp settings. COAST called for the OPAG's attention to expedite localization and address rising xenophobia against foreigners. WFP drew the OPAG's attention to key gap areas such as the use of biometrics and digital IDs, cash-based transfers, protection issues and access to marginalized people. Risks of using biometrics in cash programming was echoed by FRD, while SCHR suggested the development of guidance around new tools such as biometrics. WFP further shared that the Early Warning and Early Action Expert Group is working on integrating COVID-19 aspects into EPR guidance and suggested optimizing linkages with the Grand Bargain processes. WHO highlighted the need for advocacy on the provision of essential services to migrants and displaced people and the impact of COVID-19 on peace programs among other issues. UNHCR expressed support for consideration of issues related to bureaucratic impediments faced by NGOs as well as a further push towards localization and invited the OPAG to reflect on new rules and tools of engagement as a result of COVID-19. IFRC highlighted the importance for the OPAG to provide timely and relevant support to the Principals and the EDG, with a particular focus around localization, gender-based violence, PSEA and mental health issues. UNICEF emphasized the need to consider protection concerns, within the context of a public health emergency response. SCHR and InterAction stressed that blanket humanitarian exemptions should cover all IASC partners and should not be negotiated agency-by-agency. They also added that it was important for NGOs to access testing to ensure deployment of staff, and the pursuit of joint procurement and distribution for personal protection equipment for humanitarian workers. InterAction and ICVA urged collective advocacy to

¹ These three Interim Guidance documents were endorsed by the IASC Principals and circulated widely.

maintain NGO regular services on the ground, including advocacy with governments. ICVA further suggested exploring opportunities that the COVID-19 response presents from a nexus perspective.

Follow-Up Actions:

1. OPAG will prioritize quick implementation of the task requested by the IASC Principals to develop IASC Guidance on COVID-19 on the best possible new or adapted response modalities for settings where implementing testing, tracing, treating and distancing measures are particularly hard to achieve [OPAG members with support from the IASC secretariat]
2. In support of IASC Principals, OPAG agreed to maintain the fast-track endorsement of Interim Guidance documents with a view to filling key gaps with additional timely guidance. IASC secretariat is asked to follow-up with OPAG members and facilitate endorsement as required. [OPAG members with support from the IASC secretariat]
3. OPAG agreed to highlight key areas of joint advocacy for the Principals and amplify the joint messages at individual agency's level. Results Group 3 on Advocacy is tasked to ensure support and leverage opportunities to take this forward [Results Groups 3 on Collective Advocacy]

SESSION 2: BRIEF DISCUSSION ON THE PRIORITY AREAS OF WORK OF THE OPAG AND THE RESULTS GROUPS

The OPAG co-Chairs noted that COVID-19 has had and will continue to impact the ability of the Results Groups to deliver on their 2020 priorities and requested the Results Groups co-Chairs to share their initial thoughts on the following: (a) areas of work that can be delivered, (b) activities that will have to be postponed, and (c) new activities/ deliverables that will need to be taken onboard in light of the COVID-19 response.

The co-Chairs of **Results Group 1 on Operational Response (OCHA and InterAction)** briefed that they would tailor their current workplan in light of COVID-19, particularly around the most relevant and pressing topics, including operationalizing localization, addressing bureaucratic impediments and mainstreaming protection. These three workstreams are ongoing but will have to reflect the new needs stemming from COVID-19 by considering protection concerns around xenophobia against foreign humanitarian workers and broader bureaucratic impediments imposed by the recent travel and movement restrictions. It was noted that concrete deliverables would be delayed as a result of the reprioritization, while the work around the IASC Early Warning and Early Action Analysis and joint guidance on data responsibility will be pursued as planned.

The co-Chairs of Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion (UNHCR and UNICEF) briefed that the group reviewed its capacity and agreed to maintain its core commitments as business as usual, acknowledging the need to slow down some of their consultation processes in order not to overburden its members and partners, including field colleagues. They highlighted the group's quick action already being taken to support the COVID-19 response, notably the finalization of the *Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Technical Note on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)* (developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, IOM, OCHA, CHS Alliance, InterAction and the UN Victims' Rights Advocate), which corresponds to the Principals' recent call to prepare further guidance to address/ mitigate the increased risk of Gender Based Violence and sexual exploitation in the COVID-19 context. The group will also consider how to adapt the *IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action* to the COVID-19 context in collaboration with the newly created Reference Group for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. They will continue to take forward the development of the Global Accountability and Inclusion Results Tracker, the Collective Accountability and Inclusion Framework for HCs/HCTs and the Global Accountability Platform during this year.

The co-Chairs of Results Group 3 on Collective Advocacy (Save the Children and UNFPA) briefed that the group will develop common key messages focused on humanitarian exemptions and localization in support of the COVID-19 response. It was noted that part of their ongoing work will be delivered as planned, including around counter-terrorism measures and climate change advocacy. Several other deliverables will be postponed due to limited capacity, notably the development of a best practices document on the engagement with Non-State Armed Groups, while this may be tailored to explore COVID-related aspects.

The co-Chairs of Results Group 4 on Humanitarian-Development Collaboration (Oxfam and UNDP) briefed that as a result of COVID-19, they expect to take up a new workstream to reflect on the possible socio-economic impact of the pandemic from the nexus perspectives, in collaboration with the OECD/INCAF and UNSDG. They anticipated general delays across their workstreams, including finalizing the IASC Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes which is currently in the process of incorporating the OPAG feedback; and the *Key Messages on the Humanitarian-Development Nexus and its Links to Peace* which was at the stage of incorporating concepts around the articulation of the peace dimension in the nexus.

The co-Chairs of Results Group 5 on Humanitarian Financing (OCHA and ICVA) briefed that the *Key Messages for the IASC: flexible funding for humanitarian response and COVID19* were drafted as a basis for the Principals' communication with donors on the urgent need for flexible and simplified funding in light of the COVID-19 emergency (currently in process of the Principals' endorsement). The group is in touch with Grand Bargain secretariat to align the Eminent Person's messaging. The group's focus on funding issues will pivot towards the need for flexible funding and sustaining humanitarian funding streams in the longer term amidst the recessionary environment. The group will further reframe its quality funding work around COVID-19 to better connect local actors to funding. Its work around financing instruments for development co-benefits and simplification and harmonization of UN systems will continue to be taken forward in consideration of its high relevance to the COVID-19 response.

The OPAG members thanked the Results Group co-Chairs for their agility and timeliness of support to the COVID-19 response. UNFPA urged the Results Groups to heed to the socio-economic effects cascading on women and girls, how to beef up remote delivery of services and collective messaging to donors on the humanitarian action alleviating impact on donors. WFP expressed that Results Group 1 would need to further adjust its workplan to address key gap areas. WFP also called on OPAG as a whole to consolidate the work of the various Results Groups in response to the Principals' ask to develop the best possible new or adapted response modalities for settings where implementing testing, tracing, treating and distancing measures are particularly hard to achieve. ICVA requested the Results Group 1 to leverage new opportunities created in light of the outbreak to speed up localization, and Results Group 3 to work on messaging to ensure continued attention to ongoing crises and "no discrimination" access to health services during this period. UNICEF called for further reprioritization and resequencing of the Results Groups' work, which was seconded by OCHA. OCHA also highlighted the need for the Results Groups to think beyond the provision of Guidance but to reflect on how to capture best practices across different operations and what changes were expected in terms of access and capacity, how to join together our work in the humanitarian financing realm with the advocacy realm, and how to feature support beyond our humanitarian programme workloads as the Global Humanitarian Response Plan is likely to expand beyond the initial 53 countries.

Follow-Up Actions:

1. OPAG will prioritize the following action points that were requested by the IASC Principals:
 - a) Develop IASC Guidance on COVID-19 on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), consider preparing and sharing further guidance to address/mitigate the increased risk

of Gender Based Violence and sexual exploitation in the COVID-19 context [*OPAG with the support of Results Group 2*]²

- b) Provide the mental health and psychosocial support needs of the response to be strengthened - consider specific measures to be taken to strengthen this aspect of the response [*OPAG with the support of the IASC's MHPSS Reference Group*]³
2. In light of the COVID-19 response, Results Groups to further consider and revert on the priority areas of work as follows (a) activities/deliverables that will be postponed, (b) activities/products that can still be delivered, (c) new deliverables that will need to be prioritized in support of the COVID-19 response [*Results Groups with the support of the IASC secretariat*]

² At the time of the OPAG meeting, this action had been delivered in form of (i) Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Gender Alert (developed by the IASC Reference Group for Gender in Humanitarian Action; and (ii) Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Technical Note on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) (developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, IOM, OCHA, CHS Alliance, InterAction and the UN Victims' Rights Advocate).

³ At the time of the OPAG meeting, this action had been delivered in the form of the Interim Briefing Note Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak and the MPHSS Children's Story Book (both developed by the IASC's MHPSS Reference Group). Other measures are also under consideration.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

OPAG Co-Chair	Ms. Valerie Guarnieri, Assistant Executive Director, WFP Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary-General, NRC
FAO	Mr. Dominique Burgeon Mr. Daniele Donati
ICRC	Ms. Clare Dalton Ms. Avigail Shai
ICVA	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi
ICVA - ACBAR	Ms. Fiona Gall
ICVA - COAST	Mr. Rezaul Karim Chowdhury
ICVA - FRD	Mr. Azmat Khan
ICVA - IMC	Ms. Mary Pack
IFRC	Prof. Cecile Aptel Mr. Stuart Kefford
InterAction	Ms. Kate Phillips-Barrasso Mr. Julien Schopp
InterAction - Care USA	Ms. Sheba Crocker
InterAction - Global Communities	Ms. Pia Wanek
IOM	Ms. Tristan Burnett Ms. Angela Staiger
OCHA	Mr. Rein Paulsen
OHCHR	Mr. Roberto Ricci
SCHR	Mr. Gareth Price Jones
SCHR - Save the Children	Ms. Leah Finnigan
UNDP	Mr. Peter Batchelor
UNFPA	Mr. Ingo Piegeler
UNHCR	Mr. Arafat Jamal
UNICEF	Mr. Manuel Fontaine Ms. Segolene Adam
WFP	Ms. Gordana Jerger
WHO	Mr. Rudi Coninx

Presenters:

Chair of the IASC's EDG: Ms. Reena Ghelani

Co-Chairs of RG1: Mr. Julien Schopp and Mr. Rein Paulsen

Co-Chairs of RG2: Ms. Meritxell Relano and Ms. Bernadette Castel-Hollingsworth

Co-Chairs of RG3: Mr. Michel Anglade

Co-Chairs of RG4: Ms. Marta Valdes Garcia and Ms. Rachel Scott

Co-Chairs of RG5: Ms. Marcy Vigoda and Mr. Jeremy Rempel

IASC secretariat:

Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, **Head, IASC Secretariat**