

IASC Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Meeting 29 November 2022

Summary Record

INTRODUCTION

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee convened on 29 November. The OPAG co-chair, Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, welcomed participants and presenters and laid out the primary objectives of the meeting, namely 1. Discuss the preliminary findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) on the humanitarian response to COVID-19; 2. Reflect on to the system's engagement with and response to communities; and 3. Identify strategic normative issues beyond the workstreams of the IASC that are of collective concern and warrant OPAG's attention in 2023.

SESSION 1: Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) on the humanitarian response to COVID-19

Mr. Lisle welcomed the presenters, Mr. Andy Featherstone, Team Leader, and Ms. Tasneem Mowjee, Senior Evaluator, of the IAHE on the humanitarian response to COVID-19. He highlighted that the IAHE on the Humanitarian Response to Covid-19 is the first evaluation report of its kind: 1) the first evaluation of an IASC response to infectious disease events, and 2) the first evaluation of a global response to a global crisis.

Mr. Featherstone and Ms. Mowjee presented the key findings and recommendations of the draft IAHE, including top-line information from the two learning papers on the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) and localization. While the IAHE Advisory Group had broadly agreed with the report's conclusions and key messages, the evaluation team was keen to strengthen some of the recommendations for maximum impact. The key takeaway was that the COVID-19 response was an unprecedented task for the humanitarian system, so it was no surprise that it was imperfect, but that the scale-up provided an important safety net for many millions who would not have otherwise received assistance. Nonetheless, the report highlighted some ongoing challenges, such as constraints putting people at the centre of the response (e.g. remote methodologies meant compromises in engaging communities and being accountable to them); prioritizing reaching those in greatest need and that are the least visible; failure to move the needle on key localisation commitments; and failing to work beyond siloes given the absence of architecture to facilitate joint assessments, planning and response; and the continued lack of suitable financing. With crises increasing in scope, scale and frequency, and with ever diminishing resources, the development of a coherent/cohesive system which can anticipate, prepare, respond to, and build long-term resilience remains paramount. The report outlines recommendations on the above.

Mr. Lisle thanked the presenters for their briefing and invited members to share their comments and reflections.

DISCUSSION

OPAG members broadly welcomed the report and the opportunity to share feedback. It was suggested that some of the recommendations directed at donors were best channelled through relevant Grand Bargain mechanisms, noting that donors were yet to follow through on their

commitments to quality funding through that forum. Members pointed out the differences between health-focused incidence management protocols and the IASC system-wide Scale-Up protocols. They also noted the difficulties in identifying the most vulnerable people in need, including between countries with a Humanitarian Response Plan versus rich countries, given this was a worldwide pandemic.

Members suggested there could have been additional emphasis in the report on the challenges of the real costs of delivery that were not accurately calculated and thus not supported. They also pointed out that the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access initiative (COVAX) was not well linked with existing health cluster coordination mechanisms at first which meant time was lost. They stressed that the inclusion of NGOs and marginal groups in decision-making could have been reinforced earlier. The substantial work put into developing progressive guidance on localization issued by the OPAG not long into the pandemic did not bring about tangible changes at country-level, which means that we need to reflect on how to ensure that IASC policy turns into IASC practice. It was also suggested that localization recommendations should be directed beyond the IASC, targeting donors directly.

Members agreed with evaluation findings on the GHRP. Some members warned that given the context-specific circumstances in which the GHRP had been compiled and revised, there was little value in developing formal templates and process guidance around a GHRP-type document for similar responses in the future, despite the likelihood of similar events reoccurring in the future. It was further pointed out that work was already underway by the Humanitarian Programme Cycle Steering Group to further prioritize the most vulnerable. It was suggested that partners need to improve their assessments of the intersectional needs of people, notably women and children, so this translates into programming and responses.

Members acknowledged the trade-offs involved in prioritising a rapid response to Covid-19 versus an evidence-based response. It was noted that the initial response focused on gender-based violence and protection, while the impacts on women and girls were much broader than that in terms of access to livelihoods, education and reproductive health.

OPAG members highlighted that financial considerations, supply chain breakdowns and movement restrictions negatively impacted duty of care in the field. The response highlighted the limits of the humanitarian system and capacities, amid pressure from donors who insisted on targeting to prioritize funding.

It was pointed out that in many cases humanitarians became the default deliverers, highlighting the important role humanitarian organisations play in the provision of global service. This offers lessons on opportunities for efficiency gains and pooling of resources.

In conclusion, one member stressed that this pandemic is not yet over. As a result the recommendations need to be framed in terms of what needs to be addressed now and not just for the next pandemic, including all the ongoing inequities on vaccines and other issues as well as on the accountability of our own organizations to meet the ever-present threat.

The OPAG Co-Chair thanked the presenters and members for the strong discussion. He expressed looking forward to receiving the final report and for OPAG to contribute to actioning key global recommendations. Mr. Lisle then suggested OPAG set up and task an inter-agency team/working group - in collaboration with IAHE SG and OCHA – to draft the Management Response Plan (MRP) for the global system-wide recommendations stemming from this IAHE, for review and endorsement by the IASC.

ACTION POINTS

1. Encourage OPAG members to continue to liaise with the IAHE Covid team to provide feedback on the draft report, including the recommendations and likewise encourage the IAHE team to continue to take into account OPAG member comments, including those made during this meeting [**OPAG members**]
2. Align recommendations, to the extent possible, with Grand Bargain commitments and plans [**IAHE SG**]
3. Incorporate an understanding of usefulness/utility of IASC guidance notes/documents on Covid-19 [**IAHE SG**]
4. Share the final IAHE on the Humanitarian Response to Covid-19 with OPAG and EDG for response [**IAHE SG**]
5. Step forward to join an inter-agency team tasked with drafting the MRP for the global system-wide recommendations stemming from the IAHE in collaboration with the IAHE SG and OCHA [**OPAG members**]
6. Share the draft MRP with OPAG and EDG for review and endorsement [**IASC secretariat**].

SESSION 2: Putting Communities Affected by Crises at the Center of our Work

Co-Chair Mr. Geir Olav Lisle introduced the session, recalling the IASC Principals' discussions on, and commitment to, Accountability to Affected People (AAP) and introduced the report by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), Listening is Not Enough, on the perceptions of crisis-affected communities of humanitarian assistance. He noted that the report, commissioned by OCHA, had been presented to the IASC Principals meeting on 28 November, before handing over to Ms. Sarah Muscroft to outline the report key findings and recommendations.

Outlining the methodology, Ms. Muscroft presented that the report is a synthesis of existing data gathered by GTS, supplemented by data provided by the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Partnership. The report hypothesis is that, to understand the perspectives of crisis-affected people, one also needs to understand their expectations of assistance.

Summarising the report findings, Ms. Muscroft outlined the extent to which humanitarian assistance falls short of the expectations of crisis-affected people across five dimensions: participation, transparency, information, resilience-building, and relevance. She reflected that, not only are humanitarians falling short of community expectations, but the humanitarian system is also falling short of its own ambitions – especially in areas such as consultation, awareness of complaints and feedback mechanisms, and offering affected people the ability to influence assistance. Ms. Muscroft emphasised recurring themes in the analysis, that: participation needs an overhaul – people's participation must drive the response; people need to be made explicitly aware of their right to participate; there is a need for increased transparency; cash programming has potential for improved feelings of participation and resilience, but is not a panacea; the system needs to move from a supply-driven to a demand-driven model; and, participation goes hand-in-hand with longer term solutions. She concluded with the report's key recommendations to the IASC Principals that perceptions need to be part of how humanitarian organisations program, with participation

reimagined as a process of trust building; doing so requires systemic reform. Mr. Lisle then invited Ms. Mervat Shelbaya to reflect on the IASC Principals discussion.

Ms. Shelbaya highlighted that the IASC Principals welcomed the report findings and recommendations, noting that the report's findings are neither novel, nor surprising, but nonetheless disturbing. She reflected that, while recognising the tremendous work that many organizations have undertaken to strengthen AAP, there is still a long way to go and the report points to the need for change. Ms. Shelbaya recalled the IASC Principals recognition of the challenges that the report poses for the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and business model, and the need for empathy and humility. She reflected Principals' discussions on the importance of engaging the donor community, assessing existing coordination mechanisms, and the need to move towards a co-design process with communities.

Ms. Shelbaya concluded by highlighting the ERC's commitment to test putting communities at the centre of humanitarian response in two to six countries, to explore the humanitarian system's level of ambition and learn about the new skillsets and partnerships that will be needed to put people at the centre as well as the limitations of such an initiative. Ms. Shelbaya outlined other workstreams around AAP within OCHA, including discussions around using pooled funds to bolster AAP, and considerations of systematically gathering perceptions data in the future.

DISCUSSION

Thanking Ms. Muscroft and Ms. Shelbaya for their presentation, co-Chair Ms. Valerie Guarnieri reflected the need to do better for the people affected by humanitarian crisis and invited members to share their reflections on how OPAG can support the ERC's initiative, including through Task Force 2 on AAP.

Welcoming the report and the IASC Principals commitment to the issue, OPAG members affirmed the need for a system-change approach to putting people at the centre, while proposing greater coherence between the efforts at Principals and Task Team level, not least to ensure transparency at country-level. They also asked for greater synergies with the protection agenda. They suggested that Task Force 2 is requested to become more visible also in regard to the ERC's efforts and encouraged Task Force 2 as well as the wider system to consider the findings of the report. Members furthermore suggested to use perceptions data as a learning tool, relevant to coordination mechanisms as well as the delivery of assistance. Additionally, OPAG members emphasised the linkages to other workstreams, including gender and protection, noting the particular importance of trust-building with vulnerable groups to give them the confidence to raise the challenges that they face.

OPAG members highlighted examples of good practices within their own organisations, suggesting that these be drawn upon as inspiration and learning for the wider humanitarian system. Relatedly, noting that participation has a long track record in the development system, OPAG members reflected on the need to learn from development approaches, including area-based approaches, co-design of interventions, and working with local and national authorities where appropriate.

Ms. Mervat Shelbaya responded to these discussion points, noting that an IASC best practices on AAP document will be circulated to members in the near future. She emphasised that many structures across the IASC are doing important work on AAP, and that this will inform the roll-out of the ERC's learning initiative.

Thanking the OPAG members for their contributions, Ms. Guarnieri welcomed the report as an important contribution to the work of the IASC, reflecting the importance of perceptions surveys as an important tool and mirror for the sector's efforts. She concluded by suggesting Task Force 2

should leverage the energy, enthusiasm and direction that is coming from the ERC and from other parts of the system. She thanked the presenters and GTS for their work and for fueling this critical focus area for OPAG and the system at large.

ACTION POINTS

1. Consider the findings of the GTS report as an important input to into its existing workplan [**Task Force 2**]
2. Take forward the work for AAP and leverage the interest, energy, enthusiasm and direction that is coming from the ERC and from other parts of the system. [**IASC Task Force 2**]
3. Consider utilizing perceptions surveys as an important tool [**OPAG members**]

SESSION 3: Discussion on OPAG Forward Agenda

Mr. Lisle suggested rescheduling the discussion on the OPAG Forward Agenda, ways of working and the critical cross-cutting issues beyond the work of the Task Forces in light of time constraints.

ACTION POINTS

1. Reschedule a dedicated session on the OPAG Forward Agenda, ways of working and critical cross cutting issues [**IASC secretariat**].
2. Share suggestions with the IASC secretariat on which cross-cutting, system-changing issues the OPAG should take on [**OPAG members**]

CHAIRS' CLOSING REMARKS

The OPAG Co-Chairs closed the meeting by thanking presenters and the OPAG for their constructive engagement during this meeting and through 2022. The next OPAG meeting is tentatively scheduled for January 2023 on the issue of localization. They expressed they looked forward to re-engaging with newfound momentum in 2023, wishing all a happy New Year.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

OPAG Co-Chairs	Ms. Valerie Guarnieri, Deputy Executive Director, Programme & Policy Development Department, WFP Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary General, NRC
FAO	Mr. Daniele Donati
ICRC	Ms. Alexandra Boivin
ICVA	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi
ICVA - Concern Worldwide US	Mr. Kirk Prichard
ICVA - Humanitarian NGO Forum Colombia	Mr. José Luis Barreiro
ICVA - Tamdeen Youth Foundation, Yemen	Mr. Jameel Abdo
IFRC	Mr. Frank Mohrhauer
InterAction	Ms. Sarah Fuhrman
InterAction – Catholic Relief Services	Ms. Emily Wei
InterAction - NRC	Ms. Cecilia Roselli
IOM	Ms. Angela Staiger
OCHA	Mr. Andrew Wyllie
OHCHR	Mr. Roberto Ricci
SCHR	Mr. Gareth Price Jones
SCHR - Christian Aid	Mr. Michael Mosselmans
SCHR – Save the Children International	Ms. Leah Finnigan
SR on HR of IDPs	Ms. Kim Mancini
UNFPA	Mr. Ingo Piegler
UN HABITAT	Mr. Filiep Decorte
UNHCR	Ms. Annika Sandlund
UNICEF	Mr. Charles-Antoine Hofmann
WFP	Mr. David Kaatrud
WHO	Mr. Maria Van Kerkhove
IASC secretariat	Ms. Mervat Shelbaya