

IASC Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Meeting

15 March 2022

SUMMARY RECORD

INTRODUCTION

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) convened on 15 March 2022 to discuss the next steps and areas for consideration for the Entities Associated with the IASC (Entities), namely the Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG), the Reference Group on Gender and Humanitarian Action (GRG), the Humanitarian Programme Cycle Steering Group (HPCSG) and the Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (MPHSSRG).¹

In their introductory remarks, the OPAG co-Chairs, Ms. Valerie Guarnieri and Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, welcomed the OPAG members and the Chairs and co-Chairs of the Entities to the OPAG meeting. The meeting was an opportunity for the OPAG to engage with the Entities that carry out important work on behalf of the humanitarian system, provide guidance on their future direction as requested by the IASC Principals, and prioritize actions that can be taken by the Entities until the end of 2022.

IASC ASSOCIATED ENTITIES: AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION AND WORKING MODALITIES

Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Chief of the IASC secretariat, shared an overview of the key issues and the suggested expectations requested of the Entities for the OPAG's agreement. She reminded members of the key requests from IASC Principals for the OPAG to closely consider the future direction of the Entities, including their continued associated with the IASC, to better understand their work, to determine how they can better support the field and contribute to integrating cross-cutting issues into the humanitarian response.

Ms. Shelbaya added that the primary objectives of the OPAG discussion was to agree on the end game of the Entities' work and what actions could be taken towards that end - whether it is through dedicated time-bound groups or by streamlining their work at the country level. She further noted that the Entities were established in different times, with different purposes and operating modalities, and could be classified into thematic bodies and coordination bodies, as noted in their Terms of Reference circulated prior to the meeting. Ms. Shelbaya further noted that there were good examples to build on such as translating policies into practices by working directly with the field, establishing technical working groups on the ground, and providing surge support.

Further to the Ms. Shelbaya's overview, Mr. Lisle invited the Chairs and the co-Chairs of the Entities Associated with the IASC to present on (a) how the Entity views its key roles and added value to the system, (b) how the Entity can play an active role in support of the field operation, and (c) why the Entity sees the association with the IASC as critical to its future direction.

¹ The Entities Associated with the IASC also includes the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group, but it was not tabled at this meeting.

GLOBAL CLUSTER COORDINATION GROUP (GCCG)

Ms. Marina Skuric Prodanovic, the Chief of OCHA's System-wide Approaches and Practices Section and the Chair of the GCCG, highlighted the role of the group in translating IASC-endorsed policies and guidelines to the operational level and in supporting country-level clusters and inter-cluster coordination groups. She noted that observer status was also issued to the Gender Reference Group (GRG) and the Reference Group on Mental Health Psychosocial Group (MPHSS) as a follow up to the Principals recommendations. Ms. Prodanovic further suggested maintaining the six-monthly frequency of reporting to the OPAG, instead of the recommended quarterly basis. She noted the group's readiness to adopt a 12-month rotational co-Chair position dedicated for non-governmental organizations, once the OPAG endorses its Terms of Reference.

Ms. Prodanovic subsequently outlined priority country contexts for the GCCG support in 2022, including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Madagascar, South Sudan, Ukraine and Zimbabwe. Various forms of support would be provided, including direct support to Humanitarian Coordinators, support to priorities identified during the EDG or the Peer-2-Peer missions, and support to evaluations outcomes identified by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group.

Ms. Prodanovic presented group's workplan for 2022, which included direct or remote support to key operations, country-level clusters, coordination architecture reviews, learning and capacity-building resources, performance reviews, provision of guidance tools among other key priorities. Ms. Prodanovic stressed the group's key role and added value, noting that it coordinates more than 17,000 cluster members – 49 per cent of which are local and national operational partners - through their country-level clusters and national-level strategic advisory groups. In particular, the group plays an active role in translating IASC policies and guidance to reality through direct support to clusters in the field. This is demonstrated by how [the IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level](#) provides the foundation of the group's work, and how other IASC policy and guidance on cross-cutting thematic issues are incorporated into the group's workplan activities and implemented through direct support to country-level clusters. Global Clusters also feed into global-level guidance and policy through OCHA or the cluster lead agencies or by directly inputting to IASC bodies and stakeholders. Ms. Prodanovic stressed the importance of continued association with the IASC, considering its important role in contributing to IASC-commissioned evaluations and reviews, and in the practical application of the IASC guidance. She drew the OPAG's attention to that the GCCG-OPAG link which mirrored the ICCG-HCT link at country level and the GCCG's formal association with the IASC helps ensure strengthened communication, accountability and oversight.

In the ensuing discussion, members expressed support to the GCCG's operational focus, strengthening country-level cluster and inter-cluster coordination, as well as additional time to review its Terms of Reference and priority areas suggested for 2022. Several members stressed its potential role to funnel policy issues that cut across different clusters as they arise to the Task Forces to help connect policies with operational realities. In terms of the observer status of the GRG within the GCCG, it was reminded that all clusters had gender focal points who were members of the GRG already. The GRG participation in the GCCG should not add an additional layer of coordination, but should lead to streamlined coordination, engagement and communication at the system level and focus on strengthened advocacy for the increased presence of female humanitarian staff in the sector, rather than technical functions. The importance of having a reporting line from the GCCG to the OPAG on policy and guidance was also raised.

Ms. Prodanovic welcomed the OPAG feedback and noted the group's continued focus on field support. She acknowledged the group's potential contributions to funneling policy issues to the normative bodies

and committed to actively engaging with the Task Forces. With regard to group's interaction with the GRG, she expected observer status would reinforce the connection between the two Entities, in line with the recommendation of the [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls](#). She also noted that the group's Terms of Reference had undergone previous revisions, with the latest version reflecting comments from the OPAG made in 2019, however its endorsement was put on hold given the ongoing IASC structural review. Once the Terms of Reference was endorsed by the OPAG, the GCCG would be ready to fill the co-chair seat designated to NGOs, which is likely to be taken up by Save the Children.

Mr. Lisle thanked Ms. Prodanovic and the GCCG for their efforts. He welcomed the stepped-up work and support to the field carried out by the GCCG, including through field missions and virtual support. He reiterated the calls to reinforce the field focus, reduce the number of coordination layers, and funnel the normative issues to the OPAG and the Task Forces.

ACTION POINTS

1. In light of the critical role that clusters can play in translating IASC-endorsed policies to action, the GCCG is to prioritize efforts to translate IASC-endorsed policies and guidelines to action in the field through the various clusters and inter-cluster work, including through field missions and virtual support. **[GCCG]**
2. Include representation from the GRG and MHPSS at the GCCG as observers to ensure that cross-cutting issues are better streamline and strengthen linkages. **[GCCG]**
3. Recirculate the GCCG Terms of Reference to the OPAG for final review. **[IASC secretariat]**
4. Report on the above and the work of the group on a bi-annual basis to the OPAG. **[GCCG]**

REFERENCE GROUP ON GENDER AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION (GRG)

Ms. Anusanthee Pillay, Action Aid's Global Women's Protection Advisor and the co-Chair of the GRG, remarked that the co-Chairs had consulted in depth the vast membership of the Reference Group, which includes diverse NGOs, on its roles going forward vis-à-vis the humanitarian system. The consensus was that the system was still lacking in gender capacity and accountability, as highlighted in the [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls](#). In this regard, it would be important to shift the GRG's functions towards technical expertise and field support.

Ms. April Pham, OCHA's Senior Gender Advisor and Head of Gender Unit, and the co-Chair of the GRG, noted that the GRG's niche lied in its support to strengthen the accountability of the system on the gender agenda. The GRG had been leveraging the Gender Accountability Framework over the past years, as a mechanism to institutionalize the [IASC Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action](#) and its accompanying [Accountability Framework](#), and to ensure that the recommendations were better followed up. The GRG had spotted gaps in the adequate follow up and saw its role as making the Gender Accountability Framework and reporting mechanisms more user-friendly and meaningful to all IASC members. The responsibility of technical capacity belonged to all actors Ms. Pham added that an updated Terms of Reference would be submitted to the OPAG for review and endorsement.

In the ensuing discussion, the OPAG members expressed support for the GRG's work and its contributions as a watchdog to ensure that the system is on track to take up the recommendations. At the same time, many members urged the GRG to explore its future direction in both delivery and accountability, particularly by translating policy to practice. Members expressed their agreement to the continued association of the GRG to the work of the IASC.

Ms. Pham reiterated that the GRG works on the premise that gender is collective system-wide responsibility, and affirmed that, following the OPAG feedback, the GRG would consider ways to find that balance, while not taking on the roles of the technical owners. She further stressed the need to better involve UN Women into the IASC space to help strengthen accountability..

Mr. Lisle appreciated the co-Chairs' leadership and efforts to strike the balance between accountability, operational support and advocacy, noting the general support from the OPAG for the GRG's continued association with the IASC. He further suggested to unpack the balance of accountability, operational support and advocacy in its new Terms of Reference, while giving more weight on its potential role to provide operational support and offer gender perspectives into the OPAG's normative work.

ACTION POINTS

5. Reconsider the GRG's purpose to ensure that it provides more practical and tangible support to the field and translating gender policy to action **[GRG]**
6. Arrange a dedicated OPAG discussion with the GRG around the implementation of the Management Response Plan of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation and to consider further steps to be taken to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment is better mainstreamed and prioritized. **[IASC secretariat]**
7. Play a more active role in (a) providing the gender perspective to OPAG-produced policies and tools, and (b) following up on the implementation of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation's Management Response Plan. **[GRG]**
8. Report on the above and the work of the group on a bi-annual basis to the OPAG. **[GRG]**

REFERENCE GROUP ON MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN EMERGENCY SETTINGS (MPHSS)

Dr. Fahmy Hanna, Technical Officer in WHO's Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse and co-Chair of the MHPSSRG, emphasized the Reference Group's field focus, including its support to country-level MHPSS technical working groups and different clusters. The number of technical working groups doubled from 23 in 2020 to 48 in 2022 thanks to the advocacy efforts by the IASC Principals and many actors. In 2021, 27 country-level MHPSS technical working groups received at least one of the following support from the Reference Group in 2021: field missions, teleconferences, capacity building activities, or adaptation of resources. In addition, the Reference Group had provided 32 inter-agency surge deployments since 2020 to date.

Dr. Hanna also presented the Reference Group's contributions in support of the COVID-19 response. This included 22 teleconferences to assist global MHPSS focal points and country-level MHPSS technical working groups, and the development of "[My Hero Is You, Storybook for Children on COVID-19](#)", "[Interim Briefing Note Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak](#)", "[IASC Guidance on Operational Considerations for Multisectoral MHPSS Programmes during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)", "[IASC Guidance on Basic Psychosocial Skills - A Guide for COVID-19 Responders](#)", "[Living with the Times, A MHPSS Toolkit for Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)", and "[Actions for Heroes, A Guide for Heart-to-Heart Chats with Children to Accompany Reading of My Hero Is You, How Kids Can Fight COVID-19!](#)". These vital products were made available in multiple languages and accessible formats. The Reference Group continued its efforts to produce practical guidance in 2021 and 2022, by developing "[Technical Note, Linking Disaster Risk Reduction and MHPSS: Practical Tools](#),"

[Approaches and Case Studies](#)”, and [“IASC Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for MHPSS in Emergency Settings: With Means of Verification Version 2.0 \(upcoming\)”](#).

Dr. Hanna also noted the Reference Group’s support to the Ukraine humanitarian response much like to all emergencies, which included mappings of responses by partners in Ukraine, neighbouring and affected countries; provision of relevant IASC resources for MHPSS response in English, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Slovakian and Ukrainian; deployment of surge capacity for MHPSS multisectoral coordination, among many others. She added that the Reference Group’s priorities included: (a) support to country-level MHPSS technical working groups and the Reference Group’s member agencies, (b) mainstreaming MHPSS in global humanitarian structures, (c) developing and operationalizing inter-agency consensus based on MHPSS resources, and (d) continuing the rollout and strengthening of MHPSS surge capacity. She urged members to continue the association of the group with the IASC in light of its critical operational, normative and coordinating function, especially in terms of drawing interagency consensus, developing MHPSS specific products, and supporting country-level operations through field missions, the roll-out of MHPSS surge and emergency specific MHPSS coordination calls. She cautioned that disassociation from the IASC may lead to leaving the country-level multisectoral MHPSS technical working groups without a cross-cutting technical entity supporting them globally.

Members echoed their strong support to the Reference Group’s continued association with the IASC, given its clear relevance to the field impact and its undeniable value in face of growing MHPSS needs as a result of the Ukraine crisis, COVID-19 and other key emergencies. OPAG members acknowledged that its association with the IASC helped propel the humanitarian community to realize the importance of MHPSS and commended the Reference Group as an example of where the IASC envisages to reach with a good mix of normative, coordination and support functions. Members also acknowledged that the humanitarian community depends on the Reference Group for continued guidance to advance the system-wide understanding of MHPSS.

Members highlighted the Reference Group’s community-based approach, which should be replicated by the new Task Forces. The combination of policy and advocacy with field support was a key factor in translating and contextualizing policy to practice. Members also noted that the translation of the technical tools into locally spoken languages was particularly useful and valued. They stressed the importance of lessons learned from the Reference Group shared with the new Task Forces to help narrow the gap between policy and practice. Several members also reiterated the importance of including the Reference Group in the GCCG to strengthen integration MHPSS across all relevant aspects of the cluster, inter-cluster and humanitarian coordination.

Dr. Carmen Valle Trabadelo, Senior Advisor in IFRC’s Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, co-Chair of the MHPSSRG, added that the group was well attuned to the field and affected communities. She stressed that the group’s association with the IASC and its inter-agency coordination effort as important to creating a consensus around the do-no-harm principle, particularly as MPHSS was a cross-cutting issue that could not be addressed by a single agency. She further requested stronger support and buy-in from other agencies and organisations with the group’s surge scheme.

Mr. Lisle thanked the co-Chairs for the impressive work done by the Reference Group, in particular the direct support, including surge support, provided to the field and translating the key guidance to action. He suggested to set aside a session dedicated discussion on further steps needed to be taken to mainstream MHPSS, including to gather lessons learned.

ACTION POINTS

9. Arrange a dedicated OPAG discussion with MHPSS to consider further steps to be taken to ensure MHPSS is better mainstreamed and prioritized. **[IASC secretariat]**
10. Capture lessons learned to inform the work of the Task Forces and other associated Entities. **[MPHSS with the support of the IASC secretariat]**
11. Report on the work of the group on a bi-annual basis to the OPAG. **[MPHSS]**

HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMME CYCLE STEERING GROUP

Mr. Andy Wyllie, OCHA's Chief of Assessment, Planning and Monitoring Branch and Chair of the HPCSG, noted that the group was established as a forum for open and frank discussions on the programme cycle coordination in operations, including needs assessment, planning, monitoring, preparedness, guidance, tools and identification of challenges and opportunities for change. He expressed that this was vital to ensure that there was a programme cycle framework at the operational level that was fit for purpose reflective of IASC priorities. The Steering Group was cautious not to duplicate work of other IASC bodies, while providing recommendations for adjustment or changes to approaches, tools and guidance.

Mr. Wyllie added that the Steering Group updated its Terms of Reference following the OPAG feedback last year, which was reshared with the OPAG in July 2021 for review and endorsement. The new Terms of Reference reflected adjusted membership and three focus areas, namely: (a) identify and address sources of heaviness in the programme cycle coordination; (b) strengthen monitoring of the collective response; and (c) ensure proper streamlining of the localization-related work of the Results Group 1 on Operational Response into all aspects of the programme cycle. In addition, the Steering Group will be contributing to a review of costing methodologies and intersectoral analyses. The outcomes will be submitted to the OPAG for review and endorsement. The Steering Group has as active members ICVA, SCHR, InterAction, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, FAO, Save Somali Women and Children, Al Sham Foundation, and the Chair of the GCCG.

In the ensuing discussion, members acknowledged the Steering Group's efforts in improving the programme cycle, including in strengthening gender language and addressing the heaviness of the process. Members called for simplifying and adapting guidance to context-specific use, ensuring that it is working for local leadership, and taking a more solution-oriented approach. It was noted that continued association of the Steering Group with the IASC gave a sense of collective ownership.

Mr. Lisle expressed support for the suggested way forward and encouraged the Steering Group to continue channeling any tools and policies through the OPAG. He urged all Entities to maintain and strengthen their focus in translating normative to practice, which is the overarching priority of all IASC structures and members. Ms. Guarnieri acknowledged the progress being made by some of the Entities in better engaging with local actors and encouraging continued momentum. She concluded by noting that the OPAG would revisit later this year the continued association of the Entities with the IASC, while noting the importance of not losing sight of what more needs to be done by the Entities and the new Task Forces in delivering on IASC priorities and field impact.

ACTION POINTS

12. Ensure that any tools/policies developed by HPC-SG, which are expected to be implemented by the IASC, are reviewed and endorsed by the OPAG. **[HPC-SG]**
13. Report on the work of the group on a bi-annual basis to the OPAG. **[HPC-SG]**

14. Extend the term of Entities Associated with the IASC until December 2023 and arrange an OPAG discussion in the fourth quarter of 2023 on the association of all Entities Associated with the IASC beyond 2023. **[IASC secretariat]**

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Ms. Guarnieri reminded members to provide comments on the draft priority areas of work for the new Task Forces which was due 16 March to the IASC secretariat and to nominate one to two officials from within or outside respective organizations with the relevant technical expertise and seniority to become members of each of the five Task Forces. Ms. Guarnieri reiterated the importance for both the new Task Forces and Entities to ensure streamlined efforts and engagement with critical stakeholders within and beyond the IASC, including participation and consultation with local actors. OPAG co-Chairs thanked the members for their constructive engagement and support.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

OPAG Co-Chairs	Ms. Valerie Guarnieri, Assistant Executive Director, WFP Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary-General, NRC
FAO	Mr. Patrick Jacqueson
ICVA	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi
ICVA – ACBAR	Ms. Lisa K. Piper
ICVA – COAST	Mr. Rezaul Karim Chowdhury
ICVA – FRD	Mr. Azmat Khan
ICVA – IMC	Ms. Mary Pack
IFRC	Mr. Frank Mohrhauer
InterAction – CRS	Ms. Emily Wei
InterAction – Global Communities	Ms. Pia Wanek
IOM	Ms. Tristan Burnett
OCHA	Mr. Andrew Wyllie
OHCHR	Mr. Roberto Ricci
SCHR	Mr. Gareth Price Jones
SCHR – Christian Aid	Mr. Michael Mosselmans
SR on HR of IDPs	Ms. Kim Mancini
UNDP	Mr. Peter Batchelor
UNFPA	Ms. Jennifer Miquel
UN-HABITAT	Dr. Graham Alabaster
UNHCR	Ms. Sara Baschetti
UNICEF	Ms. Segolene Adam
WFP	Mr. Gian Carlo Cirri
WHO	Mr. Kevin Ousman
World Bank	Ms. Maria Dimitraou
GCCG	Ms. Marina Skuric Prodanovic
GRG	Ms. April Pham
GRG	Ms. Anu Pillay
HPCSG	Mr. Andrew Wyllie
MHPSS RG	Dr. Fahmy Hanna
MHPSS RG	Dr. Carmen Valle Trabadelo
IASC secretariat	Ms. Mervat Shelbaya