

# **Roles and Responsibilities of the United Nations System in Disaster Management**

## **Summary**

Based on a number of United Nations General Assembly resolutions which establish the institutional and policy framework for international disaster relief, the United Nations, through its agencies, programmes and funds, and specialized agencies fulfill a coordinating and operational role within the mechanisms and procedures which have been established by the humanitarian system to facilitate immediate response in the event of disaster. The Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator at country level – with the support of OCHA – retain responsibility for ensuring the adequacy, coherence and effectiveness of the international humanitarian response in support of the overall government leadership of the response and is accountable to the Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs/Emergency Relief Coordinator (USG/ERC).<sup>1</sup>

## **1 Institutional and policy framework**

The underlying mandate for the humanitarian system is derived from General Assembly resolution 46/182 (1991) on strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations which provides, inter alia, for:

- the guiding principles for humanitarian assistance to victims of disasters and other emergencies
- the key elements of humanitarian emergency assistance (prevention, preparedness, stand-by capacity; consolidated appeals, coordination, cooperation and leadership, continuum from relief to rehabilitation and development)
- the leadership role of the United Nations Secretary-General
- the basis for the mandate and role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator
- the establishment of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

Resolution 46/182 also emphasizes that humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality and underscores the primary responsibility of the affected State in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.

A number of other General Assembly resolutions clarify roles and responsibilities of the United Nations and other actors in the case of disasters including but not limited to:

- General Assembly resolution 57/150 establishing the International Search And Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) (please see under 3.2 below for more detail concerning INSARAG)
- General Assembly resolution 56/103 and 63/141- International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of disasters, from relief to development outlining OCHA's coordinating role for preparedness within the UN system

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Resident Coordinator reports to the Emergency Relief Coordinator only when responding to disasters and emergencies.

- General Assembly resolutions 54/219, 56/195, 59/233 and 63/216 covering the International System for Disaster Risk Reduction

International response to disasters is also supported by the IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters and by the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance (the "IDRL Guidelines") which provide recommendations on domestic regulation of international assistance in disasters. The IDRL Guidelines are a technical tool of reference to enhance legal preparedness through strengthening national institutional, policy or legal frameworks. They are anchored in existing norms and standards including UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182; the Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, the Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, Code of Conduct for the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGOs in Disaster Relief and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles.

## **2 Coordination**

The international humanitarian community organizes itself in support of the government leadership of response by coordinating through sectoral working groups. This concept is embodied in the 'cluster approach', an IASC-agreed approach which brings all relevant actors together in order to strengthen coordination among humanitarian actors and between the humanitarian actors and the government and address the gaps in the emergency response. The cluster approach clarifies the division of labor among organizations, and better defines their roles and responsibilities within the different sectors of the response.

The Cluster Approach operates at two levels. At the global level, the aim is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by designating global Cluster Leads and ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability in all the main sectors or areas of activity. At the country level, the aim is to ensure a more coherent and effective response by mobilizing groups of agencies, organizations and NGOs to respond in a strategic manner across all key sectors or areas of activity, each sector having a clearly designated lead, as agreed by the Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator after consultation with the Humanitarian Country Team and all relevant actors.

The designated Global Cluster Leads, as agreed by the IASC are as follows:

- Agriculture (FAO)
- Camp Coordination/Management (UNHCR and IOM)
- Early Recovery (UNDP)
- Education (UNICEF & Save the Children)
- Emergency shelter (UNHCR and IFRC - as convenor)
- Emergency Telecommunications (OCHA, UNICEF & WFP)
- Health (WHO)
- Logistics (WFP)
- Nutrition (UNICEF)

Protection (UNHCR)<sup>2</sup>  
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (UNICEF)

All sector/clusters have the responsibility to include the following cross-cutting issues in their work: HIV/AIDS, gender, environment, age and human rights – protection and early recovery while often separate sectors should also be mainstreamed across the work of all sector/clusters.

Sectors/clusters are established at country level as required in response to the specific needs of each emergency response, and considering the presence and capacity of the humanitarian actors. A key responsibility of cluster/sector leads at the country level is to ensure that humanitarian actors build on local capacities and that they develop and maintain appropriate links with Government and local authorities, state institutions, local civil society and other stakeholders. The affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance.

### **3 Operational humanitarian response**

For planning purposes, disaster management can be divided into a series of phases on a time continuum which normally includes disaster response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness. However, field experience has shown that two or more of these disaster management phases may take place concurrently. The UN system provides operational inputs and services and tools to support Governments and the humanitarian community to respond effectively and in a coordinated manner to disasters in order to minimize the impact of such events on the most vulnerable.

#### **3.1 *Disaster Preparedness***

The United Nations System supports and engages in activities in advance of forecast disasters by decreasing the vulnerability of populations to the effects of disaster (reducing disaster risk) and by increasing the capacity of individuals, communities and authorities to deal with the adverse effects of a disaster (increasing preparedness for effective response). The ISDR system Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 : Building the resilience of nations & communities to disasters provides the policy and institutional basis for risk reduction and disaster preparedness. Priority 5 of the HFA seeks to strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels noting that “impacts and losses can be substantially reduced if authorities, individuals and communities in hazard-prone areas are well prepared ... and equipped with the knowledge and capacities for effective disaster management.”

Within this framework, preparedness activities would typically include contingency planning, risk analysis, capacity and vulnerability assessment, mapping of hazards &

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<sup>2</sup> IASC Guidance Note for Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, November 2006: UNHCR is the lead of the global Protection cluster. However, at the country level in disaster situations or in complex emergencies without significant displacement, the three core protection-mandated agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF and OHCHR) will consult closely and, under the overall leadership of the HC/RC, agree which of the three will assume the role of Lead for protection. Within the Global Protection Cluster, a Core Group focuses on protection concerns in disaster situations.

threats, the development of early warning systems, contingency stockpiling and logistics facilitations arrangements with host governments in disaster-prone countries (see also IDRL). The development of most of these activities is supported by the work of the IASC Sub Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning.

Disaster preparedness may also include the establishment of appropriate coordination mechanisms – whereby agreement should already, for example, be reached on sectors/clusters, leadership, partner identification in the pre-disaster phase.

At the country level, the main implementing partner for pre-disaster capacity building activities in terms of prevention, mitigation and preparedness within the UN system is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as well as other UN agencies under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator.

The Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator also has the role of leading and coordinating preparedness activities aimed at improving the capacity of the UN/ inter-agency country teams to be able to respond better to emergencies. This is done with the overall support of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as well as the sectoral expertise of specific agencies and partners, in particular the Red Cross Movement and NGOs.

Overall, OCHA has the role of “promoting and coordinating disaster response preparedness among the United Nations humanitarian agencies and other humanitarian partners” (GA resolution 56/103).

During the pre-disaster phase there is strong cooperation between countries and UN agencies in the framework of the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (ISDR). The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) system provides the strategic framework for all global stakeholders for disaster risk reduction and recovery and is chaired by the ERC/USG. Effective since 2009 is a new Assistant-Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Special Representative for the Hyogo Framework, heading the UN wide efforts and the UNISDR.

The ISDR was adopted by United Nations Member States and is owned by local, national, regional and international organizations. It is being serviced by a Secretariat (UNISDR) which is the focal point in the UN System to promote links and synergies between, and the coordination of, disaster reduction activities in the socio-economic, humanitarian and development fields, as well as to support policy integration.

The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 was adopted by 168 governments in 2005 and set the roadmap for concerted action towards disaster risk reduction by the ISDR system (A/RES/54/219, A/RES/56/195, A/RES/59/233). As the overall coordination mechanism, the ISDR system created the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, which is chaired by the ERC/USG and meets every 2 years. It is the main global venue for Member States and other stakeholders to assess progress made in the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, share experience, raise the profile of disaster risk reduction and identify gaps to be further addressed.

### **3.2 Disaster Response**

The immediate disaster response is characterised by an initial emergency relief phase typically during the first ten days following the occurrence of a sudden disaster (or the discovery of a neglected/deteriorated slow-onset situation) when exceptional measures have to be taken to identify the individuals or groups rendered most vulnerable by the disaster and respond to their basic needs for shelter, water, food and medical care.

Disaster response will take place at field, regional and headquarter levels and will be based on the capacities and requirements of the government, local authorities and civil society in the disaster-affected country or region. At the field level, the Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator is responsible for the coordination of international relief and for communication with the government. In the case of a need for disaster response, the Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator will establish or convene the Humanitarian Country Team, composed of UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and other relevant humanitarian actors. This team functions as the strategic body leading the international humanitarian response.

At headquarter level, the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, in his role as Emergency Relief Coordinator, is responsible for coordinating the overall response of the international humanitarian community. As the principal adviser of the Secretary-General on humanitarian affairs, he will hold consultations with the various actors, including donor governments, established bodies such as the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA) and the Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC)

The USG/ERC heads the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which is mandated to facilitate, mobilize and coordinate humanitarian assistance delivered by international and national partners to populations and communities in need.

In disaster situations where the host government has requested international assistance the Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator may propose to the host government the deployment of a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC). UNDAC is a stand-by team of disaster management professionals who are nominated and funded by member governments, OCHA, UNDP and operational humanitarian United Nations Agencies such as WFP, UNICEF and WHO. UNDAC teams may be complemented by the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement Field Assessment and Coordination Team (FACT).

In the case of earthquakes, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Teams are deployed as part of the bilateral assistance and coordination is assured by the secretariat of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), which is a network of disaster-prone and disaster-responding countries and organizations dedicated to USAR (Urban Search and Rescue). The Secretariat of INSARAG is based within OCHA and an UNDAC team is mandated to fulfill the role of coordinating with the USAR teams on site.

The Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator may also decide to establish or reinforce existing humanitarian coordination capacity in the country through OCHA surge capacity available through an internal Emergency Response Roster or through a Stand-by Partnership Program with partner organizations.

Where disaster response requires an international appeal for funds, the Humanitarian Country Team, based on rapid assessments of priority needs conducted by the sectors/clusters, prepares a Flash Appeal within 7 days. The Flash Appeal is a strategic response plan, which provides a coordinated and concise overview of urgent life saving needs, also outlining the projected resources required to fund immediate response actions, and may include early recovery projects that can be implemented within the timeframe of the Appeal. Once the Flash Appeal has been delivered to the donor community, it is usually revised after a period of one month, at which time a clearer picture would exist with regard to the overall magnitude of the crisis and the specific needs of the affected population. The Flash Appeal is a process to identify needs and to coordinate a strategic response, a platform to publicise funding needs for specific projects and an inventory of relief and early recovery projects. A Flash Appeal may be developed into a Consolidated Appeal (CAP) if the emergency continues beyond six months.

Information management is a critical element of the coordination of humanitarian response, improving the capacity of stakeholders for decision-making and analysis. It is also imperative to ensure that other stakeholders are kept fully informed on a regular basis as to priority needs, response capacity, and gaps. The humanitarian community produces regular situation reports for this purpose, with input from sectors/clusters channeled through OCHA.

United Nations Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) is the humanitarian platform for facilitating the appropriate levels of humanitarian civil-military interaction and use of Military and Civil Defence Assets (MCDA) in humanitarian emergencies, according to internationally established guidelines. A UN-CMCoord Officer will facilitate information sharing, task division and planning with military components on behalf of the humanitarian community when foreign and/or domestic military forces are operating alongside humanitarian relief organisations. UN-CMCoord capacity can initially be deployed alongside UNDAC teams during the initial stages of an emergency. Where a large military component is present UN-CMCoord can be established through the deployment of a dedicated UN-CMCoord Officer.

### **3.2 Recovery**

During and immediately after a crisis, national actors and the international community primarily focus on meeting the immediate life-saving needs. But there is also a need to plan for sustainable recovery after a disaster, which includes the restoration of services, livelihoods opportunities and governance capacity. This planning and initiation of recovery activities early in a humanitarian setting is called early recovery. It is guided by development principles and aims to generate self sustaining, nationally owned, resilient processes for post crisis recovery. Humanitarian and development actors work together in early recovery to support nationally-led recovery efforts.

Early recovery has three broad aims:

- augment on-going emergency assistance operations by building on humanitarian programmes
- support spontaneous recovery initiatives by affected communities
- establish the foundations for long-term recovery

Usually, government structures/line ministries lead the coordination for early recovery. Within the UN system, the Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator has the lead responsibility for coordination the early recovery efforts of international organizations in cooperation with national actors. An early recovery advisor can be deployed within seven days from the global Cluster Working Group on Early Recovery (see chapter 2 above) to support the Resident and/or Humanitarian Coordinator in early recovery strategic planning and in forging inter-cluster linkages on early recovery-related issues. Early recovery is a multi-dimensional process and each of the sectors/clusters should ideally identify an early recovery focal point, who work together in a network of early recovery focal points to coordinate early recovery issues.

The Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) of UNDP coordinates the network of early recovery focal points and coordinates early recovery activities that are not covered by other clusters. BCPR and the network of early recovery focal points reach out to key development stakeholders such as the International Financial Institutions, Civil Society Organizations and NGOs and the private sector and include them in the planning and implementation of early recovery interventions.

Ideally within 4 weeks a joint early recovery needs assessment is conducted, which forms the basis for the development of a strategic framework for early recovery. On the basis of this strategic framework, the Early Recovery Network and the government develop an action plan, which should be implemented within 18 months.