

**International Conference on Disaster Relief and Management – International Cooperation  
and the Role of ICT**

**Alexandria – Egypt \* 14 – 17 April 2007**

**Abstract from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**

***“Humanitarian Coordination and Response in Disasters and Emergencies; an  
introduction by OCHA on main features, tools and mechanisms”***

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues and friends,

The title of this important conference refers to ‘disaster’, ‘relief and management’, ‘international cooperation’ and ‘the role of ICT’. My address to you today, will focus on a few of those issues, in particular how we can cooperate internationally to respond more effectively to crises and disasters, with a focus on the role of the United Nations and its system.

**The origins of and rationale for humanitarian coordination**

Since it first coordinated humanitarian relief operations in Europe following the devastation and massive displacement of people in the Second World War, the UN has been mandated by its member states to respond to disasters that are beyond the capacity of national authorities alone. Today, the Organization is a major provider of emergency relief and a catalyst for action by governments and relief agencies.

In the early 1990’s, during the Iraqi Kurdish displacement crisis, governments became acutely aware of the costs associated with a lack of coordination and decided to establish a UN

coordination office, which later became UN OCHA, the organization I work for. Over the years and further triggered by major international catastrophes such as the Rwandan genocide, the Balkan wars, and the Tsunami, the importance of solid coordination gained further recognition and started to also gradually encompass the private sector and other 'non-traditional' actors such as armed forces and civil defense organizations. It is basically now more commonly recognized that we have a better chance to succeed with and through technically sound and principled assistance if we collaborate with all actors involved looking better in the end. This is, however, easier said than done since coordination does not happen easily or organically. Instead, what we often need to rely on are systems, structures, standards, rules and regulations combined with an important dose of flexibility, realism and willingness by all actors to use all these tools actively and constructively.

In view of what I have just said, I want to use this address to you today to share a non-exhaustive overview of the main tools and services that are currently at the disposal of the international community for humanitarian action, disaster response and coordination. In addition, I will say a few words about the continued need to improve the way we collectively use these tools and actually collaborate through them with a special focus on this region.

The UN Department I work for, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (now commonly known as OCHA) is an office established by member states to provide leadership and coordinate the relief efforts of the international community. OCHA's Headquarters is in New York and the organization has staff working in 31 countries and territories across the globe. OCHA is funded by voluntary contributions<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> OCHA has a budget of US\$160 million, 90% of which comes from the UK, the US, the EU, Scandinavian countries, Canada and Switzerland.

Mandated through the 1991 General Assembly Resolution 46/182, OCHA's mission is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to alleviate suffering and advocate for the rights of people in need. OCHA also promotes preparedness, prevention and sustainable solutions.

When a disaster strikes, many actors (donors, NGOs, UN agencies) seek to respond simultaneously. OCHA works with all actors to provide a coherent framework within which everyone can contribute promptly and effectively to the overall effort. As part of the newly launched Humanitarian Reform Process, OCHA is now placing additional emphasis on partnership building, both in depth as well as scope and OCHA's new Regional Office for the Middle East in Dubai, which I am heading, helps to roll-out this agenda in this region.

Many people wonder why coordination is so important. In brief, coordination is essential to make sure we can help the most people, in the shortest amount of time, with the fewest delays with technically sound, principled and cost-effective humanitarian aid. In a crisis, every delay, every supply bottleneck, every misrouted truck, causes people to suffer longer.

The importance of coordination has grown in recent years. Today, there are more aid actors than ever before, particularly from the NGO sector. OCHA works with all aid organizations to provide a coherent framework in which everyone can contribute most effectively and efficiently. Coordination helps avoid waste and duplication of effort by leveraging the assets of all humanitarian partners.

I want to repeat here what I often say to humanitarian partners in the region and elsewhere and that is that the tools and mechanisms that we have in our virtual humanitarian 'toolbox' will only actually function properly with 'buy-in' from all concerned and if the stakeholders that use them are interested in operating and utilizing them in a positive and constructive manner. In other

words, we should not expect that the mechanisms and tools will do the coordination and partnership building for us. This may sound very obvious, but in OCHA we believe that coordination cannot be taken for granted and we often stress that coordination and partnerships at times actually entail hard work, investments and sometimes even certain sacrifices by all involved parties for the greater good and, at the end of the day, to deliver the best product to our beneficiaries.

This requires that we are all willing to invest time and energy and that we all realize that we have an obligation to look at the wider inter-agency picture as opposed to our own direct vested interest. Such an approach and mentality is not always easy to adopt and pursue, but essentially it is what is expected from us as humanitarian service providers by our beneficiaries and donors. We have a moral and operational obligation to look beyond our own turf and invest in the greater good.

### **International humanitarian partnerships**

In a globalized but at times also tense and politicized context where the United Nations, NGOs, charities and Governments in the Middle East and elsewhere share similar perception challenges, it is important that we strengthen humanitarian partnerships across regional geographical borders and cultural boundaries among countries, government, organizations, charities and other key stakeholders in and between various regions such as the Middle East and Europe. This effort would help address mutual bias and misunderstanding, further enhance the humanitarian efforts to reach affected communities and have more transparent and accountable humanitarian aid.

Our shared belief in humanitarian values outweighs any political and cultural differences. Compassion has no borders, and suffering carries no passport. Humanitarianism is about

acknowledging our common humanity. It is a universal concept that applies to all people at all times, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, politics, religion or culture. Humanitarianism is premised on the belief that human life has one and the same value, regardless if one lives in Cairo or Los Angeles or Calcutta, Riyadh or Rotterdam. Humanitarians believe aid should be provided impartially, according to need alone, not according to creed, politics, nationality, race, religion, media attention or any other criteria.

I should perhaps stress again that there appears to be continued room for improvement in terms of how aid providers from the 'western world' on the one hand and the Arab-Muslim world on the other work together. We increasingly find ourselves working side-by-side in places such as Darfur, Somalia, Iraq, the earthquake stricken mountains of northern Pakistan, Banda Aceh and Kosovo, but work remains to be done in terms of further improving our collective coordination efforts. In other words, we need to not only work side-by-side, but also hand-in-hand. Our view is that this can be best done through internationally recognized and mandated modalities which are there for all aid agencies and assistance actors and are often driven and managed by these same entities.

### **Mechanisms for response and coordination**

At this juncture, I want to say a few words about the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, or IASC, which remains the main global body for decision-making on humanitarian emergencies and related matters, bringing together UN organizations, the Red Cross/Crescent Movement and three large NGO umbrella organizations. At HQ-level, the IASC is chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Sir John Holmes who also serves as UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Chief of OCHA. It is important to know however that the IASC also meets at various levels in the field and I want to reiterate here today that aid responders from the region should not hesitate to engage with the IASC and its processes. I stress this as we often find that

coordination meetings in the field are not adequately reflective of the very diverse international humanitarian community. This issue, i.e. the need for greater diversity and partnership building, is further promoted through the Humanitarian Reform Process which was adopted by the IASC in 2005 and this increasingly leads to humanitarian decision-making in broader Humanitarian Community Partnership Teams as opposed to more restricted UN Country Teams.

Again, by working together, we will build a stronger, more representative and universally accepted and legitimized humanitarian community. Partnerships will propagate mutual support and due visibility to volunteer work, humanitarian response and charitable work.

In most complex emergency and large natural disaster settings around the globe one can find OCHA offices that support the UN Resident or Humanitarian Coordinator and national authorities in the domains of humanitarian coordination, policy-making, advocacy and information management.

All actors deploying to these types of operational theatres are encouraged to touch base with OCHA, to share information on projects and programs, to gather information on what others are doing in the various sectors or geographical locations, to find out when joint assessment missions, general coordination or cluster group meetings take place and to obtain more information on issues such as access and conditions in the field, Civil-Military Coordination and other OCHA or inter-agency field products and tools such as:

- the reception centre and On-Site Operations and Coordination Centre (OSOCC) in earthquake and other natural disaster situations;
- the Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC);
- the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) through which the UN and its NGO partners coordinate and appeal for funding.

Information-management and other practical response tools are central to OCHA's mission. The organization manages platforms to exchange time-critical information such as Reliefweb & Hewsweb. OCHA also offers information and coordination services through increasingly innovative ICT means, such as the well-known and frequently visited humanitarian website Reliefweb ([www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int)) , the Virtual On-Site Operations and Coordination Centre (V-OSOCC), and the Global Disaster Alert Coordination System (GDACS) which sends text message alerts about new disasters.

### **Funding flows and donor coordination**

It remains commonplace in many sectors to think of humanitarian assistance as a Western enterprise. Yet, this region has historically played a prominent role in charitable and humanitarian work, for example in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan or more recently in Lebanon. More needs to be done though to ensure adequate recognition of the important role played by this region in the humanitarian field. It has been suggested that post 9/11 we are living in an increasingly polarized world. If this is indeed the case, then it's more important than ever to reflect that aid is a universal pursuit. If we do this right and together, we will help collectively address the fear amongst some that we are heading towards a 'clash of civilizations' and clarify that at most what we are up against is a 'clash of mutual ignorance'.

A recent study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) found that certain donors not belonging to the Disaster Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, including for example the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, gave up to twelve percent of total humanitarian aid between 1999 and 2004 with its influence particularly prominent in spheres where these non-DAC donors concentrate attention such as North Korea and the occupied Palestinian territory.

OCHA would welcome strengthened collaboration among DAC and non-DAC donors as part of a common effort to strive towards a humanitarian aid system where donors collectively respond impartially on the basis of needs, where aid becomes less of a lottery where some win but most lose out and with enhanced attention for so-called forgotten emergencies.

Greater complementarity with – and participation within - the multilateral system could help bring about both enhanced recognition and additional benefits to those being assisted. Also, formally reporting on contributions made, in cash or in kind, enables the United Nations to ensure greater visibility for these, through the public information and advocacy efforts that are routinely undertaken in the context of disasters and emergencies. In this vein, at a more practical level, OCHA is very much eager to better record and reflect the generous contributions by all member states, charities, Red Cross/Crescent Societies and NGOs. The main mechanism in this respect is OCHA's Financial Tracking System or FTS (<http://www.Reliefweb.int/fts>). The FTS is a global, real-time database of humanitarian aid, managed by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It covers funding through the Consolidated Appeals Process as well as that outside appeals (incl. NGO funding, bilateral aid, in-kind aid, and private donations to the extent reported). It includes details on donor and recipient countries, implementing organizations, and the aid sector. The FTS serves to improve resource allocation decisions by indicating to what extent populations in crisis receive humanitarian aid, and in what proportion to needs. All FTS data are provided by donors or recipient organizations.

OCHA's FTS is only driven by a desire within the humanitarian and donor communities to have a complete picture of all available assistance. By highlighting who does what where and which sector or country needs funding urgently, we aim to work towards an equitable, well-coordinated and coherent form of global humanitarian action. In addition, we want all partners to understand that the FTS offers an excellent opportunity to obtain official recognition and additional

international public acknowledgement through a widely used UN - mechanism. OCHA has started work on FTS with various Gulf Governments as well as Red Crescent Societies and progress is encouraging.

### **OCHA in the MENA Region**

Since 2005, OCHA has a new Middle East Regional Office in Dubai. One of the main functions of this office will be the classic OCHA task to help improve capacity of national counterparts and the UN system in the Middle East, North Africa, Iran and Afghanistan within the domain of natural disaster and emergency preparedness and response. Furthermore, we are working hard to enhance engagement of Arab states with multi-lateral disaster response and donor coordination tools and mechanisms. We do this as we are convinced that member states from this region can help make these systems stronger and more representative, can help set the international humanitarian agenda and of course we think that these countries should be fully able to benefit from services provided by the UN and its agencies. Although this component of our work program is still relatively new, we are happy to note that with various countries in the region we are making excellent progress in terms of engagement with OCHA-administered tools and services such as UNDAC, INSARAG, the CERF, and the ODSG.

In addition, the OCHA Dubai office works on the strengthening of humanitarian partnerships and networks in the region. This component is essentially a pre-requisite for the successful execution of our other regular functions and duties and it would not only help address mutual bias and misunderstanding and further enhance humanitarian efforts, but will also help generating much needed additional publicity in the Middle East on the UN's positive role by promoting the value of its humanitarian activities.

Having nearly arrived at the end of this address, I want to just quickly highlight one more 'partnership' issue that I have been having on my mind for some time: in trying to understand the challenges for enhanced cooperation with the humanitarian scene in the Arab world, it is important to note that certain countries within the region have very few of their nationals working within what can be called mainstream international assistance actors. This trend occurs despite their interest to become more actively engaged within these structures through human resources or otherwise. Under-representation, in my view, leads to decreased opportunities to benefit from but also influence the international aid system. Against this backdrop, the new OCHA Regional Office in Dubai would be very interested to explore options with partners in the region to rectify this situation.

I think the Conference here in Alexandria is extremely fruitful and beneficial for our joint efforts to reach out to each other, enhance and foster understanding, and work towards further improvements in terms of joint disaster response and humanitarian action through a variety of mechanisms and tools, including the highly innovative ICT sector. I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to our colleagues of the ITU, our Egyptian hosts, and all other involved partners for the excellent facilitation and hospitable reception. I look forward to our discussions here in Alexandria and to staying in touch with all of you. Obviously I remain at your disposal for questions or comments in relation to what I have touched upon today.

Thank you very much.