MODULE 2

The humanitarian system: Roles, responsibilities and coordination

PART 1: FACT SHEET

The fact sheet is the first of four parts contained in this module. It provides an overview of the humanitarian system, and discusses how the actors and processes involved are coordinated in emergency situations. Detailed technical information is covered in Part 2. Words in italics are defined in the glossary.

What is the international humanitarian system?

The international 'humanitarian system' includes a wide range of organisations, agency groupings and inter-agency processes that all combine to enable international humanitarian assistance to be channelled to those locations and peoples in need of it. However, there is no formal 'humanitarian system' as such; it is a term commonly used to capture the diversity of actors and mechanisms that contribute to the humanitarian effort.

A wide range of organisations are often included in reference to 'the humanitarian system', including United Nations (UN) agencies, the International Red Cross Movement, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donor agencies. These organisations are guided by certain *humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality* which arise from international humanitarian law (IHL):

Humanity. "The right to receive humanitarian assistance, and to offer it, is a fundamental humanitarian principle, which should be enjoyed by all citizens of all countries."

Impartiality. "Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone."

Independence. "Humanitarian aid is not a partisan or political act and should not be viewed as such. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint… Humanitarian NGOs shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy. Humanitarian NGOs are agencies which act independently from governments."

Neutrality. "Humanitarian assistance should be provided without engaging in hostilies or taking sides in controversies of a political, religious or ideological nature."

These humanitarian principles are not common to all agencies. For example, humanity, impartiality and independence are upheld by most whilst neutrality is claimed by the UN, Red Cross Movement and a small minority of NGOs only.

What is humanitarian coordination?

Whatever the context of an emergency, and whatever the specific mix of actors involved, there is always going to be a need for some level of coordination in order to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the humanitarian effort. Co-ordination is thus a means to creating an enabling environment where independent organisations can collaborate as necessary according to the specific context. In order to create this enabling environment, it is helpful to have some general guidance and generic procedures, and these are described in this module. However, much will depend on the specific situation of the emergency. In each case, specific difficulties will have to be overcome in order to reach those in greatest need. Overcoming these difficulties requires contextually-appropriate judgements to be made by those responding. Thus, the role of international co-ordination mechanisms is about creating the environment where those judgements can be made.

Who is responsible for humanitarian coordination?

Ultimate responsibility for the provision (and coordination) of relief rests with the authority controlling the territory affected by the disaster, be it a national government or occupying power. This is a fundamental principle of humanitarian action, yet one which is often undervalued or even undermined during early stages of response. It needs to be recognised at all times, even in situations where that responsibility has been delegated, or assumed, by other actors.

Where the government cannot or will not undertake this responsibility, then the UN has a responsibility to intervene. A Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) is then designated to lead and coordinate humanitarian efforts.

Coordination Processes, Mechanisms and Tools

The Cluster Approach

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 the main sectors. At the country level, the aim is to ensure a more coherent and effective response by mobilising agencies to respond strategically across all key sectors.

The Nutrition Cluster's lead agency is UNICEF. The Global Nutrition Cluster Coordination Team focus on coordination, capacity building, emergency preparedness, assessment, monitoring, surveillance and response triggers and supplies. There are also Country Nutrition Cluster Coordinators, working with national and international partners on agreed priorities such as joint assessments, emergency preparedness and improving coverage of nutrition programmes.

Funding Mechanisms for Humanitarian Response

There are two main funding mechanisms for response to an emergency:

Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)

The CAP is a tool to help plan, coordinate, fund, implement and monitor aid responses to emergencies. The CAP is used to solicit donor support, including 'Consolidated Appeals' or 'Flash Appeals' for urgent needs in the short-term. Critics of the CAP argue that it is a UN-focused fundraising mechanism. Appeals are often regarded as being inflated and therefore the CAP often fails to receive full funding from international donors.

Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)

The CERF is a grant facility with up to US$450 million. It has 3 primary objectives:- Promote early action and response to reduce loss of life; Enhance response to time-critical requirements; and Strengthen core elements of humanitarian response in underfunded crisis. Food and nutrition programmes have received the largest slice, 35% of CERF funds.

Sphere Standards on Coordination

The Sphere Handbook places a great deal of emphasis on coordination – both inter-agency and inter-sectoral coordination. Every technical chapter has references to coordination, and these are underscored by one of the Core Standards presented at the beginning of the Handbook:-

Sphere Core Standard 2: Co-ordination and Collaboration

Humanitarian response is planned and implemented in coordination with the relevant authorities, humanitarian agencies and civil society organisations engaged in impartial humanitarian action, working together for maximum efficiency, coverage and effectiveness.

The 'Principles of Partnership'

Five basic principles were endorsed by UN and non-UN humanitarian actors to support efforts to address common challenges. These are: Equality, Transparency, Result-orientated approach, Responsibility and Complementarity.

Collaborative Groupings within the Humanitarian System

The United Nations

The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) is a high level position in the UN. The ERC is responsible for oversight of all emergencies requiring UN humanitarian assistance, and acts as the central focal point for Governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental relief activities. The ERC is the head of OCHA (the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). OCHA is responsible for coordinating the UN's response to (large) complex emergencies and natural disasters.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

Chaired by the ERC, the IASC is an inter-agency forum established in 1992 for coordination, policy development and decision-making. The IASC aims to ensure a coherent inter-agency response to complex emergencies and natural or environmental disasters. The IASC comprises the main UN agencies and other actors involved in humanitarian assistance.

Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) Initiative

Launched in 2003, the GHD initiative includes 37 representatives of donor organisations. By establishing principles and good practice of humanitarian donorship, the GHD can be seen as an example of donor coordination. It provides a framework to guide official humanitarian aid and a mechanism for encouraging greater donor accountability.

United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN)

The UN's SCN is neither an operational nor a humanitarian body, but is a forum to harmonise the food and nutrition policy of the UN. The SCN convenes a Working Group on Nutrition in Emergencies and supports several publications, including the NICS Report (Nutrition Information in Crisis Situations)*.

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* http://www.unscn.org/en/publications/nics/

Roles and Responsibilities of some Specific Actors

UN Agencies

The main UN actors involved in nutrition in emergencies are:

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- World Food Programme (WFP)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- World Health Organization (WHO)
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

Each of these supports a range of nutrition-related activities in emergencies. Many of them also have memoranda of understanding (MoU) to help clarify their specific roles and responsibilities – such as the MoU between WFP and UNHCR, or that between WFP and UNICEF.

Donors

The European Union and ECHO

Since the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in December 2009, the European Union has been undergoing important changes, including within the Commission. The Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection functions have been merged into a new Directorate General – The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Office (ECHO). Whether and how this amalgamation affects ECHO's humanitarian mission remains to be seen.

USAID and OFDA

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provides economic, development and humanitarian assistance in support of the foreign policy goals of the United States. USAID houses the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA), which supports the coordination of USAID's democracy programmes, international disaster assistance, food aid (emergency and development), aid to manage and mitigate conflict, and volunteer programmes. Within DCHA is the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), which coordinates and provides relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction assistance.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are collectively known as The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (or more simply the Red Cross Movement). However, the three are independent bodies.

National Societies are found in almost every country. They act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own countries in the humanitarian field and provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes.

The IFRC is the world's largest humanitarian organisation, with 187 member National Societies, a Secretariat in Geneva and over 60 country delegations. It also includes tens of millions of volunteers world-wide. The role of the IFRC is to coordinate and direct international assistance to disasters in non-conflict situations, working primarily through National Societies.

The ICRC is mandated by the international community to be the guardian and promoter of international humanitarian law. The ICRC's humanitarian mission is: "to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance". ICRC has offices in around 80 countries with over 12,000 staff worldwide.

NGOs

There is no easy characterization of NGOs. The term encompasses a wide variety of agencies, with different missions, ethical frameworks, competencies and approaches to emergencies.

Military

It has become increasingly common for humanitarian agencies to be operating in contexts in which international military are also deployed. High-profile conflicts have seen humanitarian language being used to justify international military intervention. Also, there has been a trend of military carrying out projects that would normally be regarded as the work of humanitarian agencies. This has emerged as a critical area of humanitarian policy, concerned with clarifying the interface between military and aid actors.

Private Companies

The private sector has played an increasingly important role in humanitarian action – not only as contracted agents for specific goods and services, but also as actors with the logistical reach and timely positioning for early humanitarian response.

Key messages

1. Humanitarian coordination is about delivering assistance in a cohesive and effective manner in order to save lives and reduce suffering among those affected.

2. Responsibility for coordination of humanitarian relief rests with the authority controlling the affected territory, be it a national government or occupying power.

3. When external support is required, the UN mobilises and coordinates the international humanitarian system.

4. The international humanitarian system comprises UN agencies, NGOs, the Red Cross Movement and donors guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and, for some, neutrality.

5. The Humanitarian Coordinator is responsible for coordination amongst these various actors, potentially in support of the affected Government's role.

6. The IASC Cluster Approach, which includes the Nutrition Cluster, is one important coordination process that can be enacted in an emergency.

7. Donor governments, through the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative are striving to improve their accountability and effectiveness in humanitarian response.

8. The increasing role of the military is viewed by some as compromising the humanitarian imperative and humanitarian principles while others see the increasing role of the military as necessary and even desirable.