## Second Secretary of the Local Embassy of a Donor State

# Lavinia Steffke



*"That's the added value of the sitrep, it gives me the details if I don't have time to go to the meetings."*

**LAVINIA IS A CAREER DIPLOMAT** on her second posting abroad. In her embassy there are only 20 staff, so everybody has a wide mandate. She covers the country where the embassy is located as well as three other adjacent countries. She is not a country-specialist, nor an expert in humanitarian emergencies, which are only part of her job.

She sends regular reports to her Ministry; to write them she relies on a limited number of printed/electronic sources, meetings, and informal conversation with colleagues from other embassies and international organizations. Her reports contain updates on the situation in the ground and recommendations for funding when appropriate, but all funding decisions are taken at the Ministry headquarters in the capital.

The majority of the Ministry's humanitarian aid/development budget is allocated at the beginning of the financial year, and there isn't much left for emergencies.
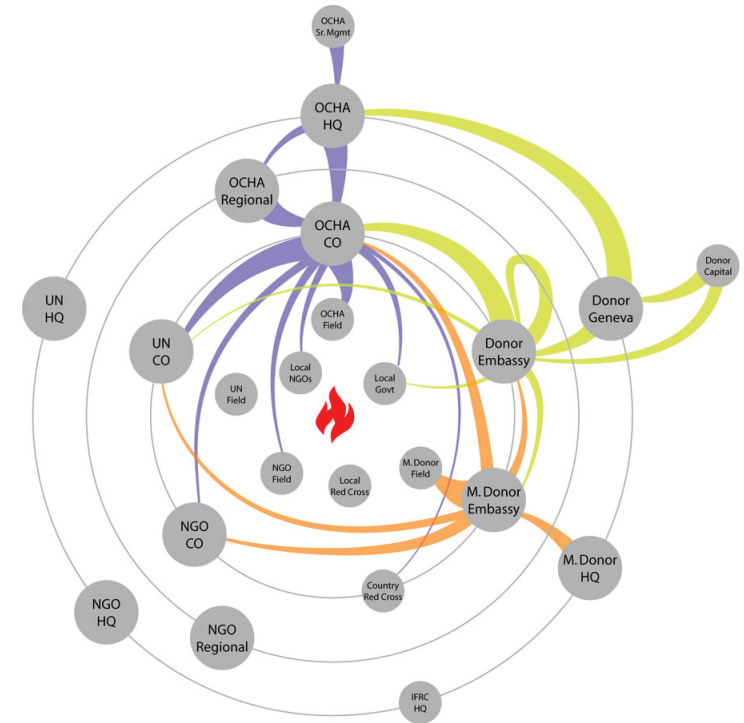
**WOULD LIKE**
— shorter sitreps
— a standard template across countries
— recap from FTS, or easy link to it
— reliably know when to expect a sitrep and how to sign up to receive one

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**GOALS**
— Get acquainted quickly with the general character of emergencies
— Inform her HQ about decisions regarding humanitarian crises
— Find out what other donors are doing, in order to suggest behaviors aligned with the rest of the international community
— Identify funding opportunities in an emergency that her government can "sell" to the public opinion of her country
— Understand when a crisis moves from response to recovery, and when it's "finished"
— Track the funding that her country provides to the international community, Red Cross, and various NGOs, making sure that her government is not double— funding the same projects
— Avoid looking uninformed to her HQ and foreign community colleagues, or unaligned with everyone else
— She talks on the phone with her HQ as soon as a crisis breaks out, but she needs to send an official, written report within 36 hours

**FRUSTRATIONS & CHALLENGES**
— She is on a slow satellite Internet connection, and if a sitrep is in PDF format, she deletes it without reading
— She is not interested in the details of relief operations; however, she occasionally uses sitreps to double— check proposals that she gets from NGOs and see if they are feasible
— She reads sitreps from several different countries, and never knows what to expect in terms of format and information
— She would like to have easy access to information about donations from her and other states; she knows that it is all available online through the FTS, but it is information she feels should go with the crisis details
— Humanitarian emergencies are not her specialty
— She doesn't speak the local language
— She doesn't have contact with OCHA staff beyond official meetings
— She doesn't have any budget autonomy

**OCHA SITREPS**
— She receives OCHA sitreps because she inherited them from her predecessor, but doesn't know how to manage her subscription
— OCHA sitreps are her first point of reference, because they give a snapshot of the situation rather than focusing on a specific area, and sometimes have information on access and security
— She appreciates having an official, non— controversial report, and considers OCHA to be a credible source of humanitarian information.

**OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION**
— Official host government reports, when available
— IFRC sitreps
— Reports and funding requests from Country A  NGOs active in the host country
— Informal sources such as colleagues, expats, etc.

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**Lavinia Steffke**

## SCENARIO 1

A sudden crisis breaks out in the country where she is posted, and the Country A embassy convenes a meeting to update the staff on what is happening. At this time, there is no specific information about the humanitarian situation, and very little is known about the magnitude of the crisis. Lavinia calls her colleagues at headquarters and updates them, then goes to ReliefWeb and news websites to see if she can find more detailed information. She begins writing her report to HQ, and eagerly awaits the IFRC and OCHA sitreps. When she sees them in her mailbox, she quickly translates the main parts to incorporate in her report, and sends it out.

## SCENARIO 2

It's 3 days into the crisis, and her government is pressing her to report information and recommendations to allow it to decide how to intervene financially. Her government supports CAP, a couple of international NGOs, and country A's NGOs active in the country. It is also an important direct donor to the Central American Republic, and it's important to avoid double— funding. She is looking at the OCHA report to see what are unmet needs that would fit the little available budget that her country has. Before she sends out her report, she also goes to a donor meeting to see what other countries are doing. Her third report in the crisis goes to HQ on the 5th day of the crisis, and includes her recommendations for funding.

## SCENARIO 3

It is now the end of the second week of the crisis, and her government has finalized its financial commitments to respond to the crisis. After sending a daily report for most of these 2 weeks, she decreases the frequency to twice a week, and scans rather than reads OCHA sitreps. She keeps an eye on what kind of recovery projects are implemented, to see if the ones that she has recommended are proceeding, but most importantly she is waiting to hear when the crisis has moved to a manageable level so that she can send weekly or biweekly updates to headquarters.

# International NGO Information/Press Officer (In the Field)

## Sue White



*"I like OCHA sitreps, but I don't read them – I go to them when I need to research something quickly."*

**SUE WHITE IS THE INFORMATION AND PRESS OFFICER FOR AN INTERNATIONAL NGO**, whose main focus is development. Now in her mid-thirties, Sue has lived in Africa for most of her working life: after spending a year abroad in Country X during university, she went back to work for a small NGO after graduating. Since then, she has moved to a neighboring country, and changed organization twice. Her main job is as a press officer, but her colleagues often ask for her help in writing the organization's internal sitreps. When an emergency breaks, she becomes to focal point for communications from the field to headquarters, and she has to issue regular press releases. She is also one of the contact points for OCHA, since it's easier to reach her than her colleagues who work in projects.

**WOULD LIKE**
— shorter sitreps
— a standard template to submit information to OCHA
— her organization to be mentioned in sitreps more often



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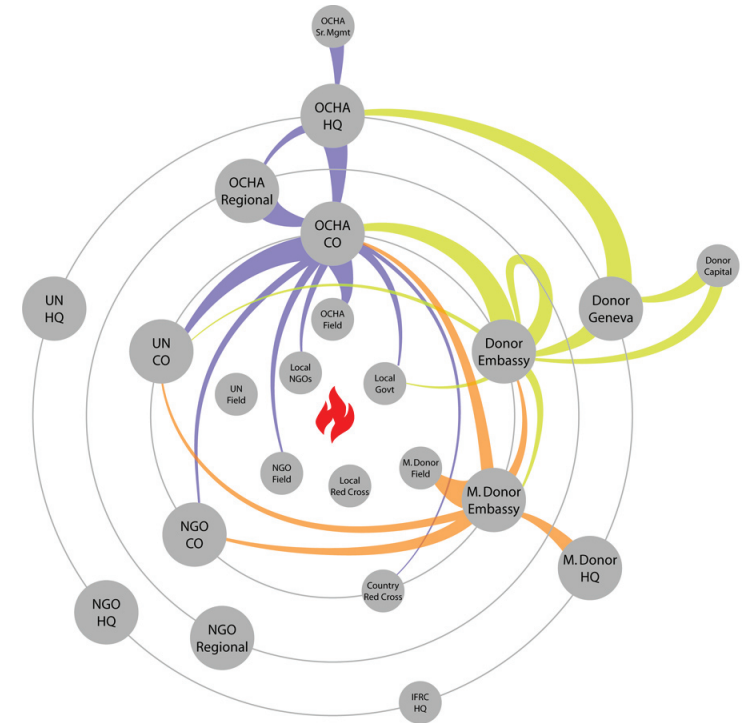
**GOALS**
— Triangulate the information she gets from other sources, and see what other organizations are doing
— Get background information about the crisis that she can use on her internal sitreps
— Get her organization mentioned in sitreps
— Avoid any extra work to give OCHA information

**FRUSTRATIONS & CHALLENGES**
— Her workload doubles during emergencies, so she doesn't have time for anything that is not her own organization's priority
— She doesn't know what kind of information OCHA needs exactly
— Her organization is part of several clusters, but information about its activity never seem to make it into the cluster reports for OCHA
— She feels that often the information exchange with OCHA is one—way – she gives but never gets back

**OCHA SITREPS**
— She receives sitreps by email, and she checks ReliefWeb if she needs more information for her press releases
— She skims sitreps, and looks for information about access and security
— Nobody in her organization relies on sitreps to make operational decisions
— She considers sitreps biased toward UN agencies

**OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION**
— Colleagues in the field, and other NGOs
— Meetings and personal contacts she has developed as press officer
— Printed and online sources about the country, including informal ones such as blogs

**International NGO Information/Press Officer (In the Field)**

**Sue White**

## SCENARIO 1

It's the third day after an earthquake has hit Country X, and Sue, after being on the phone and on email non-stop with her organization's HQ, and on formal and informal meetings around town, needs to compile an internal sitrep, as well as a press release that HQ will release. She has to chase her program and emergency response colleagues to get data about her organization's response, and doesn't have time to find background information on the country and on the international community response. She finds most of the information she needs on OCHA sitreps, and she adapts it for both her purposes.

## SCENARIO 2

A week into the crisis, things are still hectic. HQ hasn't decided yet what is the organization's financial commitment toward the emergency, and keeps on asking for more information. Program managers are impossible to find, as they are out organizing relief and intervention. Sue has several emails and phone messages from OCHA asking for information about her organization's activities, but this is not part of her priorities: the organization has sufficient fundings, and visibility in OCHA sitreps is not an important issue. At a meeting, she bumps into the OCHA IO, and she has to promise to send some information asap. She does so in the evening, from home, cutting and pasting from other reports, and hoping that this is what OCHA wants.

# Ashwin Jayden

*"People always expect the sitrep to be something other than what it is."*

**ASHWIN JAYDEN IS AN INFORMATION OFFICER** at the OCHA Country Y Field Office. He used to work in a local NGO as program officer, and met OCHA staff at coordination meetings. After a recent emergency, OCHA found itself short on staff, so hired Ashwin to write sitreps. He has very good local contacts, and knows his way around the country politics, but is not an experienced writer. He asked for a template to follow, and was given a variety of formats used by different offices, so he ended up creating his own from various elements of the existing ones. Ashwin is not clear about who he is writing for, and what kind of information they need – he only knows that despite all his field contacts, it is very hard to get anyone to give him information in a timely manner. He has a ready-made mailing list for sitreps on his computer, but doesn't know who's in the list; if he wants to make sure people receive them, he cc's them manually.

**WOULD LIKE**

— a standard template that gives him enough guidance on expectations, but not too many constraints
— training
— more power to edit and prioritize information he receives
— to write 'no new information' when he doesn't get updates from agencies
— to avoid listing every chicken and tent delivered
— to get information understandable by non—specialists

**GOALS**

— get suitable information from actors in the field promptly and without spending half of his time chasing it
— make writing sitreps less painful, although he isn't sure if and how this is possible
— avoid the templates and guidelines developed by HQ, because his fit better the needs of Country Y's emergencies
— streamline and accelerate the bureaucracy around sitreps (e.g. clearance)
— to have maps and graphs like other OCHA field offices with more resources

**FRUSTRATIONS & CHALLENGES**

— he spends too much time trying to collect information and make sense of it
— he is the first person people call to complain that their organizations are not in sitreps, but the last person they call to provide information
— he is often stuck between UN agencies and NGOs, especially as far as clusters are concerned
— he is not sure how to include political analysis or potentially sensitive information
— everybody asks for analysis, but nobody specifies exactly what kind of analysis
— he is held responsible for the quality of information in sitreps, but if he edits anything that clusters send him, they will complain to no end
— even when he knows what needs and priorities in the field are, he doesn't know how to communicate this information in a prioritized manner without offending operative agencies

**OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

— Formal and informal meetings in the field
— Clusters and NGOs, but only if he chases after them
— Personal contacts outside the international community
— Local press, websites, tv, etc…
— Local government