Situation Reports at OCHA, 2009

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Executive Summary

This document is a follow up of our May 2008 report to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on the state of sitreps. It focuses primarily on the perspectives of stakeholders who were under-represented in the first phase of our research: donors, cluster members, and OCHA field staff.

In late July and early August 2008, we visited OCHA's offices in Geneva and Nairobi. We interviewed 15 OCHA staff and 22 participants from donor agencies, cluster lead organizations, and NGOs.

As in the earlier part of our research, our interviews focused on (1) how OCHA sitreps are perceived by both creators and users, (2) what processes are involved in producing and distributing OCHA sitreps, particularly how these processes differ in the field as compared to headquarters, and (3) what modifications to the process and document format might allow sitreps to better fulfill their role within OCHA's mission. Moreover, we explored the role of clusters in relation to OCHA sitreps, and asked non-OCHA interviewees about the role they felt OCHA and its sitreps should play in humanitarian emergencies.

Summary of Findings & Recommendations

FINDINGS: SITREP PURPOSE

- Most interviewees saw sitreps as a useful "point of reference," providing a concise overview but rarely serving as a primary basis for decision making.

- Both small donors and NGOs rely on OCHA sitreps for numbers that are official and citable. These participants also mentioned the importance of information on security and humanitarian access.

- Major donors, especially high-ranking officials at the field level, see little value in OCHA sitreps when they can get more up-to-date and forthright information from their personal network.

- Almost all interviewees identified a summary of unmet needs, organized by sector, as the most important information in the sitrep.

- Most participants wanted unmet needs to include clear priorities, but there was no consensus on OCHA's role in setting these priorities.

- Participants from cluster lead organizations supported the use of a standard template for sharing inputs for the OCHA sitrep.

- Many participants felt that a mention in the OCHA sitrep could attract funding, but donors reported they did not consider sitreps a significant factor in their funding decisions.

FINDINGS: AUDIENCE WISH LIST

- The template of the OCHA sitrep should be standard across countries and emergencies.

- Sitrep distribution mechanisms should provide easy ways to subscribe or unsubscribe.

- Information on response activities should always be given in the context of needs and impact.

- OCHA must ensure the inclusion of non-UN actors, including the local government.

- The sitrep should be concise!

- Sitreps should include maps and visual information.

FINDINGS: INFORMATION DOMAIN

- Participants agree that OCHA should report on "unmet humanitarian needs," but there was little consensus on the limits of this definition.

- Participants were split on whether OCHA should include political analysis in situation reports; in general, NGOs and small donors supported including this analysis, while major donors and cluster lead agencies did not.

- The role of OCHA headquarters and regional offices in supporting field-level sitrep production is sometimes confused in practice.

- There is a tension between OCHA's role as a "clearinghouse" for information from the clusters and the need for analysis and editorial control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a standard template organized by cluster, working with field staff to ensure that it supports field level work.

- OCHA should attempt to work with cluster lead agencies to establish a standard template and process for sharing information for the sitrep.

- Redesign the OCHA sitrep distribution mechanisms to allow recipients and OCHA reporting officers more control over subscriptions.

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"It's hard to say if one template could serve all purposes in all emergencies. But there should be some points that are always covered: executive summary at the beginning, information on national and international response..."
Donor, HQ

"My experience with OCHA is that if they send you guidelines, then they consider them signed conventions! I'm weary of guidelines and templates, because they're HQ-driven, not for us in the field. When we develop them for ourselves, they are different."
OCHA staff, Field

Introduction

In March 2008, our team at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information began working with OCHA to investigate the role of OCHA sitreps in humanitarian response. We interviewed OCHA staff in New York and in a number of field offices, as well as representatives of key stakeholders including donors and NGOs. Our research findings suggested that sitreps are seen as valuable information products that should represent the public humanitarian consensus about an emergency. However, the lack of explicit guidelines and formats for sitreps and the ad hoc processes around their production and release cause a certain degree of anxiety and confusion among OCHA staff and frustration among sitrep recipients.

The first phase of our research ended in May 2008 with a report that summarized our findings and suggested a set of recommendations to improve situation reporting.[1] During the summer of 2008, we continued our research and interviewed staff from OCHA field offices, donor agencies, and NGOs, whose viewpoints we felt were under-represented in our earlier research.

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[1] The 2008 report and annexes can be downloaded here: http://groups.ischool.berkeley.edu/sitrep/dl/BerkeleySitrepReport.pdf http://groups.ischool.berkeley.edu/sitrep/dl/BerkeleySitrepReportAnnexes.pdf

Research Methodology

In July 2008 we visited Geneva, where we interviewed three OCHA staff, four donor representatives and officers from four cluster lead agencies. These interviews were primarily individual, in-person conversations, but also included two roundtables with several participants and three phone interviews. We then visited Nairobi, where we interviewed 12 OCHA staff from both regional and country offices, five donor representatives, five cluster leads and four NGO staff. Because the location of interviewees (field or HQ) and their role (donor, NGO or OCHA) are particularly important to understanding their comments, quotes taken from interviews identify the participant by role and location (e.g., "OCHA staff, HQ", or "Donor, Field").

We did not talk to representatives from all groups who were mentioned by OCHA staff as potentially important constituencies for sitreps, missing, for example, participants from the media, local governments and think tanks. However, our previous findings suggest that OCHA sitreps suffer from a lack of focus, partly due to the desire to serve audiences that have very different goals, and we believe that OCHA will be best served by developing content and formats that are most useful to a core audience of humanitarian actors.

This report concludes the second part of our project. Our findings were presented to a group of OCHA staff in a workshop in New York on October 6, 2008. Together with the findings from the first phase of our research, they provided the foundation for a revised sitrep template and accompanying guidelines and procedures, now being put into practice throughout OCHA.

"It's one source of information, but we have our own diplomatic posts in most of the countries and they are the ones… who identify the main priorities."
Donor, HQ

"That's what we look for in the OCHA sitrep: we want a broader overview than what we receive from our partners and missions abroad."
Donor, HQ

"On the basis of the situation reports that we have, we can decide that… at least we need more information."
Cluster Lead, HQ

Findings

Our second round of interviews confirmed the main findings of our previous research: There is significant confusion around the purpose and audience of OCHA sitreps; the most useful content for recipients is consolidated information about humanitarian needs, response, and gaps; and recipients feel that OCHA sitreps should represent the public consensus about an emergency situation. In this section we refine a number of points made in our May 2008 report, but do not attempt to reiterate our previous findings.

The Purpose of Sitreps

We revisited the question of the purpose of a sitrep, and found that most recipients see them as ideally filling the role of a "one-stop shop" or "overview," but almost never a primary basis for decision making. Our Nairobi interviews helped to highlight the differences in how different organizations view and use OCHA sitreps. In general, our interviews indicated that the smaller the OCHA sitrep recipient's organization (as in the case of small donors and local NGOs), or the farther the sitrep recipient is from the field (as in the case of regional and headquarters offices), the more useful OCHA sitreps are.

- Donors at the headquarters level and smaller donors in the field found the information in an OCHA sitrep to be very useful to their work. "[The sitrep] forms the basis of my report to the ministry… especially if I haven't made it to coordination meetings or haven't met people on ground" (Small Donor, Field). This is especially true in the early days of an emergency, or when donors don't have access to a particular region.

- Major donors or large organizations have a network of people they call upon to get the information they need to perform their jobs. The sitrep may be a "point of reference" from which to triangulate reports. "For someone like me, it's not terribly interesting… I don't think a single one of my… colleagues has read an OCHA report since they've been here" (Major Donor, Field).

- The information that people in larger organizations rely on to make decisions is often not information that OCHA could make public because of its politically sensitive nature. But the public nature of OCHA sitreps is critical for other purposes. Many donors and NGOs value the sitrep as an official, publicly citable source. The public status of a sitrep is also seen as critical for the purposes of coordination. "Things go better when there's common information, a common viewpoint, even when it's wrong" (Major Donor [HQ or Field?]).

- A number of participants pointed to implicit functions of the OCHA sitrep. For example, one donor suggested that the presence or absence of coordination meetings in the sitrep might be an indication of how well coordination is working. One OCHA officer suggested that the sitrep might signal the level of humanitarian access allowed by the local government, even when this is politically infeasible to report explicitly.

In summary, with the exception of major donors at the field level, interviewees felt that the sitrep was useful, even though they clearly used it in many different ways. While every recipient would rather the report be tailored to their specific use, it makes sense for OCHA to produce a solid "generalist" document with a core set

of information—primarily needs, response, and gaps—that can serve a range of functions, recognizing that a sitrep will never form the sole basis for critical decisions.

Visibility & Funding

"I always look for my own stuff, to see if [my agency] is there. If it is, then I look at who else is there; if not, then I call OCHA to complain."
Cluster Lead, HQ

There is a perception amongst many of our participants that appearing in an OCHA sitrep could give an organization valuable visibility, especially with funders. For some information providers, there is a strong feeling that they deserve to be mentioned and recognized. Beyond pragmatic self interest, outlining which organizations are involved in the response has the potential to help coordination at a field level: "As a humanitarian actor, I want to know what others are doing, so I am not duplicating, so I can dovetail with others" (Cluster Lead, Field). It can also provide an incentive to share information with OCHA.

"Everyone says, 'A report, I don't want to be left out' — it's a waste of energy."
Donor, HQ

In May 2008 we wrote that the donors we talked to did not rely on OCHA sitreps for funding decisions. All donors whom we interviewed in Nairobi and Geneva in Summer 2008, large and small, confirmed this observation. Smaller donors might use sitreps to see what other donors are doing so there is no overlap, and, in some cases, use sitreps to decide who *not* to fund: "If I see [a particular donor] playing a big role, we won't fund that sector" (Donor, HQ). Overall, small donors are mostly looking for the "big picture," including information about access and security, and are less interested in the details of who is doing what.

The problem of humanitarian agencies pushing for increased visibility is not likely to go away, even if there is no direct link to increased funding. While the option of mentioning no names at all could solve the problem, it would do so at some cost to coordination, information sharing, and accuracy. The best route may be to set clear guidelines about when specific agencies are mentioned, and make sure all information providers are aware of them. Furthermore, as many interviewees pointed out, it is important to mention not only UN humanitarian organizations.

Snapshot vs. Cumulative Information

Participants were split on the question of whether information in the sitrep should be a snapshot of the reporting period or a running cumulative description of the emergency. OCHA field staff felt that adding too much history and background was problematic, because it is hard to keep track of the situation as it evolves, and because it adds to the length of sitreps. Some donors specifically asked for cumulative information, noting that sitreps are currently inconsistent in how much background they provide. This seems to be an impossibly fine line to walk. OCHA may want to consider whether the sitrep document could be reserved for "new news" only and provide another supplementary document for further background information.

Distribution Issues

Our first report highlighted a number of problems and possible solutions related to the distribution of sitreps. These issues bear repeating as the same distribution issues were brought up again:

- No one seems to know how the distribution lists for sitreps function. Not a single sitrep recipient we talked to knew how to get on or off the sitrep mailing lists.

"How much history should we put in? Well, since the glaciers left…"
Cluster Lead, Field

"[The sitrep is] not reporting cumulative numbers, often it's just a snapshot, and you need to pull data every week to make your own chart."
Donor, HQ

- More worrisome, a number of OCHA field staff are not aware that desk officers in New York distribute OCHA sitreps through headquarters mailing lists that are different from field mailing lists.
- As we mentioned in May, many people assume that ReliefWeb is the authoritative source for sitreps, and that ReliefWeb staff is responsible for OCHA sitrep content.

It is clear from the prevalence of these issues that OCHA needs to undertake a review of its current distribution mechanisms and find ways to make them easier for both staff and recipients to use.

Reactions to the Idea of a Template

In our May report, we noted that there is a strong desire for a sitrep template among OCHA HQ staff, as well as among sitrep recipients. The reactions of OCHA field officers were more ambiguous. While there were a number of people in favor of the idea, others were very concerned that it would create more work for already overworked reporting and information officers, that it would constrain the type of information that can be put in a sitrep, and that it would push out important information that does not fit the template.

In this round of interviews, we explored further what different constituencies thought of a common sitrep format, and confirmed our previous findings. Most reactions have been positive, particularly from donors. However, OCHA field staff tends to value independence and flexibility: "It's true, we resist standardization, because sometimes it lowers the quality of a good product to suit it to different audiences rather than your specific context" (OCHA Staff, Field). Oftentimes the

experience of the staff on a project reflected their attitude towards a template. Those who were newly assigned to writing a particular kind of OCHA report were eager to try something that might simplify their information gathering and reporting practices and give them guidance on what readers expected. On the other hand, reporting and information officers who had been working in a particular office for a long time, and who had spent a lot of time developing the most effective method of getting information from their contacts, were understandably resistant to the idea of a template.

We believe that this resistance is not always about the template itself but rather about how the template is developed and delivered. Previous attempts at creating common formats have been headquarters-driven, and were felt as insensible to the situation in the field, or as too constraining, as expressed by this field staff: "I think [a template that field offices can customize] would be a great idea… I think a common format would be extremely useful. One of my concerns, almost say fears, is the level of detail…" (OCHA Staff, Field).

Templates are about power: who controls how the story is told. "If you come out with a template, you are limiting us. Maybe what we need to know is, how do you write that report, it's up to individual style rather than a tool" (OCHA Staff, Field). Ultimately, the field should know the story and it is up to headquarters to facilitate the telling of it.

Best & Worst Practices

Asked to identify best and worst practices in existing sitreps, readers came up with a broad range of answers, but there were some common themes:

Sitreps Template:
participatory design, rather than a format imposed from HQ, is essential to create an effective document that will be used in the field.

- The most appreciated aspects of a sitrep are highlights, organization of information by clusters, and information about the security situation.
- Short sitreps are preferred to longer ones. Some participants specified no more than 2-3 pages.
- Most recipients consider the current frequency appropriate.

Worst practices mentioned by most interviewees included:

- A tendency to focus on specifics, especially details of the response, rather than the big picture.
- Too much focus on the UN to the detriment of local government and NGOs response.
- Inconsistency among sitreps issued by different field offices, lack of standards, and length were also mentioned as common problems.

Findings: Conclusions

In May, we suggested that clarifying the goals of sitreps would simplify the work of sitrep writers and provide a consistent information product for the audiences. This round of interviews confirmed that recipients expect a concise document with a good overview, and not a lot of operational details. Sitreps should be consistent across offices and emergencies so that readers know what to expect and where to find the specific information they need. In order to ensure a consistent product, guidelines and training are a necessary complement to a physical format.

Sitreps are seen as having explicit functions (providing an overview of the "official viewpoint," highlighting new concerns, summarizing needs-response-gaps and access/security information) as well as implicit ones (showing consensus, coordination, and access to the field—or lack of thereof).

Visibility in a sitrep is an incentive for actors in the field to provide information to OCHA, and OCHA staff is under pressure to list single projects. Grouping such information in appendixes to sitreps may be a good solution to serve both worlds: a 1-2 page summary that gives an overview, and references to where more details about the response can be found.

As we suggested previously, a participatory sitrep redesign, involving both sitrep readers and sitrep writers at all levels, will ensure a product that makes the work of field staff easier, is closer to the actual needs of its stakeholders, and that will have a certain degree of buy-in so that people actually use it. If a few people in headquarters design a template without consulting others, it will reflect their perceptions and beliefs, not the people on the ground creating the sitreps, and it will not fulfill the needs of sitrep consumers.

OCHA Information Domain

What information is OCHA responsible for covering in a situation report? This section presents a number of difficult questions about what constitutes the "OCHA information domain."

Key questions

Answers to the following questions obviously defy a set of restrictive guidelines. However, it is useful to surface questions that OCHA reporting and information officers in the field face. We hope that these questions might further illuminate the challenges and limitations of sitrep.

DOES "HUMANITARIAN" REPORTING REQUIRE AN "ACTIVE" EMERGENCY?

In other words, how are the areas where OCHA should be engaged defined, and what are the boundaries between emergency relief and development interventions? This proved to be a much more significant issue for people closer to the field.

Most interviewees agreed that OCHA's role as a humanitarian actor was limited to unmet humanitarian needs. Beyond this, however, there were considerable disagreements over the limits of OCHA intervention because disaster recovery can have serious long-term impacts on development. "I don't want the OCHA sitreps to go into development land. But the early recovery stuff, where we can use humanitarian funding for longer-term development, that's still OCHA's mandate" (Donor, HQ). This is not an easy task: OCHA cannot merely describe recovery efforts in the moment, but they must also consider how recovery efforts impact long-term development. OCHA should look to the Early Recovery cluster for guidelines and best

practices on reporting activities that span "humanitarian" and "development" activities.

SHOULD OCHA PROVIDE POLITICAL ANALYSIS?

OCHA interviewees were evenly split as to whether OCHA has a responsibility in this area. Some thought that providing political analysis would make it difficult for OCHA to act as a humanitarian actor: "In terms of political analysis, in situation like the [Kenya post-election crisis], you can't not do it!" (OCHA Staff, Field). Others thought that it was difficult to actually represent the realities on the ground without some kind of political analysis. "Then we ask whether it should contain political analysis. It's a never-ending discussion. In principle, no, if it's a humanitarian situation, there's no need for political analysis, but if the humanitarian situation is triggered by political details, I'd like to have it in there" (OCHA Staff, Field).

Donors were also divided on the issue, and the division tended to reflect their respective sizes and resources of the donor organizations. Smaller donors are much more reliant on OCHA's reporting than larger ones. "[Should OCHA provide political analysis?] I really think yes. It would be useful. It is not their mandate. But understanding the political situation is useful for any agency working there" (Small Donor, Field). Other donors believe that using a "humanitarian lens" on political analysis is appropriate for OCHA, and would shield them from accusations of overstepping their bounds. "To what extent is OCHA mandated [to do] political analysis? It would probably be dangerous for OCHA, but we would like to see them use the humanitarian lens to look" (Major Donor, HQ).

"OCHA has to provide this: agreements and common definitions of beneficiaries, affected areas, time-frame, OCHA has to provide this service."
Cluster Lead, HQ

"Would love that, to have guidelines from OCHA, I've been advocating that for five years. However, it must be done in consultation with agencies."
Cluster Lead, HQ

Other major donors tend to have enough resources in the field to get political analysis without OCHA, and are not interested in seeing OCHA entering this area: "I don't think that we're looking to OCHA for political analysis—they are the coordinating body for humanitarian effort, so we are looking for what are the conditions, what is the response—not policy or political issues" (Major Donor, HQ).

WHAT SHOULD OCHA BE REPORTING ON BEYOND THE ACTIVITIES OF UN AGENCIES?
Donors, NGOs and some OCHA interviewees confirmed what we previously heard from NGO interviewees: OCHA tends to focus too much on the activities of UN agencies to the detriment of giving a complete picture of the humanitarian situation that includes other actors. "OCHA's mandate is to pull it all together, but what we see is actually a UN sitrep… their sitreps seem to assume the UN is the only player in a particular response. So they shortchange their mandate." (Major Donor, HQ).

There is clearly a tension between the manner in which OCHA works with clusters and the UN country team: the country team has generally had a strong relationship with most humanitarian actors on the ground while cluster leads may or may not involve non-UN humanitarian actors on the ground. Thus, since OCHA is forced to rely on cluster leads for information about their activities, the clusters might leave out information about non-UN actors that OCHA knows about from their country team.

Furthermore, some feel that the clusters don't cover everything that OCHA should be reporting on. "OCHA has to report on human rights, but there's no cluster on human rights... If you compile all the cluster reports, you're still not getting what you're looking for. More than just a compilation, OCHA has to do much more than that: report on security of staff, for example, which isn't reported by anybody else" (Cluster Lead, HQ).

WHAT KIND OF PRIORITY SETTING SHOULD OCHA DO?
Again, interviewees were split over whether OCHA should set priorities, and, if so, whether OCHA has the expertise needed. Some donors would like to see OCHA set priorities. "OCHA should do the analysis. They need to come up with a figure, rather than report on what others are doing. I've been pushing for this—coordinate, but also lead. Take the initiative. Lead with numbers and priorities" (Donor, HQ). Some thought that OCHA's big picture view could be useful in setting priorities by deciding on what to highlight in sitreps. "In the early days certain agencies are always going to get more coverage than others… You aren't able to include everything at all times, so OCHA will have to prioritize—being mindful of agencies' sensibilities" (Cluster Lead, HQ).

Larger donors felt that OCHA lacked the expertise to effectively set priorities. "OCHA doesn't have the weight, the technical capacity, or the ability to argue about the priorities" (Major Donor, Field).

Unsurprisingly, many cluster leads echoed this skepticism and tended to see OCHA as a vehicle for delivering their analysis. "I would caution against any kind of analysis in areas of competence of other agencies… General analysis, political situation, definitively, we look at OCHA for that, but no analysis of food or watsan" (Cluster Lead, HQ). In this view,

"If OCHA decided to make [the sitrep] into an advocacy tool, that could be effective… I would want it to cover the function of advocacy."
Cluster Lead, HQ

"I don't think OCHA should be involved in political analysis to guide humanitarian actors. We have other channels of information for our political decisions, we don't think OCHA sitreps should reflect political issues."
Major Donor, HQ

"OCHA has to report on human rights, but there's no cluster on human rights… If you compile all the cluster reports, you're still not getting what you're looking for."
Cluster Lead, HQ

OCHA's role is to provide general information, but no technical analysis. "A one-to-two pager from OCHA… cluster reports and a bit of topping and tailing. Clusters, you write the leads, and we put in the header" (Cluster Lead, HQ).

Other non-UN organizations see OCHA's role as facilitating priority setting, but not setting these priorities directly. "It's OCHA's role to provide a forum for clusters, and that's where priorities are set" (NGO, Field).

HOW SHOULD OCHA HANDLE SENSITIVE INFORMATION? "There are so many stories that I wanted to tell. But you can't say so many things" (OCHA Staff, Field). It is widely understood that OCHA can't report on many sensitive information (e.g., failings of the local government or the UN), but some non-OCHA interviewees doubted OCHA's credibility because at times sitreps do not report what is "really going on." As one interviewee put it, there's a "tradeoff between credibility and acceptability." There is clearly a fine line, and it is one for which there exists no blanket solution. Much of the work of those involved in the sitrep writing process is in how to deal with and synthesize sensitive information. In the May report, we suggested that clarifying how the process of getting sitrep cleared works would be a useful first step towards establishing what are the OCHA-wide policies on sensitive information.

Nearly all interviewees agreed that OCHA should highlight gaps and neglected areas in the response, but some noted that it could be hard to provide an unbiased perspective on humanitarian activity. "If OCHA says that donors are a key stakeholder, then

gaps won't be reported. Sitreps are to say how wonderful we all are, but if there are gaps, then we aren't wonderful" (Cluster Lead, HQ). Cluster leads are very aware that the OCHA sitrep might be seen as a report card on their activities, and explicitly stating needs might create the appearance that they are not fulfilling their humanitarian goals.

There's a tension between OCHA as a passive repository/clearinghouse and an active reporting body that sets priorities, does independent analysis, and sets information standards for clusters. While few of the cluster leads felt that OCHA should be providing analysis or priorities, they were extremely supportive of OCHA developing standards *in partnership with the clusters* for the kinds of information they wanted and in offering guidelines. "Something like a template with a series of prompts, which clusters are free to use as they see fit. That would help consistency and reliability, send a clear message that this is when and how you send the info" (Cluster Lead, HQ).

It is an impossible line to walk: how does OCHA get information from clusters in order to paint a clear picture of a situation for donors and others when OCHA is going to elucidate a situation that the clusters may not want to be visible? It is obviously not OCHA's mandate to enforce accountability from the clusters, yet this tension will persist, undermining the quality of the information in an OCHA sitrep and even OCHA's credibility, unless the incentives for clusters to report to OCHA are realigned.

Information Domain: Conclusions

All teams involved with reporting have to implicitly work out many of the dilemmas set forth above. It is a hard task, and represents the "skill" and "art" involved in writing a sitrep that no template or technical solution will solve.

OCHA's ability to provide political analysis or set priorities explicitly in a sitrep remains a thorny question. Is there a consistent way in which OCHA can gather information that allows those with obvious technical expertise to do most of the priority setting? Most interviewees agreed that providing guidelines and templates for information providers is within OCHA's mandate. However, much like creating templates for OCHA information and reporting officers, creating templates for clusters without the consultation and training of those who will be using the templates are destined to fail.

The regional offices and the field offices are sites where many of the tensions described above are daily issues. Every effort must be made to focus on reforming the sitrep and associated templates and tools in such a way that the people who are doing reporting work in the field feel that they are able to produce better information products more easily without hampering the skill involved in synthesizing information.

Recommendations

Some challenges may be amenable to technical approaches; others may not. Technology can enable cumulative report generation, links to deeper information, or making FTS information available to donors. Technology will not fix problems involved with the quality of the information in a sitrep, including or

deliberately leaving out sensitive or politically motivated information, and technology will not generate intelligent analysis.

We have a number of concrete recommendations for OCHA, many of which were discussed during the October 2008 workshop in New York.

Fix the distribution list

There are several technical solutions that allow simple mailing list management. The distribution list needs to be redesigned such that:

- Audience has control over subscriptions. Humanitarian actors can easily request or cancel a subscription to a specific sitrep or group of sitreps.

- Audience knows about all of the *public* distribution lists. This means that there should be a central place that all the different public distribution lists are available.

- OCHA staff can add or remove recipients, and see to whom they are sending sitreps.

- There must be clearer guidelines about which sitreps are sent through *ReliefWeb* and which are sent through separate mailing lists

- The role of *ReliefWeb* should be clear and explicit for both internal and external sitrep constituencies.

- In the long run, OCHA should consider technical solutions that have the potential to

implement access controls over documents such as sitreps. That means that parties at OCHA would be able to specify whether documents are available for distribution to the general public, or only a specific audience.

Involve the field in the creation of new templates

Our work in Nairobi importantly underscored the necessity of creating tools that *make the work of those in the field easier.* The success or failure of any efforts in this area will be decided by the implications for field staff. Thus, we advocate the following approach:

- Use an iterative draft/refinement process in order to create a document that is maximally useful to all parties. Constantly consult information and reporting officers, as well as donors about what works and does not work.

- Templates should allow for flexibility. Individual offices have deep expertise that templates should not constrain. There should be minimal requirements in a template document. However, even while what is required is minimal, the manner in which information is structured must be consistent across OCHA. Clear guidelines will aid those writing the report, without imposing extra work.

- It is sensible to pilot the outcome of a sitrep redesign with a "new" emergency where the reporting officers do not already have an established reporting practice.

Clarify the role of HQ and regional offices

Many functions such as map-making have been addressed at field level. We recommend considering which functions can be consolidated at headquarters and/or regional offices level, particularly translation services.

Templates for Clusters and NGOs

We recommend creating a template for clusters and possibly NGOs to provide information for OCHA sitreps. It could be a very simple needs/response/gap type of template. This is a critical first step in two ways. First, it is a critical first step toward OCHA being able to manage information that allows for better analysis. Second, it is a way to decrease the burden of reporting, clarify expectations, and simplify communication for those working in the field. Information and reporting officers should work with lead agencies to figure out how to best create this template. Given the tenuous relationship that many NGOs feel with the cluster system, it is essential that OCHA continue to gather information from NGOs, regardless of whether they are part of a cluster or not. NGOs are wary that their activities are underreported, and contributing to OCHA directly would give them more buy-in. We recommend offering alternatives to NGOs who do not feel they are being appropriately represented by their cluster reports by providing them predictable, standard ways of giving OCHA information about their activities

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