
Situation Reports at OCHA

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes our research into the challenges and opportunities for situation reporting at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Our work investigated (1) how current OCHA sitreps are perceived by both creators and users, (2) what processes are involved in producing and distributing OCHA sitreps, and (3) what modifications to the process and document format might allow sitreps to better fulfill their role within OCHA's mission.

We conducted interviews and roundtable discussions with OCHA staff in New York, Geneva, and field offices; NGO staff; and representatives from donor agencies. We supplemented these conversations with several iterations of document analysis over a varied body of OCHA situation reports. Our findings underscore the problematic nature of sitreps at OCHA: often a source of significant confusion, written without clear goals or guidelines for unspecified audiences whose needs are not fully understood.

This document presents an overview of our findings and offers recommendations for improvements to the process and sitrep format. While some of our suggestions are for simple, immediate actions, others will entail a lengthier process of revision and require OCHA to consider longer-term strategic decisions.

Summary of Findings & Recommendations

FINDINGS

- There is considerable confusion among both internal staff and external recipients around what constitutes a “sitrep” and what to expect from the document.
- The primary function of OCHA sitreps seems to be to represent the public humanitarian consensus about an emergency, but the sitrep production process and most sitrep content does not reflect this ideal.
- To meet their recipients’ needs, OCHA’s sitreps must be able to deliver a consolidated view of needs, response, and gaps in response.
- This goal, however, appears to be hampered by poor information flow at the field level and a document format that often obscures important overview and trend information.
- A lack of clear sourcing in sitreps both reduces the incentive for agencies in the field to share information and reduces the value of the document to recipients.
- Both internal and external stakeholders are confused as to how sitrep distribution actually works – who is on the list, how the list is managed, and how to get on or off.
- Though there were strong objections to a standard template being imposed by headquarters, many interviewees saw the benefits a common guidelines could offer, as long as they did not compromise the flexibility needed in the field.

IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reserve the title “sitrep” for reports triggered by specific events and establish standard names and frequencies for periodic updates.
- Create a style guide for sitreps, requiring basic elements including a consistent header and a table of contact information.
- Offer guidelines on how to properly source and contextualize reported information.
- Give desk officers control over sitrep distribution lists and create clear ways for recipients to choose which reports they wish to receive.
- Further research is needed to fully understand the makeup and needs of the current sitrep audience.

TOWARD AN IMPROVED SYSTEM

- The social and institutional barriers to technology adoption at OCHA argue strongly for a user-centered design approach.
- A phased approach to developing a new system might include a comprehensive needs analysis, the rollout of an improved Word template, and a pilot technical implementation.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR OCHA

- Should OCHA sitreps include political analysis?
- Should OCHA sitreps support operational decisions?
- Who constitutes the priority audiences for sitreps?
- How can OCHA improve information flow at the field level?
- What is OCHA’s plan for staff training in reporting?

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Introduction

In the fall of 2007, our team at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information began investigating the potential for improved situation reporting in disaster response, focusing on internal sitreps within NGOs. This preliminary work, done in the context of classes in the school's graduate program, looked at similarities and differences in the process and the format of sitreps in different NGOs, assessing the potential for a general sitrep data format that could be used by multiple NGOs and facilitate the sharing of information in the field. In this initial phase, we interviewed NGO staff, analyzed a limited number of sitreps, and tested different research methodologies.

Several months into our project, we came in contact with information management staff at OCHA, who had identified sitreps as a key product in need of revision following the Information Management Review. We saw a clear opportunity for collaboration, and an important chance for OCHA to take the lead in developing guidelines and standards for situation reporting in the humanitarian sector. In collaborating with OCHA, we investigated how its sitreps are perceived by both creators and recipients; what processes are involved in producing, distributing, and using OCHA sitreps; and what modifications could allow sitreps to better fulfill their role within OCHA's mission.

Methodology

Our research methods included a combination of interviews and document analysis. We visited OCHA in New York over the week of March 24, conducting two roundtable discussions, one with some 20 desk officers, and the other with OCHA's Information Advisory Group, including six people in New York and three by

teleconference from Geneva. We interviewed 39 individual staff members, 28 in person, the others by phone. We also interviewed 12 people from different humanitarian NGOs (four in person, eight over the phone, all interviewed on their experience as field staff). Finally, we conducted two roundtable discussions by phone with groups of institutional donor staff.

We supplemented the interviews with several document analyses, including one on a corpus of 101 documents, representing all the OCHA situation reports sent out by ReliefWeb between March 18 and April 25, 2008.

In this report, interviewees are identified with their participant number and a generic acronym (e.g. *P1*, *NGO* or *P15*, *OCHA*). An anonymized list of participants can be found in Annex 2. Quotes are either taken verbatim from transcription or reproduced from notes in the case of unrecorded interviews.

This version of our report is intended for the OCHA audience and thus we assume most readers know at least as much about sitreps and the internal workings of OCHA as we do. We have included annexes with more background on sitreps for non-OCHA readers.

This report concludes the first phase of our project, which was dedicated to an in-depth assessment of situation reports and of the needs of their users. We hope the second phase, which may take place during the summer and in the next academic year, will be dedicated to the design of a sitrep data model and a pilot implementation of an integrated system for situation reporting.

“Sitreps are a fundamentally confused document.”

P46, OCHA

“What exactly do you mean by ‘situation report’?”

Donor Roundtable 1

The State of Sitreps at OCHA

Situation reports at OCHA are the result of processes and formats that are often ad hoc, tailored to a specific emergency, written without clear goals or guidelines, and aimed at unspecified audiences whose needs are not fully understood. Any attempt to improve the process must begin with a clear picture of what happens now.

Sitrep Stakeholders

In the course of our interviews, we saw three basic “constituencies” emerge:

1. OCHA operational staff, who create and distribute sitreps: either by writing the initial documents (at the field or regional level), expanding and editing (regional or support offices), or adding the headquarters perspective and sending them out (desk officers). These interviewees bear the brunt of the sitrep process, and while recognizing problems in the process and format often expressed concern with changes that might be handed down from headquarters.

2. OCHA senior managers, who are primarily concerned with how sitreps fit within OCHA’s overall mission and are less involved with the details of gathering information. These interviewees were interested in the need for improvements in training and technology, and expressed concern with the ability of OCHA sitreps to establish a unique identity and added value.

3. Sitrep recipients, including external actors (donor governments, local governments of affected countries, the media, NGOs, and UN agencies in the field) and internal users (e.g. OCHA’s press officers, ReliefWeb

editors, and staff in other positions who use OCHA sitreps as input for their work). These recipients constitute a broad, diverse group, but the concerns they expressed were surprisingly homogeneous. In general, sitreps recipients are interested in seeing the bigger picture of humanitarian intervention, and in particular the trends, consolidated data, and gaps in the response effort. They also want to see more reliability in sitreps, in terms of content, format, and frequency.

Defining “Sitreps”

Perhaps the most telling example of the confusion around sitreps is the uncertainty, both within and outside OCHA, over what exactly constitutes an OCHA sitrep.

- Within OCHA, some people think sitreps are only documents issued when there is a particular emergency event: “When I think sitrep, I think urgent...” (P15, OCHA).
- Other OCHA staff refer to all the reports issued by their offices as sitreps (for example, P18, when asked to describe the last sitrep he had worked on, enumerated three different types of reports, including weekly and monthly documents; when asked if he considered them all to be “sitreps,” he answered an emphatic “yes”).
- The confusion within OCHA is mirrored by that of sitrep recipients. Participants in the Donor Roundtable 1, when asked if they thought of sitreps as a particular type of document, answered no, explaining that OCHA puts out multiple products that overlap, without any clarity about what each product offers.

“Often the information is only for the week – they are not reporting cumulative numbers, it is often just a snapshot, and you need to pull data every week to make your own chart.”

Donor Roundtable 1

- OCHA operational staff mentioned that it was always a judgment call whether to name something a situation report, and this seemed to cause some justified anxiety. A lack of clarity about the triggers and frequency of documents entitled “sitreps” causes confusion for both operational staff and recipients.
- Some—although not all—of our NGO interviewees, described sitreps as triggered by a specific event, more frequent at the beginning of an emergency and replaced by regular updates on the NGO’s activity as the emergency subsides.
- Although ReliefWeb sends out every report with the title “OCHA SitRep,” out of 101 documents in our sample only 29 actually used “situation report” in their title. On average, documents that call themselves sitreps are shorter than other documents and often focused on natural disasters.
- The document analysis shows that 33 out of 101 documents do not specify what time period they cover or when the next sitrep can be expected. Almost all of these reports deal with acute situations, where there are particularly high expectations on OCHA sitreps to convey the general picture while the situation is confused and in flux.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Making a clear decision about when to call a document a sitrep, and setting clear guidelines for the time period covered and the frequency of release, could help to reduce confusion and manage expectations both inside and outside of OCHA.

Category	Actual Name	# of docs
WEEKLY	weekly humanitarian news	5
	protection of civilians weekly report	5
	weekly bulletin	4
	humanitarian action weekly	4
	weekly situation report	2
	weekly note on emergencies	1
	weekly information bulletin	1
FORTNIGHTLY	situation humanitaire - rapport hebdomadaire	4
	fortnightly situation overview	3
	bulletin d'information hebdomadaire	3
MONTHLY	monthly situation report	1
	monthly cluster report	1
HUMANITARIAN	situation humanitaire	15
	humanitarian update	5
	humanitarian situation report	5
	humanitarian situation update	3
	humanitarian fact sheet	2
	humanitarian bulletin	1
	humanitarian overview	1
	humanitarian action snapshot report	1
	action humanitaire	1
	regional humanitarian update	1
VARIOUS	joint factsheet	1
	update on insecurity	1
	socio-economic fact sheet	1
	pastoralist voices	1
	protection of civilians summary data tables	1
	implementation of the agreement on movement and access	1
	ERF and NGO micro-grants	1

Alternate titles for sitreps, including how frequently each was used within the sample.

“Sitreps should be more of an analysis tool rather than a coordination tool.”

P43, OCHA

“It’s both things: information and coordination. That’s the big challenge.”

P22, OCHA

“We have to be able to feed the beast.”

P47, OCHA

“We looked at all the products OCHA puts out. We saw that there are often multiple products that overlap, with no clarity about what each product offers.”

Donor Roundtable 1

Function & Purpose

Related to the confusion around the sitrep title is a lack of common understanding of the purpose of the document. The primary function of OCHA sitreps seems to represent the public humanitarian consensus about an emergency, but the sitrep production process and most sitrep content does not reflect this ideal.

- Many interviewees agreed that OCHA sitreps should have the first official information available about humanitarian emergencies, in order to “help the humanitarian community establish a common understanding about what is going on” (P50, OCHA).
- Our document analysis and a number of our interviews indicate that sitreps haphazardly pursue multiple goals, including collecting information for analysis, facilitating coordination, and providing recognition for other actors in the field.
- A surprising number of our respondents, especially those in the field, saw the main purpose as “feed[ing] the beast at headquarters” (P46, OCHA) – a time-consuming task aiming at placating internal staff, with little sense of useful purpose.
- Few if any interviewees saw sitreps as supporting operational decision-making within OCHA.
- Many OCHA staff members cited providing donors with the information they needed to make funding decisions as one main purpose of sitreps.
- While our conversations with donors clearly indicate that they do look to OCHA sitreps for information, they do not seem to use sitreps as a primary basis for funding decisions:

“We never allocate money on the basis of OCHA sitreps; the information must be triangulated. It can point you in the right direction, it’s part of the picture...”

Donor Roundtable 2

- Contrary to what many OCHA staff seem to believe, donors are not looking for details about agency activities, since donors typically have their own direct relationship with actors in the field.
- Donor participants see OCHA as a publicly recognizable, citable source that should provide cumulative data on people affected, damage, the response, and the gaps in the response, especially in locations that are hard to reach. However, these are the areas in which OCHA’s sitreps are perceived to be weakest.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Clearly the document cannot both be brief (something everyone seems to want) and serve every recipient’s needs. The goals of the document should be decided with a clear understanding of what sitrep recipients, especially donors, are expecting. Clarifying these goals would simplify the work of creating sitreps and give recipients the consistent information they want from OCHA. Though donors may not base their funding choices on sitreps, OCHA can add tremendous value to the funding process by providing a reliable, consolidated view of the overall situation and response, especially in areas where donors do not have staff on the ground.

“[The cluster approach is] patchy; sometimes there is a disconnect between the cluster in place and the quality of information gathered.

Inclusiveness of non-UN actors should be greater in the cluster approach but it is not always the case.”

Donor Roundtable 2

“Before the clusters there were lots of meetings; after the clusters there were even more meetings.”

P11, NGO

Needs, Response, & Gaps in Context

The requirement for information on “needs-response-gaps” quickly became a mantra of our interviews, both within and outside OCHA: a good sitrep provides an overview of the *consolidated* needs, *consolidated* response, and *consolidated* gaps in response, all put in context. This is almost universally perceived as the *raison d’être* of an OCHA sitrep, but the document analysis showed a nearly total focus on the response that different organizations were carrying out, disconnected from any needs assessment, without context, and without consolidation.

Our analysis of the document sample suggests that the collection of data for sitreps is done backwards: it starts from the response, it rarely looks for existing gaps, it never looks at the needs. OCHA seems to be trapped in a Catch-22 situation: needs are based on assessment, and assessment is not OCHA’s responsibility. The establishment of clusters in 2005 was supposed to mitigate this situation: cluster leads are in charge of gathering assessment data from their participants, and OCHA, as the overall coordinator, can then consolidate cluster information. However, our research indicated that needs, response, and gaps are still poorly reported:

- There is no obvious difference in quality of data from sitreps that are organized by clusters and those that are not.
- NGO interviewees expressed significant skepticism and frustration toward clusters, which may reduce the effectiveness of the cluster system in gathering and consolidating NGO data.

- Sitreps are extremely narrative-driven, and even when they provide information about needs and gaps, they tend to do so in a way that is interwoven with the text and difficult to find unless one is reading the document closely.
- Another important weakness in the reporting of needs-response-gaps is the complete lack of historical data and trends. This is not helped by the static, unstructured format of sitreps. Some sitreps try to overcome the physical limitations of the format by referring to specific previous reports, but they are a minority.

THE BOTTOM LINE

OCHA’s sitreps must be able to deliver the consolidated view of needs, response, and gaps that both sitrep recipients and a number of OCHA staff feel constitute their primary purpose. This goal, however, appears to be hampered by poor information flow at the field level and a document format that often obscures important overview and trend information.

Sources of Information

Getting information is a matter of banging on doors, and this is true at all levels – for operational staff, NGO staff, and donors. The benefits that sharing information with OCHA might offer to NGOs and other agencies in the field are unclear. OCHA staff often highlights how visibility is an incentive (“It’s about being visible. Donors want to see them [agencies active in the field].” P13, OCHA), but neither donors nor NGOs seem to agree:

“You mean does it matter if an NGO is highlighted? Generally no – it means they have funding and can operate. We’re really looking at gaps. We might say, oh, this looks great, but we know about NGO reputations based on our own institutional experiences.”

Donor Roundtable 1

- Both interviews and document analysis indicate that OCHA sitreps are often heavily focused on UN agencies: “OCHA’s mandate is to pull it all together, but what we see is in fact a UN sitrep. UN agencies are big players in terms of funding, but even if they are not, OCHA sitreps seem to assume that the UN is the only player in a particular response.” (Donor Roundtable 2)
- Internal and external sitrep users agree that the quality of the information put out by OCHA is not always reliable and not always useful. Donors and NGOs are unanimous in lamenting the inconsistent and sometimes contradictory sourcing of sitreps.
- The document analysis fully confirms the distrust expressed by sitreps users; typically, sitreps do not source the majority of the information they report, and when they do it tends to be bulk-sourced (i.e. all sources are listed in a single footnote, with no indication of who provided what information).

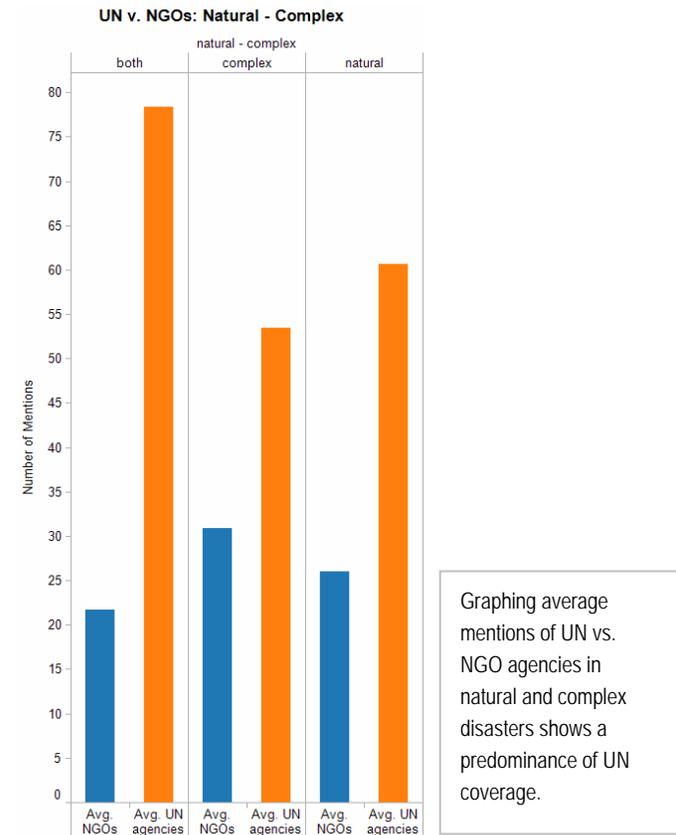
THE BOTTOM LINE

Providing sources for each piece of information in a sitrep is a simple way to significantly increase the document’s value for recipients. Sitreps should specify what data is verified and what is not, and cite sources

“I think OCHA should be more up front about their sourcing. If this is something coming from the ground, that’s different than something that comes from second and third-hand sources, and I felt that sometimes they weren’t being open about which was which.”

P9, NGO

for contradictory information, in order to help its readers understand and contextualize the data. Citing organizations that provide information can also act as an important incentive for other actors to share what they know.



“There’s all kinds of mailing lists on Lotus Notes that we use that are maintained by a small group of elves...I mean, I don’t who maintains them, but... that needs to be looked at.”

P15, OCHA

“You have to get on the mailing list, which is difficult – sometimes we need to get information on ReliefWeb, and it can be difficult to get the info and to get on the mailing list in a timely manner.”

Donor Roundtable 1

Audience & Distribution

Though OCHA sitreps exist to serve the needs of their audience, this audience has never been fully defined.

- Most OCHA interviewees identified the primary audience as donor agencies, followed by organizations in the field that need details about what is happening.
- The private sector in its potential capacity as donor was rarely mentioned, although one desk officer mentioned that “I get so many calls from the private sector to [see if they can] help” (P24, OCHA).
- Both internal and external stakeholders are confused as to how the actual distribution works – who is on the list, how the list is managed, and how to get on or off.
- Many people get around this problem by getting sitreps from ReliefWeb, which has the advantage of a relatively straight-forward sign-up process. However, ReliefWeb does not have every OCHA sitrep.
- ReliefWeb is often mistaken as the “owner” of sitreps, when it has no control over their content.
- A proliferation of ad hoc lists and Web postings makes it difficult to control what OCHA puts out.

THE BOTTOM LINE

OCHA needs to systematize and clarify the distribution mechanisms for sitreps so that OCHA staff know who receives the sitreps and can easily add or remove recipients, and potential audiences know how they can sign up. There is also a need for further research to identify the current makeup of the audience.

Template

Interviewees recognized an important tension between the need for a standard sitrep template and the need for flexibility at the field level.

- There is an almost universal objection among field staff to a template from headquarters being imposed in the field: “The standard may not meet the needs and hamper our ability” (P28, OCHA).
- This is due in part to a strong perception of the uniqueness of each disaster, and in part to a perception of headquarters as “out of touch.”
- However, it is not clear that there is an opposition to a standard template as such. Several interviewees expressed a desire for a common format, at least in terms of appearance (or “OCHA branding,” as several people put it).
- NGO interviewees who use standard templates already suggested that these have had important benefits: “People appreciate the template, because then they’re not recreating the wheel, they’re very clear about what they need to produce” (P8, NGO).
- Document analysis indicates that despite the perception that “each crisis is different” (P28, OCHA), there are already implicit standards for sitrep formats currently in use.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A common template can save time for writers and help clarify what information is expected. OCHA should draw on existing implicit standards to develop a common template for reporting, including strong participation and input from staff in the field and recognizing the problems strict, inflexible guidelines could cause.

Recommendations

In this section we outline our recommendations to help OCHA move forward with its sitrep process.

First, we offer a set of immediate, tactical recommendations to quickly implement a cohesive image and fix small but damaging problems. These recommendations are aimed at improving sitreps in their current incarnation as Word or PDF files, with the document as the “unit of information.”

Next, we suggest a potential roadmap for a user-centered design process that might address some of the social and organizational issues uncovered in our research.

Finally, we list strategic decisions OCHA should address about what sitreps are, what kind of information they contain, and whom they are aimed at. These are technology-independent decisions, in that they have to be made regardless of whether the output is a sitrep in the form of a Word document or a database-driven document-on-demand.

Immediate Recommendations

Our immediate recommendations are geared toward addressing, in the short term, some of the superficial confusion that has accumulated around sitreps. They focus on developing and distributing specific guidelines about different aspects of sitreps, and are likely to be welcomed by both internal and external stakeholders.

Despite the skepticism expressed by many interviewees about establishing a monolithic sitrep format, there is significant demand for clearer leadership on what is required. Developing guidelines around sitreps does not

mean imposing strict formats from headquarters to the field, nor does it mean additional burdens for field staff, and this should be emphasized when rolling new guidelines out. Standardizing sitreps can help people understand what they are doing and why, as well as helping end recipients distinguish sitreps from other products and know what to expect from each. Although this will require adjustments in current work practices in the short term, in the long term, consistent formats will mean that those writing sitreps will not have to reinvent the wheel in every office. It will also mean that OCHA personnel will gain institutional knowledge around the practice of creating sitreps that can be transferred to newer employees.

When there are countries or emergencies that do not fit the standard models, there should be room for as much flexibility as necessary, but with the onus on the field office to consider and justify why they need to deviate from the standards. The field will not be well-served by strict guidelines, but neither will they be well-served by a process that promotes ad hoc decisions, leading to the kind of confusion currently associated with sitreps.

The following are the main issues we feel can be addressed through guidelines in the short-term:

Decide what is a sitrep and what is NOT a sitrep: recognize and codify existing reporting practices in the field. Sitrep recipients have expressed the need for regular updates in ongoing crises, and many field offices are already providing them. However, these should be distinguished from actual “sitreps,” a title which should be reserved for event-triggered reports. Our document analysis suggests that this is already common practice.

“Let’s agree on a format and what kind of information is necessary. What should and shouldn’t be there? It could also help us gain a lot of time”

P24, OCHA

“Monthly, quarterly maps that show how things are going would also be useful.”

Donor Roundtable 1

“If there’s a corporate standard, people know what they can expect. Then they know how to use it. We definitely need a corporate definition of sitreps”

P22, OCHA

Making the distinction explicit would allow people to choose what kind of reporting they are looking for, and would make it clear when there is a sudden event in an ongoing emergency. If all the reports coming from, for example, Somalia are called sitreps, “reader fatigue” makes it likely that the report highlighting a real deterioration of the situation could be missed. For regular reports, using a standard title such as “Weekly Update” helps to set clear expectations for their period and frequency.

Create a style guide and style sheet, including graphics and branding rules that are standard across all offices. In particular:

- Settle on a single masthead for all situation reports. The variety collected from our document analysis is hard to justify, and extremely confusing for external audiences.
- Add a mandatory contact information box at the end of each report. Of the 101 documents in our sample, 27 were without contact information, leaving readers with no resource for further information and further compromising the professionalism and transparency of the report.

All information in a sitrep should be sourced, even if the source is OCHA or an anonymous contact. Providing a clear provenance for every piece of information will improve the transparency and reliability of the report, help to mitigate OCHA’s responsibility for politically sensitive assertions, and recognize the contributions of other actors, encouraging information sharing. If there are contradictory sources, cite them all and explain in the analysis why they might or might not

be credible. Some sitreps embed a link on the document to online sources when available, which is an unobtrusive and effective way to provide a source and a resource for further information.

When possible, focus on providing an overall picture of needs, response, and gaps. Though the deficiencies in this area may often be due to insufficient information, they may also be due to a lack of clear expectations. Currently, descriptions of the response predominate; setting forth guidelines suggesting that every description of relief efforts should be contextualized with an evaluation of the remaining need could help ensure that this information was included when available.

Give desk officers control over the sitrep distribution lists, including the ability to see who is on the list and add or remove new recipients. There should also be consistent, published procedures, country by country, on how to sign up to receive public sitreps. Donor staff in both roundtables expressed frustration with current distribution procedures and would like to be able to conveniently choose to receive sitreps for specific countries and emergencies. If technically feasible, recipients should have the option of receiving sitreps as plain text, as email attachments or Web access can cause problems in contexts of poor connectivity. As one interviewee who uses ReliefWeb for sitreps noted, “That’s less good in some of these places where internet access is very poor... If you’re working with a very slow dial-up connection, accessing sitreps on ReliefWeb can be really hard” (P9, NGO).

A Phased Approach

In addition to the immediate recommendations and long-term strategic questions we offer above, which consider the sitrep primarily as a static document, we propose an initial redesign process for moving beyond Word and PDF documents toward an integrated system of information collection and analysis.

The success or failure of a sitrep depends largely on how it is perceived by its recipients, rather than any objective functional criteria. This makes it a prime candidate for a user-centered design approach, in which design decisions are based on specific user needs and sitrep creators and recipients are continually consulted and engaged as participants in the design. The benefits of this approach include maintaining a clear focus on user needs, helping to ensure user buy-in throughout the process, and establishing metrics for success. By “users,” we mean any of the multitudinous stakeholders involved in the situation reporting process:

- the NGO and field staff who provide the data;
- the country and regional office staff who write the documents;
- the desk officers who receive, edit, and disseminate them;
- the diverse internal and external audiences who read sitreps and use them for decision-making, advocacy, or other purposes.

A focus on offering improvements to all these constituencies is key to ensuring success in a decentralized organization like OCHA, where in many cases staff must see a specific personal benefit in order

to adopt a new template, process, or technology.

The details of this process are outlined in detail in Annex 4. To summarize, it consists of three phases, each with specific processes and deliverables. These phases build on the research we have done so far and focus on identifying more clearly sitrep users and their information needs, prioritize them, and establish which benefits OCHA sitreps can offer to each user group, with appropriate metrics to measure them.

The analysis phase would provide the basis for a redesign of the sitrep format. This phase would include the development of a set of clear design documents representing a shared understanding of each type of user the system hopes to support, including a description of their needs and a prioritized approach to addressing them.

The format revision phase would prototype and define an improved static format based on end user needs and desires. While not the ultimate goal, solidifying a better static format for the sitrep document is an intermediate step that could offer real benefits, especially to recipients; form the basis for a standardized format that could be shared with other organizations; provide and test an example of what an integrated system should produce; and highlight those needs that a static document may not be able to address. In this phase, different prototypes are created, based on the user groups identified during the analysis phase, and iteratively tested. This phase would lead to a shared sitrep format and detailed guidelines, which can then be tested in different field offices to solicit further feedback and tested against the pre-established criteria for success.

“We try to identify what information is relevant, neutral, and will help governments and donors to take action.”

P35, OCHA

“We try to be very politically correct, especially with the [local] government. The government can be extremely sensitive.”

P18, OCHA

“In some sitreps, you are talking about governments, and they can be very soft on human rights, protection issues... Then we get pushback from the NGOs: ‘What’s up with OCHA and human rights?’”

P23, OCHA

The pilot implementation phase would provide a bridge between the document-based sitrep and a new database-driven interface that could integrate the process of sitrep creation with other OCHA systems. As noted by several OCHA interviewees and the IM Review, such a system could provide a better interface for authoring sitreps, facilitate faster and more accurate information sharing both inside and outside of OCHA, and disaggregate the information in each report to allow for easier analysis and custom reports.

However, such a project may also meet with resistance from staff in the field if it imposes constraints on their work or fails to demonstrably improve the process of reporting. Field staff may feel dubious of the benefits a new system could offer to their work, concerned about its reliability in critical situations, or threatened by technology perceived as shifting more power to headquarters. Without adoption at the field level, the benefits of an integrated system will be impossible to realize.

These considerations provide a strong argument for a flexible, iterative design process focused on the context and needs of staff in the field and engaging the participation of individuals in multiple country offices. Efforts should be made to find and address exceptions that test the new paradigm – for example, what benefits could a new system offer to offices like OPT, where established, successful reporting processes tackle unusual requirements? As outlined in Annex 4, techniques like participatory design workshops, iterative low-fidelity prototypes and field tests can help create a broad agreement and sense of ownership around the new system.

Strategic Decisions

The following questions represent important points of confusion over the identity of sitreps. These are hard decisions OCHA must address in order to move forward.

To what extent should political analysis be included in sitreps? Within OCHA, interviewees were divided. Some see sitreps as a place for “neutral” information about emergencies, while others believe that almost all emergency information is inherently political and that the political context can be an important element of the situation.

Most OCHA interviewees, especially at field level, were well aware that OCHA needs to remain on good terms with host governments, as work in the country depends on it. However, it can be a difficult balancing act between practical considerations, institutional role, and external expectations to choose how much political analysis to include. In countries where the political situation is particularly volatile, often “the very fact that there *is* a sitrep can be a problem” (P23, OCHA), because OCHA sitreps indicate the existence of an official emergency.

Donors are also divided about what kind of information they expect, with Donor Roundtable 1 stating explicitly that “we are looking for what are the conditions, what is the response – not policy or political issues. That’s not what our focus is, that’s not OCHA’s niche either,” whereas Donor Roundtable 2 took a more nuanced view: “To what extent is OCHA mandated to do political analysis about the protection of civilians? It would probably be dangerous for them to do, but we would like to see them use the humanitarian lens to look at these issues.”

During the first roundtable with OCHA desk officers, it was mentioned that one possible solution would be to divide political and humanitarian information, leaving the former to a UN sitrep and the latter to OCHA. In certain occasions, OCHA issues sitreps under the United Nations heading, but it is unclear to us whether this is left to ad hoc negotiations or whether there are specific guidelines. Our document sample included 17 documents issued as UN sitreps, although they had mostly been compiled by OCHA officers. While we are unsure about the full meaning and implications of this decision, a few interviewees expressed a great deal of frustration over it, and it seems important to establish guidelines as to when the UN header is used.

“Program staff in big NGOs sit at the same table and talk about coordination; by the time an OCHA sitrep is being written, tents are already going somewhere.”

P39, OCHA

To what extent should OCHA sitreps support operational decisions? Even though most parties agree on the answer, actual sitreps do not reflect this agreement. It seems clear, from both OCHA staff, and even more from NGO interviewees, that humanitarian actors in the field do not use sitreps for operational decision-making, rendering the granularity of information currently featured in sitreps unnecessary. The main ways to share information in the field are through coordination meetings and personal contacts. Donors at headquarters are even less interested in the details of interventions; they want to know trends, and whether there are gaps in the response. However, we are not clear about the role of donors in the field, e.g. embassies, and about how information is shared with them. Both NGOs and OCHA field staff mentioned that donor field staff can be important actors in post-emergency activities and may need detailed reports. This may have consequences in terms of granularity of information and of language used for sitreps.

Who is the audience? Although a clear understanding of the audience could provide a basis for many decisions about sitrep content and format, this question remains unclear. Clarifying and prioritizing the audiences for OCHA sitreps will help OCHA decide what information is needed, and more importantly, what value OCHA can add. It will also help sitrep writers to understand the goals of their work. Sitreps are often seen by field staff as an unwelcome requirement, with little understanding of their relevance or use to internal or external recipients.

How can OCHA improve the flow of information in the field? Although this question is largely out of scope for the research we have done, it is a fundamental requirement for improvements to the sitrep process. A better understanding of what information is needed will not help field staff if they are not able to rely on a robust, established network of contacts to provide clear, reliable information on a regular basis.

What is OCHA’s plan for training field staff in better reporting skills and the use of improved technical systems? Training is essential to executing any changes in the sitrep document on an organizational level. Minimally, OCHA needs to commit resources to training all staff to execute the immediate recommendations set forth above. We believe that most of the changes that we have suggested should make the work of those creating sitreps easier, but an email or Web page with guidelines for creating sitreps is unlikely to provide adequate support for staff in the field. If OCHA is committed to improving the sitrep process, there must be a clear allocation of resources for staff development.

What will the technical information infrastructure look like in five years? Although this document focuses on problems with current OCHA sitreps, it is important to note that the solutions to the issues outlined in this document do not lie strictly within OCHA. OCHA must look outward, and work with clusters, NGOs, and the technical community to create standards for information interoperability within existing institutional structures. Since OCHA is the key coordinator of information about humanitarian affairs, it must commit resources to develop and promote information standards with organizations throughout the humanitarian sector.

Conclusion

Sitreps are Dead: Long Live Sitreps!

An important goal of this project was to understand the shared practices and expectations around sitreps as a first step toward creating a common standard. However, we are compelled to ask: are sitreps still a useful document for OCHA?

New technologies have come to prominence in areas that used to be sitreps' exclusive domain; it is not unreasonable to think that sitreps may soon have outlived their usefulness. Information about needs and response could be sent out through fast, flexible media, such as text messages in the field and RSS updates from OCHA's websites. Information could be shared between offices and agencies through online collaboration tools such as wiki sites and Microsoft Groove. Public political and humanitarian analysis could be left to press releases and specialized reports. As one

interviewee argued: "Sitreps are a thing of the past. We need something new and sophisticated to talk to multiple audiences" (P23, OCHA).

This was not a widespread opinion. In fact, most interviewees, even when very negative towards the current sitrep and process, still believed that sitreps were a necessary part of OCHA's work. The interviewees in favor of changing the system spoke primarily in terms of technological improvements that would allow the production of "reports on demand" according to the audience preferences – a change which, while representing an important shift, still underscores the importance of a stand-alone report to the end recipient.

While OCHA sitreps serve a range of functions, one of the most important to come out of our interviews is their role as a common point of reference for the humanitarian community, a way to get a variety of emergency actors literally and figuratively on the same page. This important goal is one which may well be more effectively achieved by a static document than by flexible approaches like the disaggregated, reusable set of information envisioned by OCHA's Information Management Review, whose benefits are more evident in the context of trend analysis and operational decision-making. While these two visions of the sitrep are not incompatible – the same sitrep could be published in a static form and stored in a database as separate units of information – we believe that a clear, effective static document is an important prerequisite for further technical improvements. Despite advances in technology, the sitrep in its current form is still capable of playing an important role – one worth getting right as OCHA moves forward.

“From a historical perspective, it’s something that’s important; it’s a publication that sets the record, that certain things have been agreed upon. It’s a baseline for what the situation was at a certain time.”

P39, OCHA

A Changing Context

It is worth highlighting several global trends that will likely greatly impact OCHA's sitreps in the long term:

The development of shared standards for emergency information. Groups such as OASIS and W3C, both of which have tremendous influence in creating information standards in the technical community, are currently working on standards for emergency information interoperability. These standards will be adopted by software developers working in industry, academia and non-profits, as well as by local and national governments. Some are already in use, e.g. CAP (Common Alerting Protocol) and EDXL (Emergency Data exchange Language). If OCHA wishes to be interoperable with external organizations, it must consider now how it will adopt and participate in the creation of these standards.

The increasing role of non-institutional information gathering. The prevalence of mobile phones and robust networks is on the rise, even in the most remote corners of the world. A number of recent disasters, especially in areas with robust communications infrastructure, have made it clear that private actors, from companies to bloggers to ordinary individuals, have the ability to capture and disseminate information about emergency situations. These private sources of information may become an increasingly important basis for institutional decision-making. This trend raises two important questions for OCHA: First, what is the added value of an OCHA sitrep when there are many sources of information about a situation, and second, whether and how OCHA plans going to consolidate and manage information from non-institutional actors.

The rise of multimedia content. OCHA will increasingly need to consider management of photos, audio, and video information. OCHA has embraced maps as a key support for situation reporting, but other media may also provide useful ways to capture information for situation reporting. Multimedia information can be a powerful tool for documenting the emergency context and making persuasive arguments about gaps in the response.

Promises and Limitations of Technology

The field of humanitarian information management is changing dramatically. Beginning in the 1990s, there have been several initiatives to bring standardization and accountability to the humanitarian sector, including Humanitarian Reform, the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, the Emergency Capacity Building Project, and a variety of internal institutional efforts, including OCHA's IM Review. By systematizing emergency response, these initiatives offer the potential for organizations to better leverage modern information and communications technology in support of effective emergency relief.

If technical projects are to succeed, however, the systems they are intended to support must be effective. If the goals that OCHA wants to achieve with the information it gathers are not clarified, and if the process around information collection and analysis is faulty, providing a better interface and database-driven storage and retrieval will not make a better sitrep. It may even make it worse. Even OCHA offices with databases in place often do not report information that recipients deem useful. The most urgent problems lie in the process and in the strategic decisions around it, rather than in the technology.

There are a number of reasons why the promise of information technology has been difficult to realize in the general context of emergency relief, including significant social and organizational barriers to technology adoption. OCHA should keep these issues in mind as it considers investing in technical infrastructure:

- The decentralized, geographically dispersed nature of humanitarian organizations such as OCHA makes it difficult to implement a single solution across multiple offices based solely on executive decision. Especially in emergencies, individual choices and preferences often trump any kind of official requirements.
- Improved technical systems can, at best, help reduce the cost in time and effort of producing reports and sharing information. They will not be able to overcome deficiencies in information gathering or analysis, and will not provide incentives for staff unwilling to share information.
- Perhaps most importantly, the string of failed or mediocre technology implementations that seems common at a number of organizations, including OCHA, has left staff with a deep cynicism about the benefits of IT projects.

Though thorny, these problems are not intractable. They do, however, require an approach to technology implementation that draws heavily on user research for a rich understanding of the institutional issues that must be addressed. We hope that our research can make a contribution to this understanding.

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