

Humanitarian Operational Environment

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Introduction

The humanitarian operational environment is the one in which international and national aid organisations and commercial sector entities function and interact during emergencies. It is significantly different from any other operating environment. Activities involved in this environment are all targeted towards the delivery of humanitarian assistance in whatever form. There is no single organisation that is able to deliver this assistance adequately on its own, hence the need to coordinate and collaborate with other entities to achieve this objective. Humanitarian actors operating in this environment include:

- National and local governments.
- United Nations bodies.
- The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.
- National and international non-governmental organisations (NGO).
- Commercial companies.
- Military forces.
- Donor agencies.

To facilitate engagement between these various entities, inclusive and well-defined structures, known as 'clusters', were created. Accountable lead organisations for each cluster have been identified globally in various sectors.

The [cluster approach](#) facilitates efficient and economical operations where humanitarian actors are able to maximise their limited resources and demonstrate accountability. Therefore, clusters serve as a coordination mechanism for humanitarian organisations working in the same sector. The cluster approach will be further explained later in this chapter.

Humanitarian Principles

The principles of humanitarian practice aim to ensure the human rights of those affected by conflict or natural disaster are protected and provided the required protection and assistance, while at the same time minimising the potential negative impact or manipulation of such assistance and preparing for future disasters. Humanitarian practice includes the protection of civilians by meeting their basic needs for food, water, sanitation, shelter and health care; and assisting their return to normal lives and livelihoods. Humanitarian practice is guided by humanitarian law and a range of international standards and codes of conduct including:

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#).
- [Four Geneva Conventions of 12949 and additional protocols of 1977](#).
- [Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes](#).
- [Sphere Project Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#).

International humanitarian workers therefore abide by the following core humanitarian principles:

- **Humanity** – every individual's right to life with dignity and the duty on others to take steps to save lives and alleviate suffering.
- **Impartiality** – to act on the basis of need without discrimination.

- **Neutrality** – to act without preference for one group or another.
- **Independence** – to ensure the autonomy of humanitarian action from any other political, economic or military interests.

Organisations/Bodies in Emergency Environment

It is important that humanitarian logistics staff fully understand the environment in which they are operating and the roles of the various humanitarian organisations which may be involved.

- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)
- United Nations Operational Agencies
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
- UN Senior Representative and Coordinators
- National Government Authorities
- The Red Cross Movement
- Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)
- Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)
- Donor Agencies

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

The [Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\)](#) is a unique forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making involving United Nations and non-United Nations humanitarian partners. IASC is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. Under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the IASC develops humanitarian policies, agrees on a clear division of responsibility for the various aspects of humanitarian assistance, identifies and addresses gaps in response, and advocates for effective application of humanitarian principles.

The IASC consists of the heads (or designated representatives) of the United Nations operational agencies (i.e. FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHABITAT, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO) and humanitarian partners such as ICRC, ICVA, IFRC, InterAction, IOM, OHCHR, RSG on Human Rights of IDPs, SCHR, and the World Bank. The number of participating agencies has expanded since its inception in 1992. On the global level, the IASC meets formally twice a year and deliberates on issues brought to its attention by the ERC and by the IASC Working Group. The [Terms of Reference of the IASC](#) can be seen here.

United Nations Operational Agencies

In the United Nations system, a number of programmes, funds and specialised agencies are responsible for carrying out relief and recovery activities. These programmes, funds and specialised agencies are operational agencies with specific mandates and extensive humanitarian experience. Their activities include identifying detailed humanitarian needs through various assessments as well as designing and implementing relief programmes for disaster affected populations.

The structure of these programmes, funds and specialised agencies can be found in [United Nations Organisational Chart](#).

For more details on these programmes, funds, and specialised agencies, please click below links.

- [FAO](#) - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- [UNHABITAT](#) - United Nations Human Settlements Programme
- [UNHCR](#) - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- [WHO](#) - World Health Organization
- [WB](#) - World Bank
- [UNFPA](#) - United Nations Population Fund
- [UNICEF](#) - United Nations Children's Fund
- [UNDP](#) - United Nations Development Programme
- [WFP](#) - World Food Programme

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

The [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) is the arm of the United Nations Secretariat that is responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure coherent response to emergencies. OCHA also ensures there is a framework within which each actor can contribute to the overall response effort.

OCHA's mission is to mobilise and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies; advocate for the rights of people in need; promote preparedness and prevention; and facilitate sustainable solutions.

UN Senior Representative and Coordinators

Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG)

A Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) is appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General to act on his behalf in emergencies which are "complex or of exceptional magnitude". In practice, the appointment of an SRSG is normally reserved for those complex emergencies which require United Nations involvement in major political negotiations and/or when United Nations peacekeeping forces are deployed.

When a SRSG is appointed, he/she is recognized as having overall authority with regard to United Nations operations in the designated country. If heading a peacekeeping operation, the SRSG reports to the Secretary-General through the USG for peacekeeping operations, or if heading a political mission, is through the USG for political affairs.

A SRSG is also involved when an integrated mission is proposed for the planning, design and implementation of complex United Nations operations in post-conflict situations, and for linking the different dimensions of peace support operations. An Integrated Mission is one in which there is a shared vision among all United Nations actors as to the strategic objective of the United Nations presence at country level. Once an integrated mission has been established following a security council resolution, the SRSG will take the lead in the planning process in close cooperation with the Integrated Mission Task Force (IMTF).

Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)

The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) is the United Nations' Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and head of OCHA. The ERC is responsible for oversight of all emergencies requiring United Nations humanitarian assistance and leads IASC acting as the central focal point for governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental relief activities. The Global Cluster lead agencies are accountable to the ERC in ensuring better coordination and effective humanitarian response through cluster activities.

Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)

When a complex emergency occurs, the UN ERC, on behalf of the Secretary-General and after consultation with the IASC, will designate a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). The HC serves as the representative of the ERC (and therefore of OCHA) in the country/region concerned. The HC is responsible for coordinating the humanitarian activities of the Humanitarian Country Team. He/she will provide liaison between the Humanitarian Country Team and the ERC. TORs for HCs [can be found here](#).

The IASC may assign the functions of HC to the Resident Coordinator for the country. This is a normal practice but other options are also available, i.e. appointing a separate HC, or appointing a Regional HC when an emergency involves more than one country. In such instances RCs/HCs of countries in the region should work as a team under the guidance of the Regional HC.

The Cluster leads at the country level are accountable to the HC for their cluster lead responsibilities.

Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)

In April 2006, the IASC Principals endorsed the Action Plan on "Strengthening the Humanitarian Coordination System" which provided, inter alia, that all RCs/HCs must have "broad-based country teams developed [and] in place by November 2006."

A broad-based country team, established through a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), aims to improve humanitarian coordination and policy making as well as ensuring real and equal partnership. Chaired by a HC, the team consists of UN agencies, NGO partners, and the Red Cross Movement operating in that country. Non members in the HCT are invited on an ad hoc basis for the purpose of assisting in discussion and taking action on humanitarian issues.

Resident Coordinator (RC)

A UN Resident Coordinator (RC) is a designated representative of the UN Secretary-General. A RC leads the UN Country Team and reports to the UN Secretary-General through the Chair of the UN Development Group (UNDG).

In each country office, the UNDP Resident Representative normally also serves as the RC of development activities for the United Nations system as a whole. Through such coordination, UNDP seeks to ensure the most effective use of UN and international aid resources.

In addition, if international humanitarian assistance is required and a separate HC position is not established, the RC is accountable to the ERC, OCHA for the strategic and operational coordination of the response efforts of UN Country Team members and national and international humanitarian organisations and bilateral actors, in support of national efforts. The ERC may choose to designate the RC as HC, in consultation with the IASC, if the situation so requires. In this case, the RC/HC is accountable to the ERC with whom an annual compact is drawn up detailing the planned key results for the HC function.

The Cluster leads at the country level are accountable to the RC in the absence of a HC.

United Nations Country Team (UNCT)

The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) encompasses all the entities of the UN system that carry out operational activities for development, emergency, recovery and transition in programme countries and it ensures interagency coordination and decision making at the country level. The UNCT aims for individual agencies to plan and work together, as part of the RC system, to ensure the delivery of tangible results in support of the development agenda of the government.

The UNCT membership, roles and responsibilities must also be laid out clearly within each UNCT. These will include accountability to each other and the RC, taking responsibility for elements of the RC/UNCT work plan, particularly in oversight of subsidiary groups, mobilization of resources for the UNDAF and UNCT plans, and taking part in mutual assessments. This will not prejudice their relationship with their own agency.

National Government Authorities

In [General Assembly Resolution 46/182](#), '... each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory...' and '...the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory'.

UN encourages governments to '...designate a single national agency or organisation to conduct and coordinate emergency relief measures.' The establishment of such government authority to coordinate domestic relief activities recognises the central role and responsibility of the stricken government in disaster relief operations. Where possible, coordinating mechanisms such as clusters should involve the relevant government authorities.

The question is more complicated in man-made conflict situations when circumstances require the coordination of relief activities through a neutral intermediary. Reporting structures will be then agreed between the government and the HC.

The Red Cross Movement

The Red Cross is a very important humanitarian component that will be prevalent in all aspects of relief work. It is therefore likely to be an integral part of the emergency environment and may play an important role in coordinating humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies. The Red Cross is composed of three elements:

- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is the founder body of the Red Cross movement. The ICRC is promoter of the Geneva Conventions of their additional Protocols concerning the treatment of wounded and sick military personnel, prisoners of war and civilian populations in internal and international conflicts. Consequently, the ICRC will play an active role in most complex emergencies.
- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is a federation of national societies worldwide. It aims to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote all forms of humanitarian activities by its member societies with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering. When disasters occur, the IFRC assists national societies in assessing needs, mobilising resources and organising relief activities. IFRC delegates are often assigned to give direct assistance to national societies. Personnel from other national societies may also be requested and assigned under the auspices of the IFRC.
- The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies act as auxiliaries to public authorities and services. They normally concentrate on activities concerned with public health – including first aid and primary health care – and relief. Many national societies also maintain stocks of relief supplies. They receive funds from their own membership, from local fund-raising activities and also in many cases from the government. Especially in emergencies, they may also receive funds, supplies and/or the assistance of personnel from sister societies in other countries. This support is normally channelled through the IFRC, but may occasionally be given on a bilateral basis. The IFRC and national societies may become important actors during relief operations, particularly with regard to the storage and forwarding of non-assigned relief commodities arriving in the crisis region.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs can be divided into two main categories – international NGOs working in the international field, and local NGOs working in their own country. The NGO community has become increasingly important in humanitarian work and has significantly grown in numbers over the past years to cover the full spectrum of humanitarian relief activities.

One or more NGOs are often present in the area of an emergency, before, during and after the onset of the crisis and will therefore have hands-on experience and information that might be crucial in carrying out relief operations. NGOs tend to specialise in one or two fields, or to direct their efforts towards one needy population group. They usually offer skilled staff, rapid deployment capacity (if they are not already in the area), operational flexibility and resources that might not otherwise be available in an emergency.

Local NGOs are extremely important, especially because they are known locally and because they are familiar with the area, the culture, the community, etc. and in many cases they work together with other international NGOs and the UN agencies. For reference, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs maintains a list of [NGOs in consultative status with the United Nations](#).

Armed Forces in Humanitarian Response

Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)

The [Department of Peacekeeping Operations \(DPKO\)](#) is a UN body tasked by the Security Council to undertake peacekeeping operations in specific areas of recent or potential conflict. A Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) is usually appointed to head each peacekeeping operation. Reporting to DPKO headquarters in New York, the SRSG exercises authority over all UN entities in the emergency area. The office of SRSG has two main components: a civilian structure headed by the Chief Administration Officer (CAO) and a military structure headed by the Senior Military Officer (SMO).

Typically, a peacekeeping operation encompasses a broad range of tasks and responsibilities. For example, DPKO staff deployed into an emergency area may include military components in the security or observation role, civilian police elements and mine action teams as well as specialists in political affairs and human rights.

Recent peacekeeping mandates have also included tasks such as "coordination with humanitarian agencies" or "support to humanitarian action." The personnel, material and financial assets of these operations are managed by a civilian led administration, headed by CAO.

Civil-Military Coordination (CMCOORD)

During emergencies requiring or involving a military presence in the crisis area, the military authorities may be willing to offer direct or indirect assistance to the humanitarian relief effort. It is most important that such assistance be properly coordinated with the work being undertaken by civilian actors. Therefore, it will be necessary to set up some form of mechanism to ensure an effective civil-military collaboration.

Cooperation between civilian and military bodies can take many forms and can be initiated by either side. Civil-Military Coordination (CMCOORD) is the official term used by OCHA to describe the process of liaison between civilian and military actors in a crisis area. Military authorities may also appoint their own staff for liaison duties with the humanitarian community. Larger military formations (e.g. multi-national coalitions) may even establish a Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (JCMOTF) within a major HQ, as was the case during the Afghan emergency in 2001. The generic military term for liaison between humanitarian and military bodies is Civil-Military Coordination (CIMIC). However some military authorities or formations may use different terminology. Whatever the name used for this important function, the objective is essentially the same: to ensure any military assistance is effectively coordinated with civilian humanitarian activities in line with the "Guidelines on Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, both for Natural Disasters and Complex Emergencies."

Humanitarian Funding

Humanitarian organisations are funded by contributions from individuals, corporations, governments and other organisations. Each humanitarian agency usually has its own resource mobilisation mechanism in place having either bilateral or multilateral contributions provided by donors. Not only traditional donors such as government and inter-governmental organizations but also private donors are taking on an important part in supporting relief operations.

Donor Agencies

Donor agencies may be present in the crisis area and may even be actively involved in disaster relief activities before a major emergency occurs. Some of these donor organisations, especially governmental organisations, have developed a concept for rapid intervention in case of disaster and will deploy with specialized teams. Historically major donors to humanitarian government include the European Commission, and the governments of the USA, UK, Australia, Germany, France and Japan. Each donor government will have specialized sub offices for granting funds and liaising with NGOs and UN agencies. The funding processes and requirements are updated regularly, and will vary from donor to donor. Organisations seeking funding should consult with the relevant donor office for the most up to date information.

Appeals

At the onset of an emergency, humanitarian communities come together to prepare for an appeal which summarizes relief needs and response plan for different sectors. These appeals are tools to structure humanitarian response and to mobilize funds.

Flash Appeal

Flash appeals are a tool used for structuring a coordinated humanitarian response for the first three to six months of an emergency. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator triggers it in consultation with all stakeholders. Ideally, a Flash Appeal should be issued within one week of an emergency. It provides a concise overview of urgent life saving needs, and may include recovery projects that can be implemented within the timeframe of the Appeal.

Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)

Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) serves to raise funds for humanitarian action as well as assist humanitarian aid partners to plan, implement and monitor their activities together. Thus the CAP is much more than an appeal for money.

Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP)

Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) is a strategic plan for humanitarian response in a given country or region. It provides:

- A common analysis of the context in which humanitarian takes place.
- An assessment of needs.
- Estimated worst, and most likely scenarios.
- Identification of roles and responsibilities, i.e. who does what and where.
- A clear statement of longer-term objectives and goals.
- A framework for monitoring the strategy and revising it if necessary.

The CHAP is the foundation for developing a Consolidated Appeal, and is as such part of the CAP.

Pooled Funds

Emergency Response Fund (ERF)

The Emergency Response Fund (ERF) aims to provide rapid and flexible funding to address gaps in humanitarian needs. It is usually established to meet unforeseen needs that are not included in the CAP or similar coordination mechanisms but in line with CHAP objectives and identified priorities. It increases opportunities for local actors including NGOs to respond to needs in areas where INGOs face challenges to access due to security or political constraints. The ERFs have been used since 1997. Compared to Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF), ERFs are relatively small in size. OCHA typically undertakes both financial and programmatic management of ERFs. ERFs are operational in Afghanistan, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, the occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The [OCHA Financial Tracking Service](#) allows overview and tracking of county level ERFs.

The objectives of ERFs are to enable mainly NGOs (which do not have direct access the CERF) and UN agencies to respond quickly and effectively by:

- Making funds available to NGOs, and in urgent cases, UN agencies, to cover start-up costs
- Making funds available to NGOs and UN agencies in cases of rapidly changing circumstances and humanitarian needs where gaps need to be filled and other donor mechanisms are unavailable.

Common Humanitarian Funds (CHF)

The main objective of Common Humanitarian Funds (CHF) is to provide early and predictable funding to the most critical humanitarian needs as identified and formulated in a CAP. CHF will however also maintain an emergency reserve (typically up to 10 percent of total funding) for responding to unplanned emergency needs outside the CAP. All humanitarian partners participating in the CAP process are eligible to receive funding from a CHF. Given that the objective of a CHF is to provide core funding towards the CAP, these funds are often much larger than ERFs and will involve cluster/sector leads and other humanitarian partners in an elaborate prioritization and allocation process. CHFs are managed by the HC supported by a dedicated advisory group and with the OCHA country office providing fund management support. In all existing funds UNDP is financial fund manager (administrative agent) and has also been tasked with subcontracting NGOs on behalf of the CHF (managing agent).

Central Emergency Response Fund

The [Central Emergency Response Fund \(CERF\)](#), which was the first concrete outcome of the Secretary-General's reform process and the Millennium Summit, was launched on 9 March 2006 to achieve the following objectives:

- Promote early action and response to reduce loss of life.
- Enhance response to time-critical requirements.
- Strengthen core elements of humanitarian response in under-funded crises.

The Fund represents an important international multilateral funding instrument that saves lives through the provision of rapid initial funding for life-saving assistance at the onset of humanitarian crises and critical support for poorly-funded, essential humanitarian response operations. CERF is authorized to raise up to US \$500 million, including a grant facility of up to USD 450 million and a loan facility of USD 50 million. CERF is funded by voluntary contributions from around the globe from member states of the United Nations, private businesses, foundations and individuals. Since March 2006, the grant component of CERF has received pledges and contributions from over 110 public and private donors of more than US\$ 1.6 billion.

The Fund is managed by the ERC, on behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General. The Fund allows the UN to react immediately when a disaster strikes by making funding available for life-saving activities to eligible agencies such as the UN and its funds, programmes, and specialized agencies and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CERF is intended to complement – not substitute – existing humanitarian planning and funding mechanisms such as consolidated and flash appeals. The CERF provides seed funds to jump-start critical operations and fund life-saving programmes not yet covered by other donors.

Links

Common Guidelines on Humanitarian Operations

- [Humanitarian accountability](#)
- [People in Aid - Code of Good Practice](#)
- [The Code of Conduct](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#) (link) or see the [PDF version](#) in the Annexes
- [Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 & additional protocols of 1977 and 2005](#) (link to <http://www.icrc.org>)
- [Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes](#)
- [The Sphere Project \(2004\) Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#)
- [IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response](#)

Sources of Humanitarian Information

- [Alertnet](#) - Reuters service for aid agencies, including latest humanitarian news.
- [BBC News](#) - Full profiles provide an instant guide to history, politics and economic background of countries and territories, and background on key institutions.
- [Emergency Disaster Database](#) - Contains essential data on all disaster events occurring in the world from 1900 to present, with country and disaster profiles.
- [Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission \(ECHO\)](#)
- [International Crisis Group](#) - An NGO working to prevent and resolve conflict, its website has comprehensive information about current conflicts around the world.
- [IRIN – Integrated Regional Information Networks](#) - Useful country profiles for sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia with daily and weekly news updates and much more vital information.
- [Logistics Cluster](#)
- [MapAction](#) - Provides accurate, up-to-date maps showing the location of groups of affected people, passable routes, which medical facilities are functioning.
- [USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance \(BHA\)](#)
- [UK Foreign Commonwealth Development Office](#)
- [One World Country Guides](#) - Over 50 useful country guides.
- [ReliefWeb](#) - Main United Nations humanitarian coordination website, with daily news about complex emergencies and humanitarian relief programmes worldwide. Most major aid agencies post reports here during an ongoing emergency.

References

United Nations DMTP (1997) Disaster Management Ethics

ICRC (2004) What is humanitarian law?

United Nations Integrated Mission Planning Process (IMPP) guidelines

UN Development Group

NGO Branch - UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs