

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 with during emergencies. It is significantly different from any other operating environment as all activities involved aim to delivery of humanitarian assistance in whatever form. There is no single organisation capable of delivering this assistance adequately on its own, hence the need to coordinate and collaborate with other entities to efficiently achieve this objective. Organisations operating in this environment include:

- National and local governments.
- United Nations agencies.
- 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. To ensure accountability and efficiency, lead organisations for each cluster have been identified globally based on their sectors of expertise.

Enabling humanitarian actors to maximise their limited resources usage, ameliorate their efficiency, and demonstrate accountability, the [cluster approach](#) facilitates operations in multiple contexts. Therefore, clusters serve as a coordination mechanism improving the overall humanitarian responses thanks to the increased interaction they enable amongst all involved stakeholders working in the same sector (e.g. logistics, health, shelter). Each cluster operates under the leadership of a “lead agency” – accountable for its actions – usually selected according to its area of expertise (e.g. WHO is the Health Cluster lead agency).

Humanitarian Principles

The principles of humanitarian practice aim to ensure the fundamental human rights of those affected by conflicts or natural disasters are safeguarded, notably by providing them with adequate protection and assistance. Simultaneously, humanitarian actors strive to minimising the potential negative externalities of such assistance and preparing for future emergencies. Humanitarian action includes – but is not limited to – the protection of civilians in crisis by meeting their basic needs for food, water, sanitation, shelter, and health care. It is furthermore geared to assist affected populations to return to normal lives and livelihoods. Humanitarian practice is guided by the humanitarian law and a range of international standards and codes of conduct including:

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.](#)
- [Fourth Geneva Conventions of 1949 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** – alleviate suffering wherever it is found to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
- **Impartiality** – to act on the basis of needs, without discrimination.
- **Neutrality** – to act without taking sides for one group or another.
- **Independence** – to ensure humanitarian action autonomy from specifically political, economic or military interests.

- [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

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

OCHA's mission is to mobilise and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian actions in partnership with national and international actors in order to:

1. Alleviate human suffering during crises.
2. Advocate for the rights of people in need.
3. Promote preparedness and prevention.
4. Facilitate sustainable solutions.

UN Representatives and Coordinators

Special Representative of the Secretary-General

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

When a SRSG is appointed, he/she is recognised 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 Under-Secretary-General (USG) for peacekeeping operations or, if heading a political mission, 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 enshrines a shared vision amongst all United Nations actors being the strategic objective their collective work in-country will focus on achieving. Once an Integrated Mission is established following a specific 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

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 the IASC, acting therefore 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

When a complex emergency occurs, the ERC, on behalf of the Secretary-General and after consultation with the IASC, designates 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 Country Team activities and provides liaison between the latter and the ERC. The HCs terms of references [may be found here](#). The Cluster lead agencies in-country are accountable to the HC for their Cluster lead responsibilities.

Humanitarian Country Team

In April 2006, the IASC Principals (*i.e.* heads of the IASC participating agencies) endorsed the [Action Plan](#) on "Strengthening the Humanitarian Coordination System" which states, *inter alia*, that all 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 positive and efficient partnership between all humanitarian actors. Chaired by the HC, the HCT consists of UN agencies, NGO partners, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement operating in a given country. Non-members may be invited in its fora on an *ad hoc* basis for the purpose of assisting in the discussions and/or taking action on specific humanitarian issues.

Resident Coordinator

A United Nations Resident Coordinator (RC) is a designated representative of the UN Secretary-General. They lead the HCT and reports to the UN Secretary-General through the Chair of the UN Development Group (UNDG). The RC terms of references may be found [here](#). Generally, the UNDP Resident Representative serves as the RC. Through such coordination, the most effective use of UN and other international aid resources is being pursued. Furthermore, in the event of a humanitarian response where a HC position has not been established, the RC is accountable to the ERC. This applies for the strategic and operational coordination of the response efforts of UN Country Team members, national, and international humanitarian organisations 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. The Cluster leads at the country level are accountable to the RC in the absence of a HC.

United Nations Country Team

The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) structure encompasses all the UN system entities carrying out operational activities for development, emergency, recovery, and transition in a given country. It ensures interagency coordination and a structured decision making process for agencies present in-country. The UNCT aims for individual agencies to plan and work together, as part of the RC system, in order 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 imply accountability to each other and to the RC, taking responsibility for elements of the RC/UNCT work plan – particularly in oversight of subsidiary groups – mobilisation of resources for the UNDAF and UNCT plans, and taking part in mutual assessments.

National Government Authorities

The [UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182](#) states that “[...] 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 that “[...] the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organisation, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory”.

The UN therefore 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 upholds the stricken country’s government central role and responsibility in disaster relief operations. Where possible, external coordinating mechanisms – such as clusters – should systematically involve the relevant government authorities.

In the case of man-made crises, coordination of relief activities and reporting structures are agreed between the government and the HC.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the largest humanitarian network in the world and is 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 and Red Crescent Movement is composed of three elements:

- The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the Movement’s international relief activities during armed conflicts. Established in 1863, it is at the origin of the Movement. The ICRC plays 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 usually receive funds from their own membership, from local fund-raising activities, and in many cases from their respective government.

Non-Governmental Organisations

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) can be divided into two main categories: international NGOs operating overseas, and local NGOs working in their national context. The NGO community has become increasingly important in humanitarian responses and has significantly grown in number over the past decades to cover the full spectrum of humanitarian relief activities.

Before, during, and after the onset of a crisis, NGOs are often present in the area of an emergency. They therefore have hands-on experience and information that might be crucial in carrying out large-scale relief operations. NGOs tend to specialise in one or two fields, and/or to direct their efforts towards a specific in-need population. They usually offer skilled staff, rapid deployment capacity, operational flexibility, and resources that might not otherwise be available in an emergency.

Local NGOs are particularly important as they are known locally and because their staff is familiar with the context, area, culture, various communities, *etc.* In many cases they are used to work together with other international NGOs and the UN agencies. 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

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 lead each peacekeeping operation. Reporting to DPKO headquarters in New York, the SRSG exercises authority over all UN entities in the emergency area. The SRSG office 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).

DPKO staff deployed into an emergency area may for instance include military components in security or observation roles, civilian police elements, 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 the CAO.

Civil-Military Coordination

Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) is the essential dialogue and interaction between civilian and military actors in humanitarian emergencies that is necessary to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimise inconsistency, and when appropriate, pursue common goals. Basic strategies range from coexistence to cooperation. Coordination is a shared responsibility facilitated by liaison and common training.

CMCoord is a framework that enhances a broad understanding of humanitarian action and guides political and military actors on how best to support that action. It assists in developing context-specific guidance based on internationally agreed guidelines, it establishes humanitarian civil-military coordination structures, and ensures that CMCoord Officers and focal points are trained to make that coordination work. The CMCoord Officer can also function as an auxiliary to humanitarian access, protection and security, and facilitate these workstreams as needed. This applies to complex emergencies and natural disasters.

CMCoord is the official term used by the UN to describe the process of liaison between civilian and military actors in a crisis area, however military authorities may also appoint their own staff for liaison duties with the humanitarian community. The generic military term for liaison between humanitarian and military bodies is Civil-Military Coordination (CIMIC), however military authorities or formations may use different terminology.

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. In addition to traditional donors such as government and inter-governmental organisations, 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 concepts for rapid intervention in case of disaster and will deploy with specialised teams. Each donor government typically has specialised sub-offices for granting funds and liaising with various humanitarian actors. The funding processes and requirements are regularly updated and vary from donor to donor. Organisations seeking funding should consult with the relevant donor office for up to date information.

Appeals

At the onset of an emergency, humanitarian organisation come together to prepare an appeal summarising relief needs and response plan for different sectors. These appeals are tools to structure humanitarian response and mobilise funding.

Flash Appeal

Flash appeals present an early strategic response plan and specific projects within 5-7 days of the emergency's onset. If major uncertainty exists about the evolution of the crisis, the appeal presents the most likely scenarios and the response strategy for each. Flash appeals are usually revised about a month later, when more information is available. They may serve as the basis for funding applications to the CERF (amongst other funding streams): the RC/HC indicates which appeal projects the CERF should fund. The RC/HC, supported by OCHA, is responsible for producing the appeal. Organisations that have been asked to lead and coordinate the response within a given sector or area of activity (i.e. cluster or sector leads) have a key role: working with all relevant partners to develop the response plans and vet project proposals for inclusion in the appeal. Flash appeals should include priority projects from all key implementing agencies on the ground, including NGOs.

Consolidated Appeals Process

The Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) is a programme cycle for aid organisations to plan, coordinate, fund, implement, and monitor their response to disasters and emergencies, in consultation with governments.

The CAP contributes significantly to developing a strategic approach to humanitarian action, and fosters close cooperation between host governments, donors, aid agencies, and in particular between NGOs, the Red Cross Movement, and UN agencies. Working together in the world's crisis regions, they produce a Common Humanitarian Action Plan and an appeal for funds.

Common Humanitarian Action Plan

The Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) outlines humanitarian actions in a given country or region. It provides:

- Analysis of the context in which humanitarian actions takes place.
- Best, worst, and most likely scenarios.
- Analysis of need and a statement of priorities.
- Roles and responsibilities -who does what, when and where.
- A clear link to 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 that presents a snapshot of situations, response plans, resource requirements, and monitoring arrangements. If the situation or people's needs change, any part of an appeal can be revised at any time.

Whenever crises break or natural disasters occur, humanitarian partners develop a Flash Appeal to address people's most urgent needs. This can later become a Consolidated Appeal.

Humanitarian Coordinators are responsible for preparing the Consolidated Appeals, launched globally by the UN Secretary-General before the beginning of each calendar year. Mid-Year Reviews are presented to donors in July of each year.

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 to respond to needs in areas where international organisations face challenges to access due to security or political constraints. Compared to Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF), ERFs amounts are relatively small. OCHA typically undertakes both financial and programmatic management of ERFs and provides an overview and tracking [here](#).

The ERFs aim to enable NGOs (which do not have direct access the CERF) – but also sometimes UN agencies – to respond quickly and effectively by:

- Making funds available to cover initial costs
- Making funds available in cases of rapidly changing circumstances and humanitarian needs where gaps must be filled and other donor mechanisms are unavailable.

Common Humanitarian Funds

Common Humanitarian Funds (CHFs) are country-based pooled funds that provide early and predictable funding to NGOs and UN agencies for their response to critical humanitarian needs. CHFs enable Humanitarian Country Teams—who are best informed of the situation on the ground—to swiftly allocate resources where they are most needed, and to fund priority projects as identified in a Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP), or a similar humanitarian action plan.

CHFs mainly provide core funding to projects included in a CAP and they enable humanitarian actors to respond to protracted crises. CHFs also maintain an emergency reserve used for unforeseen emergencies and new priorities in a crisis. The reserve typically does not exceed 10 per cent of total CHF funds. CHFs are under the authority of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), with support from OCHA and UNDP for the fund's day-to-day management and financial administration.

Central Emergency Response Fund

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) is a humanitarian fund established by the General Assembly in 2006 to enable more timely and reliable humanitarian assistance to those affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts. The fund is replenished annually through contributions from governments and the private sector, and constitutes a pool of standby funding to support humanitarian action.

The CERF has a grant facility of USD 450 million and a loan facility of USD 30 million. In an average year, CERF allocates approximately USD 400 million to 50 different country teams. Sectors that typically receive funding include food, health, water and sanitation, and shelter. CERF has a ceiling of USD 30 million for each humanitarian emergency. Two thirds of CERF allocations go to rapid response allocations (for a sudden-onset emergency or a significant deterioration in an existing crisis) within 72 hours of an application being received from a Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC).

The CERF is designed to complement existing humanitarian funding mechanisms, including the CAP, flash appeals, and country-based pooled funds. United Nations humanitarian agencies and the International Organization for Migration can apply for CERF funding. WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR are the top three agency recipients of CERF funding. Applications for CERF funding must demonstrate that proposed activities are in line with CERF's life-saving criteria. The RC/HC submits applications to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the CERF secretariat, based on an in-country prioritization process. The General Assembly resolution that created CERF does not allow for NGOs to apply directly for CERF funding. However, NGOs frequently receive CERF funding when they act as implementing partners of United Nations agencies. OCHA cannot receive CERF grants as the ERC is the Fund Manager.

More information regarding the CERF may be found [here](#).

Sites and Resources

Common Guidelines on Humanitarian Operations

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#)
- [Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 & additional protocols of 1977 and 2005](#)
- [Principles of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes](#)
- [The Sphere Project - Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#)
- [IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach](#)
- [Oslo Guidelines - Guidelines on Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief, both for Natural Disasters and Complex Emergencies](#)

Sources of Humanitarian Information

- [Alertnet](#) - Reuters service for aid agencies, including latest humanitarian news.

- [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](#)
- [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](#)