OCHA and NGOs in humanitarian coordination

ABOUT OCHA

In December 1991, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 46/182 aimed at strengthening the UN response to complex emergencies and natural disasters. This resolution created the high-level position of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and was followed by the establishment of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), which, in 1998, became the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

OCHA's mission is to
◊ Mobilise and coordinate effective and principled action, in partnership with national and international actors;
◊ Advocate for the rights of people in need and promote preparedness and prevention; and
◊ Facilitate sustainable solutions.

How is OCHA set up?

Part of the UN Secretariat, OCHA is under the leadership of the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the ERC and Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock.

OCHA carries out its coordination function primarily through the **Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC),** which is chaired by the ERC. NGOs are represented and participate at the highest levels of humanitarian policy and decision-making through the participation in the IASC by three NGO consortia - International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction and Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR).

For a better overview of the international humanitarian coordination architecture, please see the briefing paper on topic 1: The IASC and the global humanitarian coordination architecture of the Humanitarian Coordination Learning Series.

How does humanitarian coordination take place at the country level?

- Through the **Humanitarian Coordinator**, who is often the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations system;
- Through the **Humanitarian Country Team** (HCT), which is comprised of senior leaders of the UN and the NGO community. Currently, 72% of the HCTs have a least one national NGO member and nearly all of them have international NGO members; and
- Through the **Inter-Cluster Coordination Teams** which are comprised of cluster coordinators, normally a UN or NGO staff.

NGOs play an important role at field level and are increasingly occupying leadership roles, by fully engaging in clusters and becoming more involved in strategic decision-making at country level.

OCHA'S 5 CORE FUNCTIONS

1. Coordination

Being OCHA's primary function, it is aimed at ensuring that humanitarian actors come together to ensure a coherent response to emergencies by assessing situations and needs, monitoring progress and mobilising funds. OCHA seeks to ensure that the right structures, partnerships and leaders are in place, and supported, so that they can better prepare for and lead a more effective coordination in humanitarian situations.
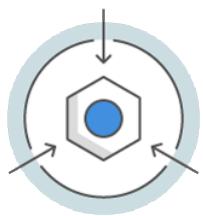
Beyond serving as the secretariat of the IASC, OCHA's key roles are to

- Deploy **rapid response teams** to set up coordination in new emergencies through the management of rapid response tools, such as the [UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC)](#) as well as the [International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAC)](#);
- Put in place the appropriate architecture to help government and actors **access tools and services** that they need to support the assessments and to agree on priorities, i.e. through the [Humanitarian Programme Cycle](#). It aims to bring together clusters, sectors and agencies and to have a joint approach in understanding what the needs are, agreeing on the priorities of the response and monitoring the effectiveness of the overall response;
- Carry out **civil-military coordination**;
- Facilitate the overarching **humanitarian response plans** that lay out the strategy for responding to the needs of the population; and
- Coordinate the [IASC Cluster system](#) which aims at strengthening partnerships and response to humanitarian emergencies by clarifying the division of labour among aid agencies.

2. Policy

OCHA supports the establishment of the agenda of policy makers and helps the international humanitarian system adapt to global challenges – such as climate change and demographic shifts – by exploring new policies, technologies and partnerships to improve the delivery of assistance.

OCHA's key roles are:

- **Rally humanitarian actors** around current and emerging concerns;
- **Engage with Member States** to strengthen the legal basis for humanitarian action;
- Provide **expert advice** on issues related to the protection and assistance in humanitarian contexts; and
- Aim to advance humanitarian norms through intergovernmental processes, such as through briefings to the General Assembly, the Security Council and co-hosting the annual ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS).

3. Advocacy
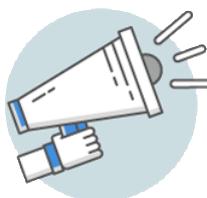
By speaking on behalf of people affected by conflict and disaster, OCHA's role is to make sure world attention is focused on humanitarian issues. OCHA uses a range of channels and platforms to make sure the world is aware of the issues impacting people affected by humanitarian crises.

OCHA's advocacy work is carried out through:

- Public channels, including media interviews and public speeches;
- Private advocacy, such as quiet discussions, negotiations, etc.; and
- Support advocacy at the field level.

4. Information Management

OCHA gathers and shares reliable data on where crisis-affected people are, what they urgently need and who is best placed to assist them. Information products support swift decision-making and planning. OCHA's key role is to collect and analyse information so that it can provide a holistic overview of needs, gaps and responses in protracted and acute emergencies.

5. Humanitarian Financing

OCHA manages two types of pooled funds which provide timely funding for life-saving activities.

- Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF): is aimed at providing rapid initial funding at the outset of humanitarian crisis and critical support for underfunded emergencies worldwide;
- Country-based Pooled Funds: allocates funding based on identified humanitarian needs and priorities at the country level. Allocations go to UN agencies, IOM, national and international NGOs, as well as the Red Cross and Red Crescent organisations.

OCHA'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

As per its 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, OCHA is in the process of a change management process and from January 20202 has begun a structural change by moving some HQ activities out of New York and Geneva: the civil-military field response capacity and Nexus teams will now operate from Istanbul, Turkey, and strategic communication and information management will be centred in The Hague, The Netherlands.

OCHA AND NGOS

NGOs are critical for the overall humanitarian response, and thus partnership, close collaboration, and coordination between OCHA and the NGOs are essential. OCHA is a strong advocate for greater NGO participation in coordination and to strengthen NGOs' response capacity. Specifically, OCHA seeks to

- Strengthen NGOs' access to pooled funds, in particular for national NGOs;
- Provide training for NGOs on how to participate more effectively in coordination; and
- Promote NGO participation in HCTs and as co-facilitators of the clusters at the field level.

NGO ENGAGEMENT WITH OCHA AT COUNTRY LEVEL

5 tips for NGO engagement with OCHA

1. **Be confident:** NGOs must be confident – both about the role and position they hold within the system – when they engage with OCHA and the whole UN system. NGOs must be treated as equals per the Principles of Partnership;
2. **Be engaged:** Coordination is hard work and time-consuming. However, the more an NGO invests in coordination in terms of time and effort, the more rewarding it can be both individually and for the organisation. Having NGO representation around the table is absolutely critical and there are many areas of engagement where NGOs can invest in, such as the co-leadership of clusters, HCT, task teams, etc.;
3. **Be prepared:** NGOs must understand the context and its challenges. The good of the sector, the community or the response must be a priority when engaging in conversations with various coordination mechanisms. NGOs must strive for continuity of representation rather

than sharing the representation out across the range of NGOs. This means that the same people must be around the table week after week, month after month, year after year.

4. **Be propositional**: NGOs should come up with ideas and innovations and go to meetings with solutions rather than questions or problems. They should look beyond the problems they face today and look at those that might arise in the future. Critically, they should not assume the UN or the donors will have better information or answers. NGOs know their sector, their geographical area, their country – they actually know far better. NGOs should use this knowledge, information and rich expertise when coming to the table with ideas and suggestions.

5. **Be aligned across the sector:** Alignment among NGOs is a big challenge. It is important that the NGO community tries to seek as much agreement on issues that are being discussed – before a meeting takes place. It is important to reach agreements on the direction aimed as a community and the priorities important for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

NGO FORA ENGAGEMENT WITH OCHA AT COUNTRY LEVEL: THE SYRIAN CASE

Coordination

In Syria, the establishment of the Syrian NGO Alliance was a turning point in the engagement of Syrian NGOs in decision-making processes. Syrian NGOs now have four seats in Northern Syria (or Turkey Hub) HCT as well as three seats for NGOs in the whole of Syria SSG. At the cluster level, Syrian NGOs in Turkey co-lead three clusters.

Policy

With the support of OCHA, NGOs participate in different policy response and decision-making platforms.

Advocacy

Advocacy strategies need to be improved and more needs to be done for the needs of Syrians, especially in terms of protection of civilians and humanitarian access in Syria.

Humanitarian financing

OCHA plays a significant role through pooled funding in building the capacities of local NGOs and enabling them. At a cluster level, the NGOs are active members of technical and strategic advisory groups as well.

Information management

Although Syrian NGOs have a big role to play on data collection, there is room for improvement of information analysis and reporting. Local NGOs need to exist in the information analysis and reporting.

Engagement and coordination are vital: NGOs should engage and use OCHA's resources and work on their own coordination, as OCHA cannot reach hundreds of NGOs individually.

5 Tips for OCHA engagement with NGOS

1. **Language**: Within coordination, OCHA must use and adopt the language of the first responders and people it serves. Interpretation may be helpful but is often not enough.
2. **Conflict sensitivity**: OCHA is a role model for local NGOs. Hence, it should be careful when war is taking place and local staff is being hired from such country because differentiation between OCHA and its staff does not take place in such settings.
3. **Partnerships**: while funding local NGOs aims to improve the response by enabling the local actors, it should not be a target itself, that is partnerships should be aimed at improving the response for the people and not for partnership itself. Hence, there is no need to engage in partnership with hundreds of NGOs, but rather a need to partner with a specific number of NGOs which have the capacity and can demonstrate a sound presence on the ground.
4. **Support to local actors:** OCHA should assist local actors and encourage NGOs to take the lead in coordination. Local actors are key in understanding the context, establishing access to difficult-to-reach areas, coordinating response and have local knowledge of the context, the processes etc.
5. **Advocacy**: OCHA needs to advocate for humanitarian actors and protection of civilians.

International NGO engagement with OCHA at country level

Benefits

- Access to reliable information on the current humanitarian situation within the country;
- Access to key decision-making actors involved in the humanitarian response;
- Access to funding; and
- Expand networking with in-country humanitarian actors.

Challenges

- Shrinking of OCHA, such as through the decreasing of staff;
- Leadership crisis in small-medium emergencies, also due to absence of OCHA (point 1);
- Competition of mandate among humanitarian agencies; and
- Growing capacity of national government.