

Guiding Humanitarian Principles in Disaster Work and the Role of UN OCHA

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Introduction

The topic is basically in two parts. One is the guiding humanitarian principle, and the other on is the role of OCHA. Disasters are becoming an issue of growing concern worldwide. Asia is the most disaster-prone region in the world. In this year alone, landslides, storms, earthquakes, cyclones, and floods in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka took hundred of human lives and billions of dollars of economic losses.

The prevalence and magnitude of disasters have had serious consequences on Asian society and the countries economy. From 1996 - 2000 natural disasters have claimed more than 313,000 lives and affected close to one billion people. Economic losses over this period have been estimated at 142 billion dollars. Each year, natural disasters impoverish millions of people in Asia. This year, OCHA has been involved in 15 natural disasters in Asia and the Pacific alone, including the cyclones in the Pacific (Fiji, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia), the landslides in Indonesia and the recent floods in Sri Lanka where Terje Skavdal played a key response role.

The trend towards more frequent and severe disasters is expected to accelerate in the near future because of the disaster risks engendered by extreme depletion of water resources, rapid and unplanned urbanization, global climate change, and environmental degradation, to mention but a few. Consequently initiatives on multilevel networking and collaboration have intensified among stakeholders in disaster reduction and response, including governments, UN agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and regional organizations.

The UN has throughout its history been concerned about human suffering. The creation of the UN was in large a response to the enormous human suffering created by two world wars, but as from the early beginning UN also started to respond to human suffering caused by natural disasters.

As the number of disasters continued to grow in complexity and numbers during the 1970s and 80s, with a high number of new actors in the field, it become more and more evident that there was a need for a stronger mechanism for coordination of humanitarian assistance.

In my presentation I will focus on two broad areas - humanitarian principles and the role of OCHA in natural disasters

Guiding humanitarian principles

During the earthquake in Armenia in 1989 it became obvious that there was a need to strengthen the coordination efforts also within the UN family, and the UN General Assembly in the Resolution 46/182 led to the creation of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA). DHA was later transformed into OCHA.

The reason why the General Assembly decided to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance was a concern of the suffering of victims of disasters and emergency situations, the loss of lives, the flow of refugees, the mass displacement of people and the material destruction. As the situation stood, the sum of all the parts in an emergency or disaster response

was less than the whole.

It also pointed out the need to strengthen and make more effective the collective efforts of the international community in providing humanitarian assistance. Through the establishment of DHA and OCHA was to maximize the interventions in emergencies by minimizing duplications and avoiding gaps in response.

A number of guiding principles on how to exercise this effort were given by the General Assembly. The key elements in the guiding principles are:

1. Humanitarian assistance is of cardinal importance for the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies.

No country has the right to neglect the need of people affected by natural disasters, however, we must also not forget that the capacity to deal with disaster will be vary depending on stage of development, resources available etc.

2. Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.

These principles that we have seen been challenged in many complex emergencies and we have, unfortunately, many times seen how these principles have been neglected in conflict situations. Humanitarian assistance has frequently been used to pressure on the affected population.

In the Iraq, one of the key issues for the humanitarian community has been the lack of unconditional access to geographical areas and populations in need. The coalition forces, are the occupying powers and had obligations under the 4th Geneva convention. Dilemma for the humanitarian community included having to work too closely with the occupiers and giving perception of complicity. In discussions, we were given assurances of access to all sides.

3. The sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

In this context, humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country.

This is an important principle, and a principle easy to forget. However, we have seen that the number of organizations involved in disaster response have grown enormously during the past 20 years, and not everybody seem to respect that we are dealing with independent nations who have the right to make their own decisions. The NGO communities have taken this challenge seriously and among the initiatives taken are the development of code of conducts and the Sphere project.

4. Each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory.

Hence, the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.

5. The magnitude and duration of many emergencies may be beyond the response capacity of many affected countries.

International cooperation to address emergency situations and to strengthen the response capacity of affected countries is thus of great importance. Such cooperation should be provided in accordance with international law and national laws.

Role of OCHA

The United Nations has a central and unique role to play in providing leadership and in coordinating the efforts of the international community to assist countries affected by disasters in carrying out their responsibilities. The UN works to ensure the prompt and smooth delivery of relief assistance in full respect of the above-mentioned principles. I would now like to move on to the specific role of OCHA within this United Nations mandate.

OCHA's mandate is comprised of three core functions:

- Coordination of emergency response,
- Policy development and
- Humanitarian advocacy.

All three functions are exercised with a view to facilitating the effective delivery of assistance to all victims of emergencies and disasters. In particular, OCHA's aim is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to: alleviate human suffering in natural disasters and emergencies, promote preparedness and prevention efforts to reduce future vulnerability, facilitate sustainable solutions by addressing root causes, and advocate for the rights of people in need.

In case of natural disasters, OCHA facilitates the mobilization and coordination of international assistance in support of the Government of an affected country, if the country requests or welcomes international assistance. OCHA is not an implementing agency, but coordinates the operational UN agencies and programmes such as UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and FAO.

OCHA carries out its responsibility for the coordination of emergency relief activities through the Response Coordination Branch (RCB), which is part of the OCHA Geneva Office. In order to fulfill our functions effectively, we have established an integrated disaster response system, which is composed of various tools. (see handout Tools and Services)

From Geneva, we disseminate situation reports to alert and inform the international community on the occurrence of a disaster, the national capacity to respond, and any resulting needs for international assistance. Situation reports are sent to over 700 addresses and posted on the OCHA internet website: <http://www.reliefweb.int>

At the country and on-site level, OCHA provides support to the UN Resident Coordinator, the United Nations Disaster Management Team (UNDMT) and national and local authorities. Frequently, OCHA dispatches UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams to provide assistance required. The UNDAC team consists of experienced disaster managers drawn from UN and national experts. UNDAC teams have been deployed more than 110 times during the last 10 years and only in May this year 5 teams were deployed to support national efforts to deal with natural disasters.

Currently there are a very few countries viz. Singapore who have signed the protocol agreement to participate in the UNDAC system many others are pending. UNDAC teams can be deployed within a few hours notice to a disaster affected country. We hope that we in short time also will have a number of active members from Asian countries participating in the UNDAC system. Two induction courses have already been held, the last one here in Kobe in March this year.

If requested by the Government of a disaster-affected country, OCHA supports the UN system and national authorities through the UNDAC system in damage and needs assessment, and the preparation of UN Inter-Agency Appeals to international community for immediate relief and initial recovery assistance.

The objectives of the UN Inter-Agency Appeal is to raise funds for immediate and sustained emergency relief to the most vulnerable groups and supplement and support Government emergency response efforts. The core participants of the Appeal are normally UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, FAO, WHO and OCHA. They work together to address the emergency relief needs for shelter, food, water/sanitation and agriculture for a period of 3 to 9 months. In 2002, the UN system has launched seven international appeals related with natural disasters in Asia.

In the UN Humanitarian Supply Depot (UNHSD) in Brindisi, OCHA maintains a stock of basic relief supplies such as blankets, generators, household kits and tents that can be rapidly dispatched to disaster-stricken areas. This stockpile is managed in close cooperation with WFP and WHO, dealing with food and health relief items respectively.

The mission of the Military and Civil Defence Unit (MCDU) is to ensure the most effective use of military and civil defence assets in support of all types of humanitarian operations where their use is appropriate. MCDU aim at providing timely, sufficient and cost-effective support to concerned humanitarian agencies by mobilizing military and civil defence assets as and when requested.

Furthermore, OCHA can provide a maximum amount of US\$ 50,000 from its own resources as emergency cash grant to disaster-affected countries. In addition, we have access to cash resources from Norway and Denmark who deposited funds in our Emergency Grant Reserve. Thanks to this facility we can immediately disburse up to US\$ 150,000 in response to a disaster. Many donors channel cash contributions through OCHA for the implementation of concerted relief programmes. OCHA then channels these funds further through the UN Resident Coordinator's office in the interest of maximum effectiveness and accountability. We also conduct evaluations and lessons learnt studies for improving the coordination of relief and the impact of international response activities in general.

OCHA's primary role in natural disasters is response. However it is important not to treat this in isolation. It must be viewed in the context of the whole disaster cycle.

Prevention

The international community should adequately assist developing countries in strengthening their capacity in disaster prevention and mitigation, both at the national and regional levels, for example, in establishing and enhancing integrated programmes in this regard.

There have been a number of initiatives on how to enhance this work, and I believe that the TDRM approach might be seen as one example on such an integrated program. In the UN family, UNDP is the agency dealing with this issue, however, a number of other agencies, including OCHA, do have a strong interest in this area of work.

Preparedness

International relief assistance should supplement national efforts to improve the capacities of

developing countries to mitigate the effects of natural disasters expeditiously and effectively and to cope efficiently with all emergencies. A number of activities must in this regard be mentioned:

Early warning

One of the most important efforts to reduce human suffering is to establish adequate early warning systems. Early-warning information should be made available in an unrestricted and timely manner to all interested Governments and concerned authorities, in particular of affected or disaster-prone countries. However, the capacity of disaster-prone countries to receive, use and disseminate this information should be strengthened. Unfortunately, we too often see human losses occur because the early warning given was not received or understood by the most vulnerable segments of the population.

Summary/conclusions

In Asia the need for the international relief community to play a role in disaster relief work is fully evident when one looks at the toll taken by disasters there, the density of population by comparison with the rest of the world, and the political complexities arising from the diversity of cultures and religions to be found in the region.

People and societies are becoming more vulnerable to natural disasters due to man's own activities that lead to increasing poverty, population growth and urbanisation, environmental degradation and climate change. While natural hazards have always been with us, in recent years we have been increasingly affected by their impact, leading to major disasters. The impact is always greatest on the least prepared and poorest elements of society. Too often these people are too busy trying to eke out a meagre existence to have the where with all to worry about seemingly distant natural hazards.

As all of us here are aware, many Asian countries are severely prone to a wide range of disasters including floods, earthquakes, tropical cyclones, and drought. It is true that first and foremost the affected State bears responsibility for providing relief assistance. In spite of the fact that many States have seriously reinforced their capacity to respond, the magnitude of these disasters repeatedly overstretch their capability to save lives and calls for additional resources.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the need to deal with the whole disaster cycle with all parts of the cycle being accorded equitable attention. In order to do this as I said earlier, it is imperative that we work with all parties, with each bringing their complementary roles and responsibilities generating a more widespread commitment and understanding. For our side OCHA's strength lies in the response phase of the disaster cycle, working closely with in this region with ADRC, ADPC, the UN family, NGOs and the Red Cross/Crescent family.

I would like to thank you for your attention and if you have any questions please don't hesitate to ask now or contact me in the course of the training programme.