COORDINATION WORKSHOP
BRIEFING PAPER

How to make the most of information
management in coordination?

ALNAP
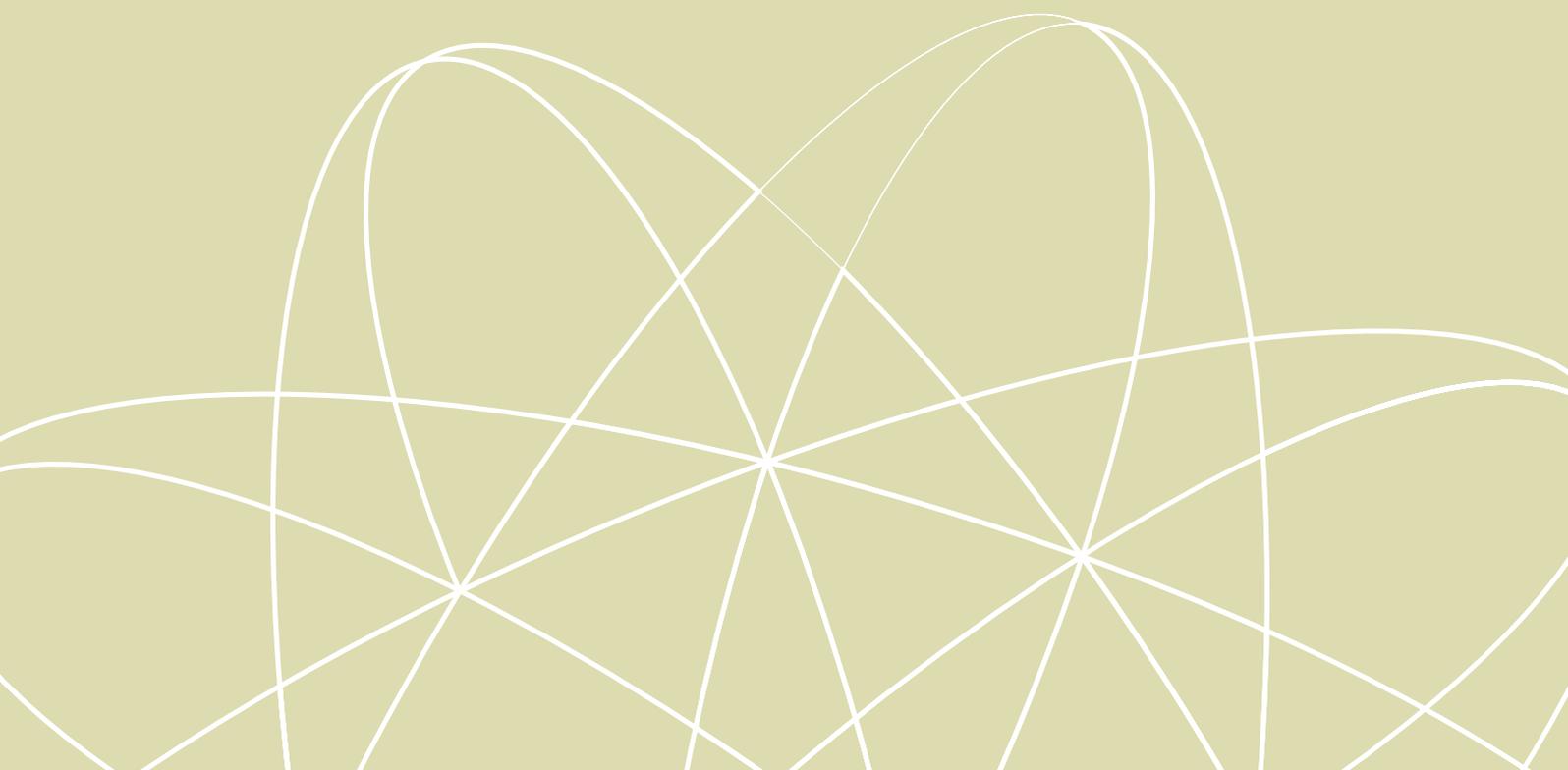
ABOUT ALNAP'S WORK ON HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

This briefing paper is part of an ongoing research initiative on humanitarian coordination. It outlines key issues and questions related to information management, one of the four themes that will be discussed at ALNAP's meeting 'Working Together to Improve Humanitarian Coordination' in London on 30 June to 1 July 2016. In particular, it will concentrate on informational management within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism (Clusters, inter-Cluster and humanitarian country teams, or HCTs). Alongside this paper, ALNAP has also produced additional materials for background context: a video and a recording of a webinar on the same topic, which can be accessed at **www.alnap.org/coord-meeting**.

This briefing paper draws on a literature review and interviews conducted for the broader research initiative. It has also been informed by **ALNAP's previous work on humanitarian leadership and coordination** over the past several years.

The meeting will address four aspects of coordination:

1.   How can humanitarians better coordinate across a response?

2.   How can we better involve national actors in humanitarian coordination?

3.   How to make the most of information management in coordination?

4.   How can we improve decision-making in humanitarian coordination?

Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

HCT   Humanitarian country team

IASC   Inter-Agency Standing Committee

IM   Information management

MIRA   Multi-Cluster initial rapid assessment

OCHA   Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNHCR   UN High Commissioner for Refugees

WHS   World Humanitarian Summit

3/4 W   Who is doing What, Where and When?

Information management in humanitarian action

Information management is a central element of coordination and is critical for an effective response.

Policy documents, evaluations, research and interviews related to international humanitarian activity (and to emergency management more generally) all underscore the importance of information management (IM). Effective IM allows better decisions to be made faster, while poor IM, on the other hand, leads to poor decisions, slows the response and can undermine the credibility of humanitarian actors. Many see IM as the core function of Clusters.

Humanitarian IM goes beyond information collection.

IM consists of a number of connected and specialised activities. The list of activities differs slightly from one authority to another, but generally includes:

- Planning (the identification of information needs and methods of collection/analysis)

- Data collection

- Processing (including activities for verifying, checking the accuracy of and collating data)

- Analysis

- The production of information products

- The dissemination of information and information products

- The storage of information.

These activities do not necessarily take place in this order, and are often conducted in parallel if the IM function is dealing with different sets of information at the same time (see below). Taken together, these activities ensure that 'Relevant information related to a humanitarian emergency is provided to the right person at the right time in a usable form to facilitate situational understanding and decision-making' (IASC, 2008: 1).

The international humanitarian 'system' has generally tended to focus on the collection and analysis of information, and has paid less attention to other – equally important – elements of IM.

Currently, funding and staffing for IM are limited.

While recognising the need to allocate humanitarian funding according to a large number of competing priorities, many interviewees suggested that current levels of resourcing do not reflect the importance, size and complexity of the IM task.

A number of IASC documents (IASC, 2008; 2012; 2015; McDonald, 2010) lay out the broad roles of the various elements of the coordination architecture in conducting IM activities. However, while this guidance outlines expectations, it is not binding: the participation of most humanitarian agencies in IM activities – particularly at the Cluster level – is voluntary.

In order to maintain the 'big picture', OCHA is expected to:

- Coordinate the first phases of assessment (the multi-Cluster initial rapid assessment, or MIRA). The MIRA is actually conducted by a team of technical experts, Cluster representatives, humanitarian organisations, representatives of the affected community, and the national authorities
- Support the coordination of the more detailed Cluster-level assessments, and provide common services and tools to help coordinate these assessments
- Coordinate the analysis for the humanitarian needs overview document and provide data and information to the HCT to support the development of the strategic response plan
- Consolidate sectoral information from the Clusters relating to ongoing and planned response activities (the 3/4 W – Who is doing What, Where and When?) to identify overall gaps in the response across all sectors
- Maintain, update, and disseminate the best common and fundamental datasets for use across the response.[1]

Broadly speaking, 'The responsibility for ensuring appropriate IM needed for an effective and coordinated inter-Cluster response rests with OCHA' (IASC, 2008: 1). OCHA can be seen as being responsible for creating and maintaining the 'big picture'. Interviewees suggested that this role is both vital and difficult, and that more attention is required for inter-Cluster IM.

At the same time, 'The responsibility for ensuring appropriate IM needed for an effective and coordinated intra-Cluster response rests with the Cluster Lead Agency' (IASC, 2008: 1). Cluster lead agencies are expected to manage sector-specific information for their own members and contribute sectoral information to support the broader response. In practice, this responsibility is generally delegated to the Cluster Coordinator.

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1 | These datasets generally relate to fundamental elements of geography and population: the name, spelling, location and population of settlements, for example (McDonald, 2010).

Cluster member agencies are 'expected to be proactive partners in exchanging information' and 'adhere to commonly agreed definitions and indicators for sector needs and activities' (IASC, 2008: 3). However, as with all engagement with Clusters, agencies are generally under no obligation to exchange information or adhere to common indicators or approaches – participation is voluntary.

The key IM-related activities of the Clusters include:

- Developing appropriate strategies and tools for data collection and interpretation, and the verification of information related to the Cluster/sector
- The planning, implementation, analysis and coordination of sectoral assessments (generally expected after the MIRA as a 'third phase' of assessment around three to four weeks after the onset of the emergency (IASC, 2012))
- Identifying common standards and indicators for monitoring the progress and effectiveness of humanitarian response within their Cluster/sector
- Monitoring current and planned response activities (3/4 W) and results at the output and outcome level, and the degree to which the Cluster is contributing to the overall objectives of the strategic response plan[2]
- Maintaining updated information sets in order to produce a number of standard information products (such as sectoral contact lists)
- In some cases, acting as the sponsor of a specific common dataset, and identifying and liaising with sources to analyse, collate and clean data, and achieve consensus around the dataset.

Responsibilities in refugee contexts where UNHCR plays a coordination role differ slightly from those outlined above.

Humanitarian decision-makers require many different types of information. There is a need to prioritise among these different information types. Currently, many would argue that 'strategic' information needs, which give a high-level view of the whole response, are prioritised over 'operational' needs, i.e. more detailed descriptions of the situation on the ground.

A number of initiatives have attempted to outline the many different types of information that are required by decision-makers in the international humanitarian system.[3] The main (often

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2 | In some cases, pairs or groups of Clusters may collaborate around the monitoring of a strategic objective.

3 | See, for example, UNHCR/DRC (2015), Gralla et al. (2013) and, more generally, the work of the Decision Makers Needs Community at http://digitalhumanitarians.com/content/decision-makers-needs (O'Donnell, 2014).

overlapping) sets of information seem to relate to[4]:

- The current emergency situation and requirements of the affected population (chiefly through needs and capacity assessments)

- The location and nature of response activities, including any gaps or overlaps in the response (generally collected as 3/4 W)

- The progress and results of response activities (output and outcome monitoring)

- Forecasting: potential trends in the evolution of the situation; how the 'big picture' can be expected to develop

- Techniques and best practices related to the technical aspect of the Cluster's work (generally guidance and standards)

- (Common) problems encountered by agencies in the implementation of their responses

- Local contacts and resources that could be used to facilitate the response, including contacts within response agencies

- Records of meetings and previous decisions, and, more generally, 'historical' information related to the response.

It is extremely difficult to collect, collate, analyse and store all of this information, particularly with limited resources, and some 'trade-offs' are to be expected.

Interestingly, there is little mention in most of the guidance of the planning element of IM:[5] determining 'what type of information decision-makers … need to know, at what level of detail, and why the information is needed' (UNHCR, n.d.: 13). Nor do planning tools seem to be available. This may be because OCHA and Cluster IM work is generally geared towards a standard set of activities and products related to the IASC Humanitarian Programme Cycle.

However, a fairly large number of participants in Clusters do not use these products (which they see as being more for 'non-operational' or 'high-level' activities such as fund-raising and advocacy), and so challenge the balance and priorities of IM in the coordination system.[6] They would like IM to be more operationally focused. In many cases the actors challenging the priorities of current IM activities are those who are also expected to provide assessment, activity, contact and monitoring

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4 | Although some sectors may also require additional types of information/datasets

5 | An interesting exception occurs in UNHCR guidance on creating an IM strategy (UNHCR, n.d.).

6 | A common refrain in interviews and in the literature, and one recently underlined by several of the Global Cluster Coordinators (Global Clusters, 2015).

information to the Clusters.

The quality of IM activities varies widely from one response to another.

Although many examples of effective IM can be found in the humanitarian system, interviews, evaluations and reports suggest that even in countries where the coordination architecture has been established for some time, there is often limited capacity for IM, and activities do not meet needs. One recent report suggested that key information on needs, response activities (3W) and gaps was not available (particularly at the inter-Cluster/whole response level) after many years of humanitarian activity in the country (OCHA, 2015).

A wide variety of tools and methods are currently in place for IM. The degree to which they are used differs, and they are not all complementary/coordinated.

Until fairly recently each Cluster in each country tended to develop its own tools for IM. Recently attempts have been made to standardise tools and approaches at the global and sectoral levels. At the global level OCHA has, for example, introduced the Humanitarian Indicator Registry,[7] which aims to contribute to a common understanding of needs and common monitoring within and between/ among responses. There is also an active Inter-Cluster Information Management Group. At the sector level, a number of Global Clusters have been active in producing guidance and tools for IM.[8]

However, in several cases these global initiatives have not been widely used at country level. The rapid turnover of staff and limited staff time mean that tools will only be effective where they are extremely simple to learn and easy to use (particularly if Cluster members are required to input data).

Existing tools also appear to be only loosely connected with one another, so while a common approach may be developing in some sectors, it is not clear that this is the case among Clusters (at the inter-Cluster level).

Similarly, in individual Clusters, different agencies often use very different assessment and monitoring approaches, making harmonised assessment and monitoring difficult.

There appear to be three basic approaches to the problem of different operational agencies collecting incompatible assessment[9] and monitoring information:

• Convince operational agencies to use a single approach and a single/core set of indicators.

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7 | www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/applications/ir.

8 | See, for example, Global Food Security Cluster (n.d.); O'Donnell (2014); UNHCR/DRC (2015); UNICEF (n.d.).

9 | At time of writing the issue of joint needs assessment is currently under discussion as part of talks on the 'Grand Bargain' around the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). Moves to include climate change issues and development actors in assessments may further exacerbate the coordination challenge.

- Collect different sets of data and then attempt to reconcile them at the assessment phase using a panel of experts.[10]

- Conduct assessment/monitoring through a single, independent entity (while recognising that operational agencies will probably also continue to collect data for their own purposes).[11]

While IASC policy and guidance tend to aim for the use of common indicator sets, this approach has proved difficult to introduce in many contexts. Cluster member agencies often need different information, or information in different formats (for their own programming purposes or for reporting to donors[12]) from that which forms the common set. Agencies may also feel more loyalty to systems they have developed themselves than to those invented 'elsewhere'. Interviewees suggest that it is easier to establish common indicators and approaches in rapid onset emergencies, where agencies have not already established their own systems.

The alternatives to a single, common approach are not necessarily less effective: using independent entities may prevent assessments from being biased by the institutional interests or the specific expertise of the operational agency carrying out the assessment, while the 'reconciliation' approach can ensure that a variety of different types of information are included and can also help to build consensus among key stakeholders.

'Baseline' information and datasets are not always available, particularly in areas where there is not a long-term humanitarian presence.

Most humanitarian IM functions rely on the presence of common operational datasets (information on settlements, transport links, the affected population and the like). In most cases responsibility for the establishment and upkeep of these datasets will lie with the state and other development actors. Some interviewees suggested that the humanitarian community could do more work around information preparedness (an area which is central to much civil defence work, but not strongly emphasised in the humanitarian sector) in terms of ensuring that this baseline information is available, and that humanitarian activities build on and support existing datasets.

Monitoring tends to concentrate on the presence and activities of humanitarian actors rather than on the way in which the situation is developing and the effect that the humanitarian response is having on the situation.

A core activity of most Clusters is monitoring 'who is doing what where' (3/4 W). Clusters also

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10 | Perhaps the best-known example of this approach is the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System; see www.ipcinfo.org/.

11 | Examples include assessment and monitoring activities conducted by ACAPS and REACH.

12 | At time of writing, this issue and the potential for more harmonised reporting are also under discussion as part of the 'Grand Bargain' around the WHS.

generally monitor output-oriented indicators – the number of people who received support, or the number of units (shelter, WASH) provided. It is much less usual for Clusters or the inter-Cluster function to collect and analyse information on the relationship between activities and humanitarian outcomes (nutrition, disease morbidity, livelihood status, sense of security, etc.). This type of 'outcome monitoring' has always been envisaged as a role of the Clusters (IASC, 2008), and a number of calls have recently been made for more focus and attention to be given to this topic.[13] However, such monitoring remains difficult and resource intensive to undertake, and is possibly beyond the capacities of some operational agencies.

Fairly limited attention appears to have been given to questions of ethics in IM, particularly with regard to issues such as informed consent.

While the Global Protection Cluster has explicitly considered issues of 'do no harm', informed consent, and confidentiality in the collection and use of information (UNHCR/DRC, 2015) and while a number of country-level initiatives have developed approaches to ensuring confidentiality, ethical issues do not so far appear to have figured prominently in the development of IM systems. This is worrying, given the environments where humanitarian activities normally take place.

Relatively limited attention appears to have been given to issues of information storage. Interviewees suggested that in many cases data are kept on a variety of Excel spreadsheets on the hard drives of Cluster coordinators or information managers. Given the long-term nature of many responses and the frequent turnover of Cluster staff and the staff of Cluster member agencies, accessible, secure, long-term data storage would appear to be an important element of IM.

Many examples of effective data presentation are available, including the use of dashboards and maps. These are often country-specific, and there may be opportunities to share best practice and standardise approaches.

Interviewees suggested that in many cases they found geo-referenced and mapped information particularly useful, while individual Clusters and OCHA country offices provided many examples of information presented in immediate and accessible form. However, producing these information products requires skilled staff and financial resources. Approaches do not appear to be standardised across sectors and countries. Some interviewees also suggested that web-based and 'virtual' information sharing was less effective than face-to-face discussion among operational actors. There may be an argument for further, focused consideration of 'what works' in terms of the display and dissemination of information in humanitarian contexts.

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13 | Not least by the UN Secretary-General (UNGA, 2016); see also Global Clusters (2015).
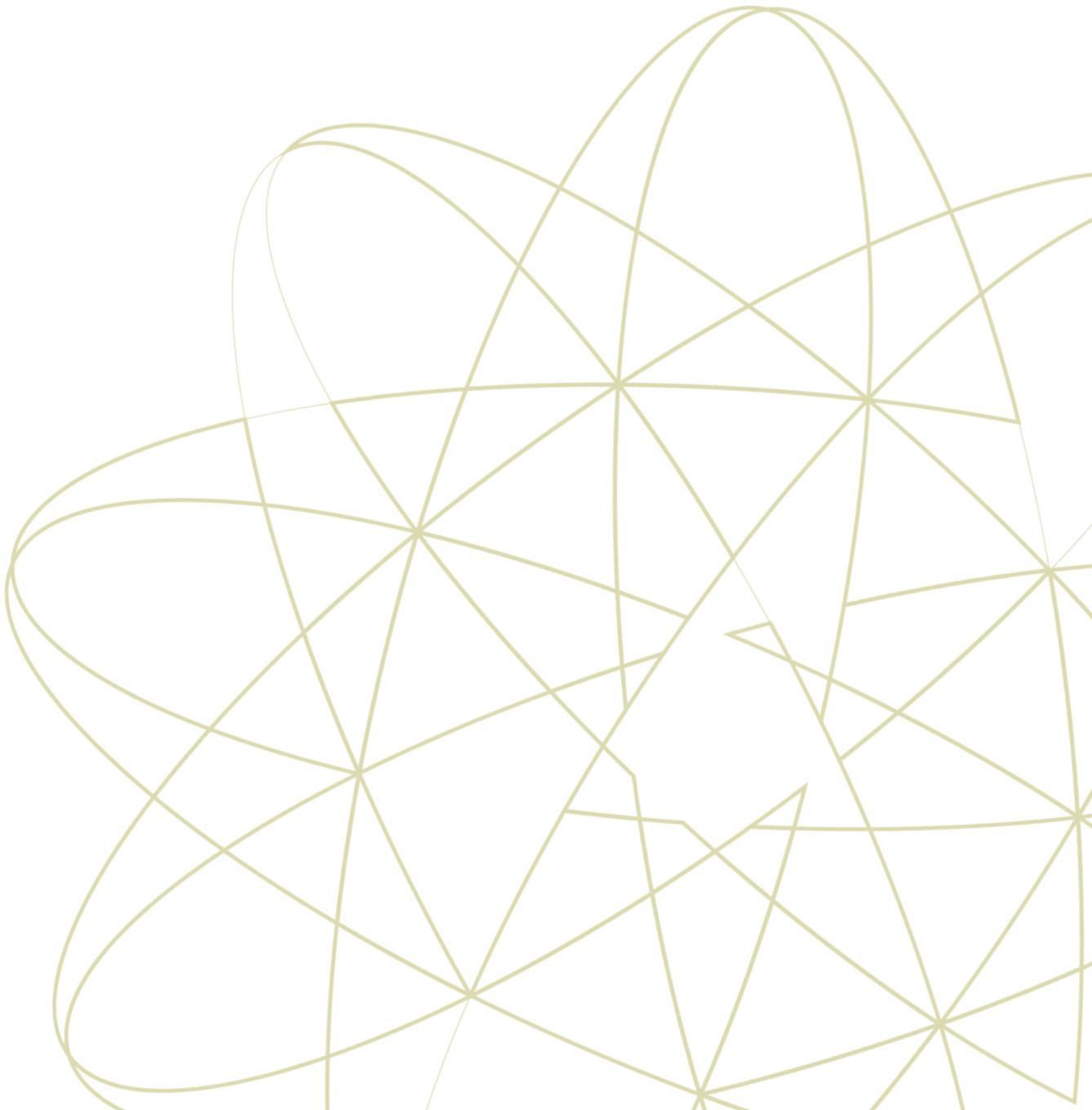
Suggested questions for the meeting

Resourcing:

• Is the IM function of humanitarian coordination receiving adequate resources?

• Are there particular gaps or areas for investment?

• Where might additional resources be found?

Incentives for coordination:

• For most operational agencies, participation in IM activities is voluntary: are there additional incentives that might increase participation?

Relevance of information to decision-makers:

• Is there a need for IM systems to focus more on operational information?

• If so, how would decision-makers prioritise the information that they need in particular contexts? Could guidance and tools be made available?

• How could IM systems collect more operational information, and still provide the information required for the humanitarian programme cycle?

• Does inter-Cluster IM need strengthening as a priority area of activity and, if so, how might this be achieved?

Harmonisation of tools and approaches among Clusters/sectors:

• Is there a need for the harmonisation of approaches and tools among global Clusters?

• If so, how might this be achieved?

• Is there scope for wider use of the Humanitarian Indicator Registry?

Harmonisation of tools and approaches within Clusters/sectors:

- How can humanitarian agencies address the problem of multiple, uncoordinated assessment and monitoring systems? What are the relative advantages of the various approaches that have been tried to date, and what should be the next steps?

Information preparedness and baseline data:

- Is there a need to enhance action around the collection of baseline data (common operational datasets), ideally before crises occur?

- If so, how might further improvements be made?

- Should other areas of information preparedness be of concern?

Outcome monitoring:

- Is outcome monitoring feasible?

- If so, which actions need to be taken, and by whom, to make outcome monitoring a standard feature of humanitarian response?

Ethics:

- Is there a need to prioritise improvements in the ethics of IM (particularly around 'do no harm', informed consent, confidentiality, etc.)?

- If so, how might this be achieved?

Presentation, dissemination and storage:

- Is there potential for the greater harmonisation of guidance and approaches within and among global Clusters around the presentation, dissemination and storage of information? Should this be a priority?

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