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B.1. Coordination is essential and important

A sudden onset emergency situation is characterized by overwhelming needs; competing priorities; destroyed or damaged communication and transportation infrastructure; a rapid influx of providers of humanitarian assistance coupled with an outburst of mutual aid from local citizens; and highly stressed local governmental and non-governmental institutions. Given this view of the emergency conditions an image of chaos quickly springs to mind.

Coordination may be defined as intentional actions to harmonize individual responses to maximize impact and achieve synergy - a situation where the overall effect is greater than the sum of the parts. There can be a little coordination or a lot of coordination and, for the most part, the more coordination - the better.

The absence of coordination is characterized by gaps in service to affected populations; duplication of effort; inappropriate assistance; inefficient use of

resources; bottlenecks, impediments, and slow reaction to changing conditions; and frustration of relief providers, officials and survivors - in general, an unsatisfactory response to the emergency.

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At its best, coordination contributes to humane, neutral, and impartial assistance; increased management effectiveness; a shared vision of the best possible outcomes from a given situation; a seamless approach to service delivery; and donor confidence resulting in sufficient resources to achieve the desired outcomes, i.e., the least possible amount of human suffering and material damage and a rapid return to normal living conditions and the ongoing progress of development.

Coordination begins with the initiation of working relationships and regular sharing of information. As coordination increases there is a resulting change in the way relief providers implement their programs of assistance. Because relief providers cooperate, individuals and organizations adapt and adjust their efforts based on changing needs and each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Coordination rarely is the result of one group or organization telling another what or how to do their work. Certainly examples of coordination as "directing" exist, especially where relief operations are controlled by a strong national government, but these situations are uncommon.

The person or organization charged with promoting and ensuring cooperation is, therefore, working in an environment where the coordination authority has few if any resources to "require" coordination. Therefore, agencies and individuals must see some added value from participating in the coordination process and the benefits must outweigh the costs. And, indeed, there are costs to coordination. Coordination requires time and other resources. Coordination may result in one organization taking a "back seat" to another; closing operations in one area; taking on a challenge at which they may be less successful; or reducing their organization's profile.

Coordination, therefore, is far from a sure thing. Thus, the coordinating organization, in this case the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), must establish a coordination process based on certain characteristics.

To achieve the best possible coordination outcomes the process should be:

- **Participatory** - Coordination occurs through the legitimacy derived from involvement. The tasks of coordination must occur within a structure and process agreed and supported by the actors in the emergency situation. The coordinators must secure and maintain the confidence of the other actors, engendering an atmosphere of respect and good will. Organizations need to participate in deciding the policies, procedures, strategies and plans that will affect them.
- **Impartial** - The coordination process should not be seen to favour

one organization over another but rather to identify the distinctive competencies of the various actors. Coordination should advocate the principle of impartiality, i.e., the provision of relief solely on the basis of need irrespective of race, religion, political affiliation, gender, or age; provided by the actor most likely to achieve the desired outcomes.

- **Transparent** - Coordination requires trust and trust requires transparency; the willing flow of information, open decision-making processes, and publicly-stated, sincere, and honest rationales for decisions. This will include the need to admit failure or at least falling short of objectives.
- **Useful** - The coordination process must produce useful products, processes, and outcomes. These may include a platform for decision-making; an opportunity to use shared resources, a venue for donor recognition and support; or a comfortable place to share frustrations and try out new ideas.

B.2. Field coordination mandate, goal and objectives

B.2.1. OCHA's mandate

OCHA is responsible for coordination in a disaster or emergency. This responsibility has been historically determined and mandated. As such, OCHA's mandate is to ensure that the relief provided is effective, not to provide effective relief. OCHA's original mandate for natural disaster response stems from the United Nations General Assembly (GA) Resolution 2816 (XXVI) of 14 December 1971 which authorizes it to "mobilize, direct and coordinate" international assistance.

In December, 1991, the GA, by its resolution 46/182 recognized the need to strengthen and make more effective the collective efforts to provide humanitarian assistance. The resolution supported a strengthened leadership role of the Secretary-General to ensure better preparation for, as well as rapid and coherent response to, natural disasters and other emergencies. To this end, the resolution called for the Secretary-General to designate an Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) at the level of Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, and specified that the ERC should be supported by a secretariat; this is OCHA. GA Resolution 46/182 incorporates the mandate given in the original GA Resolution 2816 (XXVI) of 14 December 1971.

The responsibilities assigned to the ERC and his/her secretariat, OCHA, are essentially coordination, advocacy and information. This should include the following:

- Coordinating, facilitating, and mobilizing the humanitarian assistance of the United Nations system in those emergencies that require

a coordinated response.

- Providing services that maximize the efficient use of resources for humanitarian assistance, such as consolidating, managing and disseminating information including situation reports, early warning data and needs assessments.
- Mobilizing resources through the preparation of interagency appeals, management of response funds, and financial tracking of donor responses.
- Promoting competent staff through training programs and other staff development activities.
- Acting as focal point for advocacy on humanitarian concerns, for maximizing opportunities for preventative action and for securing access to people affected by conflict.
- Ensuring that relief contributes to future development and that development plans incorporate measures for disaster mitigation, preparedness and prevention.
- Supporting and strengthening national capacity for emergency response.

B.2.2. OCHA field-based goal and objectives

Field-based goal

The goal of humanitarian coordination is to ensure that humanitarian actors responding to disasters or emergencies work toward a common strategic vision, design and deliver their assistance in a complementary fashion according to their mandates and capacities, and adapt their activities in response to mutual agreement on changes in circumstances and, thus, of needs.

There are two aspects of humanitarian coordination, the first referring to requirements at the strategic level, and the second to those at the operational level. The two are interlinked.

Strategic coordination

Strategic coordination is concerned with the overall direction of the humanitarian program. Thus, it includes the setting of agreed goals for the program, drawing on a common strategic analysis of the problem. It allocates tasks and responsibilities, according to mandates and capacities, and ensures that these are reflected in a strategic plan. It includes the undertaking of advocacy of humanitarian principles. It ensures that resource mobilization for the program results from a process conducted in a manner which responds to agreed priorities. It monitors and evaluates the overall implementation of the program to ensure that changing circumstances and constraints are identified and are then responded to in an agreed manner. In so doing, it may address issues more generally regarded as operational when these issues are seen to have an impact on the program as a whole.

Operational coordination

Operational coordination is concerned with two requirements. The first is the need, within the strategic framework of the humanitarian program, for substantive coordination in relation to specific humanitarian sectors of activity, with regard to geographical areas or beneficiary groups. This is to ensure that, within each sector, the activities of different actors are conducted in a complementary manner and according to an agreed plan. The second requirement is for common services for humanitarian actors. Thus, operational coordination ensures that matters such as security, communications and common logistical systems are managed in a manner best calculated to respond to changing operational requirements.

Field-based objectives

Several objectives have been identified by OCHA as essential to achieving effective sustained field coordination consonant with its goal. These objectives include:

1. Ensure a comprehensive and coordinated program of humanitarian assistance by:
 - Creating a framework and mechanism/platform and acting as catalyst for strategic decision-making and consultation.
 - Identifying critical needs and targeting resources to those needs.
 - Ensuring access to populations-at-risk.
 - Developing and adopting a unified approach that eliminates gaps and duplications.
 - Promoting an appropriate division of responsibilities resulting in a streamlined and coherent service provision.
 - Promoting accountability through the use of monitoring and evaluation information.
 - Promoting emergency assistance that is supportive of recovery and long-term development.
 - Advocating for humanitarian principles and concerns as well as the security of humanitarian workers.
2. Ensure a steady and reliable flow of information to inform decision-making by:
 - Monitoring events, conditions and trends to provide sufficient early warning to enable a timely response.
 - Establishing and maintaining an effective information collection, analysis, dissemination and clearinghouse capacity.
3. Ensure sufficient resources to accomplish agreed programs by:
 - Mobilizing resources to accomplish tasks in a coordinated and systematic manner.
 - Providing essential coordination/common services.
 - Promoting sharing of resources among providers of humanitarian assistance.

Essentially, coordination normally progresses through the under-mentioned phases of increasing interaction:

- Information sharing.
- Agreed distribution of program tasks and responsibilities amongst all participants.
- Common goals and programs.

B.3. Field coordination functions

Overview

OCHA seeks, overall, to improve the impact of field operations through coordination. Coordination is determined by the GA to add value to the United Nation's efforts but is not expected to add a layer of decision-making or extra bureaucratic impediments.

If field operations are improved, improvement will be evident in the areas of efficiency, effectiveness and impact. Efficiency covers those improvements that ensure that services are provided for the least possible cost and minimum amount of resources. Effectiveness is improved when humanitarian assistance providers are able to achieve the objectives of their programs. Finally, impact is the extent to which the overall "quality of life" conditions in the emergency are improved.

To carry out its mandate, field coordination requires the provision of certain key functions. The mandate to ensure coordination does not, however, mean that OCHA must provide all of them - it must ensure they are there.

The UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC)

Certain functions require the status inherent in the representational role of the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) as the designated representative of the Secretary General and ERC and are closely linked with the responsibilities of the coordinator him/herself. The functions of the RC and the HC are separate, but are often combined in one person/office (see also B.4.1.)

The RC/HC is responsible for overall leadership of humanitarian coordination; representing the UN system to high levels of government and other high-level liaison; and facilitating sensitive political or inter-agency agreements.

Specific functions related to this include:

- Convene and chair coordination body.
- Facilitate agreement on division of responsibilities.
- Negotiate access to emergency areas for all organizations.
- Advocate for humanitarian concerns.

Depending on who has requested an UNDAC team from the ERC, the team may work to support the Government of the affected country and/or the RC/HC in-country.

B.3.1. OCHA coordination functions in the field

In order to achieve strategic coordination, OCHA will typically provide the functions of:

- **Operations/programme coordination** - Responsibility for facilitating a coordinated, comprehensive and coherent operation/ programme of assistance to meet the humanitarian needs in the emergency situation.
- **Information collection/dissemination** - Responsibility for collecting, compiling, analyzing, displaying and reporting on the general emergency situation, its consequences, resource need and availability, the response activities, the achievements, and the unmet needs.
- **Coordination for international Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams on-site during a collapsed structure emergency** - In accordance with GA Resolution 57/150 of 16 December 2002 on "Improving the effectiveness and coordination of international urban search and rescue operations"; OCHA is to deploy an UNDAC team to assist the national authorities in on-site coordination of the international USAR teams.

B.3.2 Common services

In order to achieve operational coordination OCHA may need to request and support the provision of UN common services such as:

- Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC).
- United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC).
- United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UN DSS).
- Civil Military Coordination (CMCoord).
- United Nations Humanitarian Air Services (UNHAS).
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

In regard to these services, OCHA's primary responsibility is to ensure that these services are accessible and sufficient.

B.3.3. Principal field coordination activities

OCHA staff and/or UNDAC-members will engage in the following activities when working to achieve the above listed goal and objectives.

Assessing/Analyzing

Assessing requires gathering information, analyzing it and making a judgement about the situation. UNDAC members begin assessing as soon as they hear about the disaster, consulting media and web-based information sources. Further assessing occurs during transit, when landing in-country, and travelling to the capital and/or disaster site. Every interaction provides an opportunity to build up a picture of the situation, i.e., assessing options as a prelude to action and as a guide to making good choices about deploying scarce resources.

Planning

Information collected on the survivor and institutional strengths and assets, humanitarian needs and programs of assistance offered by various responding organizations must be shared and discussed by these organizations. OCHA is responsible for regularly convening the organizations to plan integrated and comprehensive interventions; facilitating agreement on the division of responsibility; and taking such actions as are necessary to ensure plans are updated and interventions implemented as envisaged in the plan(s).

Mobilizing

The resources required to effectively respond to an emergency will be significant, and frequently fall outside of normal budgetary projections. OCHA is responsible for supporting the fund mobilization process, perhaps through the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) or a Flash Appeal. OCHA may also be required to mobilize personnel and material to support humanitarian assistance efforts.

Supporting

A coordinated program of assistance requires accurate and timely information on the humanitarian situation. OCHA is responsible for coordinating and supporting inter-organizational assessments; ensuring that all areas of possible assistance are assessed and that, to the extent possible, assessment teams do not duplicate each others' work or leave important areas unassessed. (See also Chapter G – Disaster Assessment.)

When the relief effort is organized in humanitarian clusters, e.g., shelter, health, etc., OCHA is responsible for supporting the cluster lead agency (s). OCHA may need to convene cluster meetings in the very early stages of the response.

In the early stages of a humanitarian emergency, especially a natural disaster with search and rescue requirements, OCHA will be responsible for identifying priority areas and coordinating on site international assistance providers at these areas, in support of national and local authorities.

Liaising

An emergency situation of sufficient magnitude will be characterized by a large number of different entities, e.g., host-government, UN agencies, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), providing humanitarian assistance. OCHA is responsible for ensuring that these organizations are linked with each other and with the overall effort. OCHA is, therefore, responsible for maintaining contact to promote integrated programming and regular and effective sharing of information.

Monitoring

As the humanitarian emergency evolves, new areas of need will develop; some needs will be met or otherwise decrease in importance; and new providers will join the effort. OCHA is responsible for monitoring the emergency situation,

needs and assistance provided to quickly identify emerging needs, gaps and duplications in assistance, and the extent of program accomplishments.

Reporting

OCHA is the principal organization through which information on the humanitarian situation is gathered and analyzed. OCHA is also, therefore, responsible for regularly communicating the results of the analysis to interested parties such as emergency responders, donors and the media, in the form of regular situation reports and briefings.

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B.4. OCHA country level coordination structures

B.4.1. Representatives of OCHA

The UN Resident Coordinator

In the great majority of countries where the UN system is present, overall coordination of UN activities falls primarily to the UN Resident Coordinator (RC), in consultation with the relevant UN agencies. In most cases, the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is designated as the RC. The RC is responsible for coordinating UN humanitarian assistance. In the period before a disaster occurs, the RC coordinates preparedness and mitigation activities; monitors and provides early warning of potential emergency situations; leads contingency planning based on early warning monitoring; and chairs the UN Disaster Management Team (UN DMT). Unless otherwise designated, once an emergency occurs, the RC will continue to lead and coordinate the UN inter-agency response. For the duration of the emergency the RC reports to the ERC who is also Under-Secretary General of Humanitarian Affairs, i.e., the head of OCHA.

The UN Humanitarian Coordinator

If an emergency becomes significant in size and/or complexity, the ERC, in consultation with the UN agencies, may appoint a UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). If the RC has the necessary skills, he/she will normally be designated as HC. If not, either a new RC will be appointed to serve in both functions, or a separate HC will be appointed. In countries where there is a significant risk of the occurrence of a complex or major emergency, efforts will be made by the Administrator of UNDP, whether through specific training or accelerated rotation, to find a RC with an appropriate humanitarian profile. The HC normally phases out once the emergency subsides.

Lead agency as coordinator

In instances where one UN agency is providing the overwhelming majority of UN humanitarian assistance, the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) may designate this agency as Lead Agency and its representative as the HC, acting under the authority of the ERC and reporting to him/her on coordination matters.

B.4.2. OCHA Field Coordination Unit

During an emergency, OCHA is responsible for ensuring that the RC/HC receives the support required to carry out his/her responsibilities. In major or long running emergencies the Coordinator will need substantial assistance in the form of a core of experienced and energetic professional and support staff and adequate logistical, administrative and financial support. This may entail the establishment of a dedicated Field Coordination Unit (FCU).

B.4.3. The operations coordination centre

In situations combining a high number of humanitarian actors and a rapidly evolving emergency situation requiring a high degree of real time “operational coordination”, the OCHA field coordination activity may be organized in an Operations Coordination Centre. The Centre serves as the entity for the coordination of the operational activities undertaken by humanitarian organizations responding to the emergency, including the United Nations agencies, the government, and NGOs. It provides a clearly visible focal point and “meeting place” for interaction amongst the organizations carrying out or supporting the humanitarian response operation. The Centre focuses on the multi-sectoral overview of the situation, actors and responses to the emergency. It ensures that sectoral coordination is integrated and presented within a plan for the overall humanitarian response, ideally through cluster coordination carried out from the Centre by the agency designated responsible for a given cluster.

In a natural disaster, the Centre will typically be known as an On-Site Operations Coordination Centre (OSOCC) and be located at the disaster site. Sub-OSOCCs may be established at other locations affected by the emergency. (See also Chapter E – Coordination in the Field.)

B.4.4. Regional coordination mechanism

In situations where the emergency is likely to, or already has, involved more than one country, the IASC and ERC may establish a regional coordination mechanism of some kind. Operating under the supervision of the ERC, a regional coordinating mechanism will have responsibility for facilitating congruence of country-specific policies on sub-regional humanitarian assistance issues, including, where appropriate, standardization of agreements governing cross-border operations and providing logistical support including regional telecommunications networks.

B.4.5. Integrated UN missions

In some situations, the UN agencies in-country will simultaneously be involved with humanitarian, security, and development operations. In such cases there may be three separate and distinct reporting lines. Peace-keeping forces will be

overseen by a Force Commander, humanitarian affairs by a UN Humanitarian Coordinator, and development activities by a UN Resident Coordinator. There may also be a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

An SRSG may be appointed to act on behalf of the Secretary General in an emergency which is “complex or of exceptional magnitude” - normally one in which there are major political negotiations and/or when UN peace-keeping forces are deployed. An SRSG has overall responsibility for UN system-wide action and coordination. The OCHA Coordinator(s) has a dual reporting requirement to both the SRSG and the ERC.

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B.5. Coordination fora

B.5.1. Local authorities

In most emergencies, especially in sudden onset emergencies, the main UN counterpart in-country is the national government. In most countries the government will appoint a special ministry or other entity charged with overall coordination of government humanitarian assistance and with interacting with international assistance entities. When such a government coordination structure exists, this will be an important counterpart for UN humanitarian coordination staff. Other government ministries OCHA may liaise with include Foreign Affairs, Interior (normally encompassing the police and border control functions), Defence, and Civil Defence. The UNDAC team may at times be tasked to strengthen this capacity of the government authorities.

At the field level, it is not unusual for local authorities, such as regional governors or local military commanders, to have considerable responsibility and some degree of independence from the capital. An important task of OCHA field level staff is to ensure that such authorities are well informed concerning the objectives, principles, and implementation of humanitarian assistance, both of the UN as well as the larger international system.

In complex emergencies, UN assistance may need to be provided to persons living in areas outside of the control of the national government, e.g., under the control of opposition groups. Opposition groups may have established their own coordination mechanisms and OCHA field staff must be able to work effectively with them.

B.5.2. United Nations Disaster Management Team (UN DMT)

The GA has mandated that a standing UN Disaster Management Team (UN DMT), also referred to as the UN Country Team (UNCT), be formed in every disaster/emergency-prone country. The UN DMT is chaired by the RC/HC. Its composition is unique to each country depending on its special circumstances and normally includes representatives, if present in the country, from Food and Agricultural Organization, (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United

Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In some countries the UN DMT may be expanded to include donor representatives, major NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement. In such cases, it is often known as the IASC Country Team.

The primary purpose of the UN DMT is to prepare for and ensure a prompt, effective, and concerted response and promote coordinated UN assistance to the government for post-emergency recovery. This does not supersede the mandates of its members. During an emergency, the UN DMT is the main in-country mechanism by which UN agencies coordinate policies and programmes of humanitarian assistance. (See also Chapter M – United Nations and International Response Organizations.)

B.5.3. The Cluster approach

The IASC principals have agreed to establish cluster leads at the global level in nine sectors of humanitarian activity. The cluster leads will act as lead agency and have been mandated to establish a coordinating mechanism within their sector.

The designated clusters are:

Cluster	Lead agency
Nutrition	UNICEF
Water and sanitation	UNICEF
Health	WHO
Camp coordination and management	UNHCR – complex emergencies. IOM – natural disasters.
Emergency shelter	UNHCR – complex emergencies IFRC – natural disasters (taking into account the IFRC's obligations and independence, IFRC will act as convener).
Protection	UNHCR – complex emergencies. UNHCR/UNICEF/OHCHR – will jointly determine under the overall leadership of the RC/HC in natural disasters.
Logistics	WFP
Telecommunications	OCHA for emergency telecommunication and as overall process owner. UNICEF for common data services. WFP for common security and telecommunications services.
Early recovery	UNDP

The cluster approach will be applied in these nine sectors with the understanding that in four sectors the cluster model is not necessary as these four already have sufficient leadership. These four are:

- Food led by the WFP.
- Refugees led by the UNHCR.
- Education led by UNICEF.
- Agriculture led by FAO.

The IASC-endorsed cluster approach operates at two levels. At the global level, the aim is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by designating global cluster leads that are accountable for ensuring predictable and effective inter-agency responses within the particular sectors or areas of activity concerned.

At the country level, the aim is to strengthen the coordination framework and response capacity by mobilizing clusters of agencies/organizations/NGOs to respond in particular sectors or areas of activity, each cluster having a clearly designated lead as agreed by the RC/HC and the IASC Country Team. To enhance predictability, where possible, this should be in line with the cluster lead arrangements at the global level.

OCHA will take on the role of ensuring the establishment of the cluster approach in a sudden onset disaster and provide inter-cluster coordination, overall guidance and monitoring of the process, and advocacy to support the work of the clusters.

Cluster lead ToR

The cluster leads have been given standard Terms of Reference. In summary they are as follows:

- The cluster lead will be accountable for ensuring preparedness and response that is both adequate and predictable. It will work with relevant actors and agencies with expertise and capacities in that area.
- At the field level, the clusters provide support to the Humanitarian Coordinators who are able to call upon cluster leads for support as required.
- The cluster lead will not carry out all of the activities itself, but will be responsible for ensuring that these activities are carried out and will act as the provider of last resort.

The complete ToR for the cluster lead may be downloaded from the Reliefweb or obtained through OCHA.

B.5.4. Military/humanitarian operations interface

In countries that have a UN peace-keeping mission or other multi-national military presence it may be expected that such operations would have resources

which will be of considerable value for the implementation of humanitarian operations. Apart from providing security to humanitarian operations, such resources as logistics, telecommunications, and engineering support such as road, bridge, and site preparation may be useful or essential.

A UN peace-keeping operation may have a humanitarian cell or other humanitarian liaison function. US military operations or US-led multi-national forces often have a Civil-Military Operations Centre (CMOC) with humanitarian liaison as one of its responsibilities.

Ideally, such military liaison functions should work to support OCHA's coordination role. As the availability, type of resources, and expertise will differ in each situation, it is not possible to create a generic model for linkage between a peace-keeping operation and the OCHA coordination structure. Organizationally, the military support element might be limited to a position in a liaison cell or take up a more active position in other cells.

The military assets available for humanitarian activities should be integrated or at least linked to the OCHA coordination structure. However, it is important that the military liaison functions, if in the form of a humanitarian cell or CMOC, act in support of and not parallel to or in front of a primary humanitarian coordination function.

OCHA-Geneva has a Civil Military Coordination Section (CMCS) which may assist in establishing a military - civilian interface. CMCS has provided training to numerous persons in civil-military coordination (CMCoord) who can function as liaisons on all levels of the coordination structure. (See also Chapter L – Civil Military Coordination.)

B.5.5. NGO coordinating councils

In any given emergency there may be a large proliferation of NGOs. They may have organized themselves into NGO coordination bodies to meet their collective needs and integrate activities to maximize their impact. Such efforts may be organized by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), or other NGO umbrella organizations. The activities of these NGO coordinating bodies should be integrated into OCHA's overall coordination effort.

B.5.6. Donor councils

In some emergencies, donors may form a coordination body for their own purposes. These bodies are more likely to be created at the height of an emergency, when donors need information quickly and when, individually, they are not able to get reliable information. These efforts may be sustained during the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, as well.

B.6. Variations between natural disasters and complex emergencies

While each emergency situation is unique, many aspects of the emergency environment and how the response is managed are the same in natural disasters and complex emergencies. Significant variations also exist and are detailed below. The terms disaster and emergency have generally, though not universally, accepted definitions (see UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction definitions at www.unisdr.org).

The role of the national government/state

“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.”

“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.”

These principles from GA Resolution 46/182 are fundamental to the UN system.

While for most natural disasters, the State is a willing and legitimate partner and must request international assistance. In complex emergencies, the legitimacy and territory of the State is under, often violent, dispute. In some situations a State, per se, may not exist. Even if it does exist it may have limited authority and capability.

This situation makes the adherence to the above principles problematic in complex emergencies. In these cases the commitment to the victims may supersede the commitment to the State. More likely, however, OCHA coordination efforts will need to acknowledge the legitimacy of competing authorities. Thus, OCHA may need to develop and maintain effective relationships not only with the State but also with the antagonists and political opposition.

Time frame

While the basic human needs for security, food, water, shelter and medical treatment are the same for beneficiaries in natural disasters and complex emergencies, the role of an UNDAC team in a natural disaster will be circumscribed to a short period of time. In a natural disaster speed of response is critical and is measured in hours and days. This is especially so in an earthquake situation where trapped people are unlikely to survive more than 3-4 days unless rescued.

For most complex emergencies the OCHA presence and coordination mandate will need to be sustained over a longer period of time and needs created by the emergency will become chronic. This will inevitably affect the coordination approach and determine priorities.

Bilateral donor response

In a natural disaster, donor response whether financial or in-kind is largely bilateral between the donor government and affected government. In this case, coordination becomes even more difficult and the people responsible for coordination have to make a special effort to draw donor governments and organizations into the coordination process. This is less of a challenge in complex emergencies since donor response is mostly through multilateral channels.

The role of the military

Using military assets for humanitarian needs in a complex emergency is a political decision and has been opposed in the past in recipient countries, e.g., Somalia. In a natural disaster it is far easier to use military assets for relief as there are fewer political implications to such use.