

John Holmes Symposium+5 Key Note Address

I am delighted to have this opportunity to give you all something of my own perspective in the role of information and knowledge management in the better provision of humanitarian relief, and how I see it fitting into the many challenges we face, not only those of today but also the new issues we can see coming up in the next few years. I like to think I am a pragmatic, straightforward sort of person, and I will try to frame what I say accordingly. Because at the end of the day what matters is what makes a difference on the ground – whether we save lives or not, whether we help people cope with disaster or not.

I come from a professional background – the world of diplomacy – where information and words are absolutely key to everything we do. The collection and analysis of information, questions about with whom to share it – and more importantly sometimes – with whom not to share it, were and are fundamental to understanding and to success. And how this information and analysis was expressed and conveyed – the exact words, the precise nuances, the constructive ambiguity, the hidden as well as the open messages – was an indispensable tool of the trade. I had expected, in coming into the humanitarian world at the beginning of the year, to find a very different context – much more practical and operational, more hands-on, much less concerned with the subtleties of diplomatic word- games. And I have to say I looked forward to this change.

What I actually found was that I was only half right. Humanitarians are, rightly, much less concerned with the infinite variations of language, much happier to call a spade a spade, if not a bloody shovel. Nuance is not the community's strongest point, and has relatively little value. Where I was profoundly mistaken was to imagine that information and analysis would be a less central concern, or would be somehow easier. What I have learned in my first months is that while some facts are obvious – the flood, the earthquake, the conflict, the exodus of refugees and IDP's – and some consequences are all too visible – death, destruction, despair – as soon as you start to dig deeper you run into the central and glaring need for really good information and really good analysis. In other words decent knowledge. Without that you can't really get off first base. You don't know what people really need or where or how urgently. You can't make sensible decisions about priorities – whether within or between emergencies. And you can't communicate credibly with all the other people you need to influence – the media, the donors, the local authorities and, the most neglected of all from this point of view, the beneficiaries themselves.

My visits to the crisis areas in Darfur, in Chad, in the DRC, in Somalia and elsewhere; my discussions with agencies and NGO's; my encounters with the media; my interactions with governments from all different parts of the development and developing country spectrum, all have contributed to convincing me that good information and good analysis – and the ability to communicate both effectively – are central to everything we do, and central above all to doing it better.

This may seem obvious. I am not sure that it is, or that even now this is fully recognized, even if events like today and the progress made since the first symposium five years ago suggest that this issue is now much better understood. Why do I say this? Because information management is still too often regarded – and I do not

exempt OCHA in this regard – as something that a separate bunch of people do, and not necessarily the most senior or best regarded in the organization, rather than as something which is so fundamental that for literally all the key parts of the organisation and all the key players in the organisation, it must be the major priority – because without it all else will turn out to be inadequate in one way or another.

And information itself is very directly about saving lives. If we take the wrong decisions, make the wrong choices about where we put our money and our effort because our knowledge is poor, we are condemning some of the most deserving to death or destitution, and helping the relatively less needy when they do not require our relief so desperately. And in a context where resources are almost always going to fall short of the needs, we are always going to have to make these kinds of choices, and to set these kinds of priorities. To put it at its most basic, if we are going to claim at all to be needs-driven, we have to have good knowledge of what those needs are and to have the ability to compare across countries and across continents, and across crises of very different kinds and origins. And this knowledge has to be particularly sound, particularly well-founded on evidence and observation if we are to resist the siren calls of the CNN effect, and of the political choices of others, or the politically correct in today's circumstances.

I have seen this for myself everywhere I have gone – which is of course the value of seeing for yourself and really understanding. The situations in each of the places I have visited have never been quite what I expected or anticipated, even from the good briefings I was given, and certainly in most cases did not conform to the media images I, like everyone else in this media driven age, had already had formed in my head.

Let me go back a stage, to the challenges we face. The humanitarian community has come a long way in recent years, in my half-outsider, half-insider view. We are better than we used to be at delivering the right help at the right time to the right people. We are better coordinated, more coherent, more predictable, more effective. But we also all know we have a very long way to go:

- the humanitarian system – though it is not a system in the sense of having been designed but rather a somewhat haphazard collection of agencies, NGO's and other actors – is at best diverse, at worst fragmented. Its major constituent parts are, in most cases, fiercely independent, often competitive, and equipped with overlapping mandates. Not the easiest bunch to coordinate.

- there is much focus on needs assessment, and much work on the tools to provide this. But as I have already suggested, we are still a long way from having at our disposal, simple, reliable, rapid, cross-sectoral assessments which enable us to set priorities and direct resources in the way that we would like.

- similarly we are all aware of the need for much better impact evaluation. Did we do what we set out to do, and were our intentions the right ones in the first place? Do those we helped agree that we did what they needed? Again much talk, a lot of detailed work, but still no reliable, useable tools, and not much sign of lessons learned.

- availability of funds is already a problem, but this is likely to get worse. Demands for humanitarian assistance are likely to grow, not least under the already dramatically visible effects of climate change and the inexorable rise of extreme weather events affecting millions of lives and livelihoods, even if the death tolls do not always stir our headlines-conscious, story-driven media. So we will almost certainly have to prioritise even more rigorously than now, even if we do manage to increase our resource base somehow.

- the complexity and sensitivity of some of the issues we are dealing with are also increasing – internal conflicts and IDP's are tougher to tackle than the consequences of classic inter-state wars, and the sensitivity of many governments to the interventions of the international humanitarian community is also on the rise, while access and security of humanitarians are going backwards in many places.

- and last but not least, expectations – from donors, from the media, from the victims of crises themselves – are growing, rightly.

All this reinforces the need to have the best possible information and analysis at our disposal to confront these multiple and increasing challenges successfully – although our responses will never be perfect and we incidentally need to put much more focus on preventive areas like disaster risk reduction, and national and regional disaster preparedness and management capacity building. And all this also means that we have to get better at information and analysis together, collectively. One of the things that has struck me most forcibly in the last few months, given the diversity / fragmentation of the system, is the importance of partnerships – between UN and non-UN actors, between them and governments, and between all of these and affected populations.

The importance of this partnership in information management is, or should be, obvious. We have to share information and analysis because they are essentially common to us all, what binds us together despite our differences. As you have all recognized, we have to have common principles, common standards, common indicators, common methodologies, and fully open information exchange. We have to be interoperable. We have to be able to compare apples with apples, and distinguish apples from oranges. Then and only then will we have the genuinely satisfactory evidence on which to base our decisions and, particularly important in my own case, our advocacy. Because if we are not credible as humanitarians, we are nothing. We have to be able to assess quickly and credibly the seriousness of a hurricane in Central America versus a flood in Asia and a drought in Africa. We have to be able to distinguish the gravity for the victims of the media-worthy conflict in an easily accessible and 'sexy' part of the world from the long running and media-neglected, but possibly much more devastating drama in some other remote part of the globe. We have to be able to say reliably when emergency relief can safely give way to rehabilitation and development. We do all these things already, and I am not saying we do them badly or often get our judgements spectacularly wrong. But we all know we could be better still – and if we as humanitarians are not better at this, from our stand point of independence, impartiality and humanity, there is not much chance that others will be.

Let me finish with a few points about two key areas: the relationship between information management and humanitarian reform; and the role I see for OCHA in this area.

First, the package of reforms set in train in 2005/6, and which incidentally we should now regard simply as the way we all do business, rather than as experiments still being tried out, i.e. the cluster approach, financing changes, notably CERF and other locally pooled funds, and the strengthening of humanitarian coordinators. I have already talked about the fourth cross-cutting pillar – if a cross-cutting pillar is not a metaphor too far – of enhanced partnerships. These reforms were, and are, aimed at the same goals as improved information management, in other words greater coherence, predictability, effectiveness and accountability. But there is a much closer relationship than that between information and these reforms. Activating clusters in any given situation not only depends on having sufficient evidence about needs in the first place. Clusters should also be a source of good, reliable, solidly-based and above all agreed and shared information and analysis in their specific sectors. And cluster leads should be at the forefront of ensuring this is the case, not least the needs assessment, the who-does-what-where, where the real gaps and duplications lie, communicating this to all those who need to know, and acting on this information in directing or redirecting cluster partners accordingly. And this is why we want to introduce the clusters, progressively but rapidly, into all significant new or continuing humanitarian relief operations.

On the financing side, efficient and rationed resource allocation obviously depends totally on good knowledge and the ability to assess needs and set priorities between different crises and different sectors. For CERF we are doing the best we can with the information we have and the analyses we can do, but I know from experience that this is not as rigorous and scientific as I would like, even if I recognize that tricky judgement calls will always be needed. A rapid and simple system to evaluate the seriousness of a new crisis and where the greatest needs lie is not yet there. And it needs to be. We cannot simply rely on what reaches us from the country team or the field, vital though this is, without applying some relative judgements at the centre – which means having substantial and verifiable data as far as possible, in the inevitably messy and chaotic circumstances of a humanitarian emergency.

And in the third area of change, the role of humanitarian coordinators, it is self evident that they cannot do the central and vital job we are demanding of them if they do not have access to good information analysis – about the disasters in their own countries, but also from the centre to enable that information to be put into perspective compared to needs elsewhere.

Finally, what am I calling for from OCHA itself in all this? Our mandate revolves around the coordination of humanitarian response, policy development and advocacy. I hope it is obvious from what I have been saying that we cannot do any of these tasks properly without good, high quality information and analysis, without good knowledge and the ability to use and disseminate this credibly. That is why I have called for a revolution within OCHA in the way information and analysis are used to drive and support humanitarian relief efforts and advocacy, and have made these a central plank of my vision for OCHA for the next few years. We have to be knowledge brokers and intellectual leaders in this area, and provide reliable and

consistent knowledge products which can inform the decision making and responses of others, as well as our own. In other words we should be setting the standards and encouraging others to follow, and adding value in the way that we best can, by providing the broad, cross-sectoral overview and big picture of any emergency. More specifically if each cluster has to be responsible for its own better information flow and better analysis, we have to manage the information flow and analysis across the clusters. And we have to ensure that the information and analysis I have been talking about is available right across the spectrum, from pre-crisis early warnings, through preparedness and response, and onto early recovery, reconstruction, and indeed prevention of recurrence.

These are ambitious targets. But I believe we need to be ambitious in this area above all, because of its centrality to all we do. It is no good having thousands of tonnes of food or thousands of tents available if we do not know where best to send them, no good knowing houses are damaged if we do not know how badly and what would work best to repair or replace them, no good knowing people affected by the latest floods are in need of help if we cannot compare their needs rationally with those of the crisis of the previous or following weeks. And by the way, we cannot even begin to achieve any of these ambitious targets without the active cooperation of our partners, i.e. all of you, which will in turn mean you making changes in the way that you do business and sacrificing some of your autonomy in the process.

Let me add a final word about communication. I said at the beginning that I had been half right about the humanitarian community not needing to attach so much importance to the subtleties of word choice. But even here I was only half right too. For humanitarians, good communication is absolutely critical because without it we cannot mobilize the resources and the attention as we have to do, to address the needs we have identified. And while good communication is a skill in its own right, it is also highly dependent on good information and analysis to convince and to be credible. Moreover, as I have suggested already, communicating better with those we are trying to help strikes me as a major gap in our armoury, and yet another key challenge for us in the future.

So for all of these reasons and more, the value of this Symposium and of the work you all do is absolutely clear, and the need to do better equally so. I look forward to hearing the results and the conclusions of your work – the more practical, the better, not least perhaps a mechanism to bring you all together on the issues in a more systematic and results oriented way. And may I in conclusion wish you all an enjoyable and productive remainder of this Symposium.