HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SECTOR UPDATE – MAY 2007

SECTOR OVERVIEW

When a disaster occurs, the influx of humanitarian personnel and supplies can be overwhelming. Numerous agencies gather information on damage, humanitarian needs, and local capacity to respond, but without a system to collect, organize, and convey information, important knowledge can be lost, potentially delaying the arrival of essential aid or preventing agencies from knowing what type of assistance would be most helpful. Humanitarian coordination and information management efforts aim to organize agencies and information so that the most appropriate form of aid reaches the neediest populations as quickly as possible.

The United States was one of the authors of the original concept of central U.N. coordination in emergency response and continues to be a key supporter of humanitarian coordination efforts today. In FY 2006, USAID/OFDA provided approximately $35 million in support of humanitarian coordination and information management programs. USAID/OFDA believes that sustained engagement with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the U.N., and other donors at all levels—at headquarters, regional offices, and field locations—forms the basis for effective coordination and information management during an emergency. USAID/OFDA's most visible efforts in the sector may be at the site of a disaster, but the office supports numerous global and regional initiatives to strengthen capacity.

Effective humanitarian coordination and information management ensure that supplies reach beneficiaries like this woman affected by Typhoon Xangsane in Vietnam. (International Committee of the Red Cross)

GOOD HUMANITARIAN DONORSHIP (GHD)

The U.S. Government (USG), including USAID/OFDA, is expanding its involvement in GHD—an initiative to improve coordination, effectiveness, and accountability among donors. GHD recognizes that donors have the same goals: save lives and alleviate suffering; provide assistance according to need; ensure adequate, predictable, and flexible funding; and increase donor accountability and learning.

USAID/OFDA and other USG representatives are taking the lead on establishing indicators to measure donor and program performance in emergencies. Currently, agencies working on the same types of programs with the same goals measure results differently, obstructing efforts to assess overall humanitarian effectiveness. USAID/OFDA is also leading a GHD working group to review the evidence base for humanitarian assistance. The group aims to reach consensus on the best ways to measure need to more accurately gauge the severity of a crisis and the appropriateness of a response.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

To help improve humanitarian information management, USAID/OFDA funds the Geographic Information Support Team (GIST) Geographic Data Repository, maintained by the University of Georgia's Information Technology Outreach Services. The initiative is based on the idea that developing a common method of sharing and organizing information will help the humanitarian community coordinate responses. The repository aims to provide the humanitarian community with baseline geographic information that is available as soon as a disaster strikes an area.

Most data is publicly available through the GIST website at https://gist.itos.uga.edu, which allows humanitarian agencies to upload and download information during an emergency. This is especially helpful for U.N.-managed Humanitarian Information Centers (HICs), also funded by USAID/OFDA, that coordinate data and information from humanitarian agencies. The information from the repository can be translated into maps, charts, or other formats that help humanitarian organizations make program decisions. Organizations use the information to determine where other agencies are working to avoid duplication and plan activities according to needs.

ADDITIONAL USAID/OFDA ACTIVITIES TO STRENGTHEN HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

- **Serving on the ALNAP Steering Committee.** USAID/OFDA represents USAID on the steering committee of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Practice (ALNAP), a forum for the humanitarian community to share lessons learned and best practices. USAID/OFDA also provides funding to ALNAP.
- **Supporting NGO coordination through InterAction.** USAID/OFDA encourages coordination with NGOs through support to the InterAction alliance, which includes more than 160 U.S.-based NGOs. USAID/OFDA funds the InterAction Humanitarian Policy and Practice Team, which helps forge a strong dialogue between InterAction's NGO members and USAID. USAID/DCHA staff, State Department colleagues, and InterAction members meet frequently to share information on the latest humanitarian developments, issues, and concerns.
- **Supporting coordination through the U.N. system.** Since the U.N.'s inception, the USG has been a key promoter of the U.N. assuming a central humanitarian coordination function. USAID/OFDA's main coordination implementing partner is the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which USAID/OFDA funds at the country, regional, and global levels. USAID/OFDA also supports sector-level coordination, including information management efforts, through the cluster approach at the global and country levels. USAID/OFDA contributed to the U.N. Central Emergency Response Fund in 2006 and will contribute in 2007 to the strengthening of the U.N. system that appoints Humanitarian Coordinators for each major disaster. USAID/OFDA also provides financial, technical, and strategic support for coordination of critical data and information through various efforts, including HICs.
- **Providing leadership in information management within the humanitarian community.** Through support of information management tools, USAID/OFDA aims to improve coordination and identify gaps. Following the magnitude 7.6 earthquake that struck South Asia in October 2005, a geographic information systems officer created a map of USAID-funded programs in Pakistan. The USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team used the map to identify unmet needs and program additional funds while avoiding duplication of services. In addition, the maps triggered discussions about on-the-ground coordination between NGOs working in the same locations, areas where needs appeared to be unmet, and delivery routes.
- **Improving the availability of historical data.** USAID/OFDA supports the Emergency Events Database at the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED). Available to the public online at http://www.em-dat.net/, this tool provides more than 100 years worth of information on disasters throughout the world, allowing for trend analysis and historical comparisons.