

Principles and Best Practices of Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange¹

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Timely and accurate information is recognized as integral to humanitarian action in both natural disasters and complex emergencies. The international humanitarian community's ability to collect, analyze, disseminate and act on key information is fundamental to effective response. Better information leading to improved response directly benefits affected populations. Over time, improved assessment of impacts and responses through better data collection and management contributes to a more complete global database on disaster impacts, leading to better risk assessment and targeting of prevention and preparedness activities.

Principles of Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange

The Symposium affirmed the fundamental principle that the purpose of humanitarian assistance is to assist affected and at-risk people. Information management and exchange should reflect this humanitarian imperative and promote more effective humanitarian action.

Symposium participants also identified the following operational principles to guide information management and exchange activities:

Accessibility. Humanitarian information and data should be made accessible to all humanitarian actors by applying easy-to-use formats and by translating information into common or local languages when necessary. Information and data for humanitarian purposes should be made widely available through a variety of online and offline distribution channels including the media.

Inclusiveness. Information management and exchange should be based on a system of collaboration, partnership and sharing with a high degree of participation and ownership by multiple stakeholders, especially representatives of the affected population.

Inter-operability. All sharable data and information should be made available in formats that can be easily retrieved, shared and used by humanitarian organizations.

Accountability. Users must be able to evaluate the reliability and credibility of data and information by knowing its source. Information providers should be responsible to their partners and stakeholders for the content they publish and disseminate.

Verifiability. Information should be accurate, consistent and based on sound methodologies, validated by external sources, and analyzed within the proper contextual framework.

Relevance. Information should be practical, flexible, responsive, and driven by operational needs in support of decision-making throughout all phases of a crisis.

¹ Abridged by IASCI

Objectivity. Information managers should consult a variety of sources when collecting and analyzing information so as to provide varied and balanced perspectives for addressing problems and recommending solutions.

Humanity. Information should never be used to distort, to mislead or to cause harm to affected or at-risk populations and should respect the dignity of victims.

Timeliness. Humanitarian information should be collected, analyzed and disseminated efficiently, and must be kept current.

Sustainability. Humanitarian information and data should be preserved, cataloged and archived, so that it can be retrieved for future use, such as for preparedness, analysis, lessons learned and evaluation.

Key Issues

In support of these principles, Symposium participants highlighted a number of key themes to be considered when developing and implementing humanitarian information management and exchange systems.

1) User Requirements

The Symposium emphasized that information management systems should meet the clearly defined needs of users and decision-makers, and aim to reduce the effects of information overload.

2) Quality of Data and Information

To be useful, data and information must be relevant, accurate and timely. Ensuring quality requires the development of, and adherence to, standards for information collection, exchange, security, attribution and use. In addition, it is vital to maintain a strong sense of professional ethics at every stage of information system design and implementation, including such elements as independence and impartiality, in pursuit of humanitarian action.

3) Technology

Technology is a powerful enabler. Technology should not, however, undermine, distort or overshadow content. Achieving humanitarian objectives by using technology is not primarily a question of hardware and software, but rather of cost-effectiveness and appropriateness for achieving desired humanitarian outcomes. Information system designers should consider explicit and proactive efforts for making systems relevant and easy to use, particularly in remote areas. This includes bridging the technological divide by building capacity, promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills between local and international actors and making information available through a variety of means in a variety of formats. Human judgment, rather than technology, is the basis for operational decisions.

4) Partnerships

Successful information management systems encourage openness, inclusiveness and sharing. This strengthens relations, trust and coordination among multiple stakeholders. Multiple information systems, including Web sites and databases, operating at global, regional and local levels, create the potential for an unprecedented degree of cooperation between organizations and people at the field level, between the field and headquarters and between the international and local communities.

Partnering with the media can be an effective way of communicating information to the affected population.

5) Preparedness

One of the most important aspects of humanitarian information management and exchange is preparation. Information-related efforts that are incrementally resourced and initiated only as emergency situations unfold tend to remain behind the curve and reactive. This leads to a failure to provide timely information that is accurate and contextual. Preparedness measures such as base data preparation for high-risk areas, national-level capacity building and the formation of institutional relationships prior to deployment enable information management and exchange systems to effectively support assistance efforts once an emergency begins. Preparation also includes planning for sustainability and/or exit strategies.

Best Practices

The following is a set of best practices derived from the principles and themes summarized above and identified as integral to the future success of humanitarian information management and exchange. In complex emergencies and natural disasters, the humanitarian community should:

Define user needs and emphasize data sets and formats that directly support decision-making at the field level. Identify user groups, conduct user requirement analysis, inventory information resources inventory and define core information products based on user input. Develop and implement information products on operationally relevant themes, such as the location and condition of the affected population, “who is doing what, where?” and factors affecting access to affected populations. Use templates such as the Rapid Village Assessment (RVA) tool to speed data collection. Create maps to effectively communicate information to decision-makers.

Collect and analyze base data and information before and throughout an emergency. Gather, organize and archive data and information on operationally relevant themes for high-risk areas in preparation for emergencies. Maintain and enhance data sets during emergency responses. Document and archive data so that it is easily accessible for future use.

Maintain and promote data and information standards. Follow generally accepted standards for information exchange, such as the Structured Humanitarian Assistance Reporting (SHARE) standard to promote data sourcing, dating and geo-referencing. The SHARE standard facilitates integration of data from multiple sources and enhances verifiability, assessment, analysis and accountability. Geo-referencing data during collection allows cartographic presentation and geographic information system (GIS) analysis. Create metadata catalogs as part of a standard documentation process with handover procedures.

Maximize resources by expanding partnerships. Recognize that data and information are collected and managed by a variety of actors including national governments, UN agencies, NGOs, the private sector and research institutions and that the contributions of these providers are crucial. Pre-establish inter-agency agreements and relationships at the national and local levels. Establish an ongoing process of personal interaction to create partnerships for information management and exchange. Use distributed networks and neutral portal repositories to assist with information sharing and promote linkages to avoid duplication of effort.

Engage local and national actors in information projects. Develop networks of local communities and national NGOs, civil society groups and the private sector and address the issue of local participation as part of overall emergency planning, monitoring and evaluation. Build and strengthen

the national/local capacity in information management and exchange and promote the transfer and use of local knowledge.

Maintain preparedness "toolboxes" for online and offline distribution. These toolboxes provide guidelines and reference tools for the rapid-deployment of HICs or the establishment of Web sites and databases under a variety of field conditions. Toolboxes should include data standards, operating procedures, training materials, database templates and manuals.

Define an exit strategy. Develop a clear phase-out strategy, including transitioning to development activities and creating archiving systems to maintain access by current and future stakeholders after the project is closed.

Preserve institutional operational memory. Define and adhere to sound data and information management policies and techniques for handling large volumes of information. Document datasets with metadata. Maintain quality control and organizational learning to avoid the need to start from scratch with each emergency and to maintain quality of information services during emergencies.

Establish field-based HICs according to identified operational and decision-making demand. Design them as open-access physical locations, incorporate existing capacities, systems and information management activities. Serve as a neutral broker of humanitarian information, providing value-added products and beneficial services to the field-based humanitarian community. Encourage broad participation from local, national and international actors to facilitate and support humanitarian response activities. Form partnerships with specialized agencies and sector experts to conduct sectoral surveys and analyses.

Use appropriate technology. Ensure that field information systems reach the broadest possible audience. Be aware of the limitations of technology (both inherent and as related to availability). For example, keep in mind that the Internet, while powerful, is not a panacea and can be ineffective as a distribution channel to and from remote areas. Consider making data products, particularly databases, available via e-mail, CD-ROM and for local download. Recognize that local staff's ability to work with the technology is an important determinant of success. Technology should be easy to use and be accompanied by training for local staff.

Use open data formats and inter-operable technologies. Use commercial, off-the-shelf technology and create all information products using open data formats and inter-operable technologies.

Promote awareness and training. Conduct technology training sessions for non-technical humanitarian staff, particularly national staff. Educate senior decision-makers in humanitarian organizations about the purpose, strengths and weaknesses of information management and exchange. Broaden participation in information projects among affected and at-risk populations.

Involve the private sector. Consider the efficiencies of contracting information management and exchange functions to the private sector, especially local private interests, when cost-effective and appropriate. Encourage a constructive role for the private sector by incorporating private-sector expertise into preparedness and planning activities.

Mobilize adequate resources. Include funding for field-level information management and exchange systems and projects in the overall resourcing of assistance programs.