INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA REFERENCE DOCUMENT

5. Responding to Level 3 Emergencies: The Humanitarian Programme Cycle

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I   Purpose

This paper seeks to provide senior managers and decision makers in the field and at Headquarters with a clear overview of the humanitarian programme cycle, its various parts and how they interact. While it must be applied in all types of emergencies[1], aspects of it may need to be streamlined in the early days of a volatile, rapidly changing **Level 3**[2] crisis, when speed of response is critical. The paper therefore seeks to clarify how the cycle is to be applied in such a crisis. This paper will be complemented by a reference module setting out additional details on each of the cycle's component parts, as well as the tools (e.g. Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA), Consolidated Appeal (CAP), Flash Appeal, etc.) and guidance that exist to support the implementation of the cycle. The paper will be revised and updated as the components and tools are refined.

II   Summary

The humanitarian programme cycle refers to a series of actions undertaken in the management of international humanitarian response operations. These must be conducted, to the extent possible, in collaboration with and in support of national and local authorities. The actions in the cycle, described below, are inter-related and should be managed in a seamless manner using a coherent approach and a common set of tools.

- Emergency preparedness is a distinct element of, and underpins, the entire cycle.
- Timely, coordinated assessments and analysis identify the needs of affected people and provide the evidence base for planning the response.
- Coordinated planning allows for the formulation of strategic objectives, what needs to be done to meet them, and how much it will cost.
- Funding and other resources are mobilized for the system based on and in support of the strategic response plan.
- Monitoring of agreed output and outcome indicators and the tracking of financial information demonstrates results and informs decision-making about the plan.

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[1] Noting that in emergencies which involve refugees, the UNHCR representative has the mandate to prepare for, lead and coordinate the refugee response.

[2] 'Level 3' emergencies are defined as, "major sudden onset humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters or conflict which require system-wide mobilization" (from '*Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures*', IASC WG paper March 2012). Five criteria are used by the IASC Principals to determine whether a level 3 response is required, namely scale, urgency, complexity, combined national and international capacity to respond and reputational risk.

While implementation of the cycle should be flexible and adaptable to different country situations, it must at a minimum address the above elements. Whenever possible, it should support national and local partners, including NGOs, civil society and communities, and complement or build on existing frameworks; it should contribute to a response that builds resilience to future disasters.

The strategic response plan is at the heart of the humanitarian programme cycle. It is intended to guide the international humanitarian effort. It is acknowledged that in the initial stages of a **Level 3** emergency, when access to assessment information may be limited, the strategic response plan will likely be based on a 'best estimate at the time' of the needs and response required. While it is important to have a strategic response plan that is as well informed and inclusive as possible, the emphasis must be on mobilising a rapid response. As the emergency evolves and more information becomes available, the HC and HCT will ensure that the evidence base, the strategic response plan, the budget and monitoring frameworks are updated as necessary to reflect a more complete picture of the situation and the required response.

The guidance and tools related to the cycle will be continuously refined based on best practices and lessons learnt from field testing to ensure that these are fit for purpose and easily adaptable to changing humanitarian environments.

III   Implementing the Humanitarian Programme Cycle

Preparedness
Preparedness in the context of the humanitarian programme cycle refers primarily to actions taken to enhance the readiness of humanitarian actors, both national and international, to respond to a crisis by implementing the component parts of the cycle. To better enable this, the IASC SWG on Preparedness has developed an approach entitled Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP).   ERP comprises: Risk Assessment and Monitoring; Minimum Preparedness Actions (including identification of coordination arrangements); and Contingency Response Planning (including identification of priority early actions to further strengthen readiness). These actions could include prepositioning. They should also include training and simulations to "stress test" plans and familiarize all potential responders, but in particular HCs, HCT, and cluster leads, with their roles and tasks, especially in relation to the cycle. ERP action prior to a crisis assists in identifying constraints and focuses on operational issues; establishes working relationships that are critical in a crisis; reinforces coordination structures and determines what additional structures could be needed, as well as clarifying roles and responsibilities, including the leadership of sector/cluster groups.   The ERP approach assumes that plans developed in the response phase (i.e. the Strategic Response Plan) are based on Contingency Response Plans, updated with information on the actual situation (e.g. through elements of the MIRA). In addition, to promote coherence, the ERP also contains a replication of the response checklist in the IASC Handbook for RCs and HCs on Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Assessment
A coordinated assessment exercise is the starting point for the development of a strategic response plan, and the foundation for a coherent response as the situation evolves. There are essentially two types of coordinated assessments, as outlined below; both require interaction and

coordination with local actors, including the government of the affected state as well as national aid organisations and, most importantly, affected people.

- Multi-cluster initial rapid assessment (MIRA): The MIRA is the IASC-endorsed approach to undertaking a joint, multi-sector assessment during the first two weeks of a new emergency or a rapid deterioration of an existing emergency. It is intended to facilitate a common understanding of overall humanitarian needs and guide later in-depth harmonized sectoral assessments and provide decision-makers with adequate, accurate and reliable information in a timely manner. The two outputs associated with the MIRA are 1) the 'Preliminary Scenario Definition' which will be produced *within 72 hours* of a new or deteriorating emergency, and draw heavily on baseline, secondary and other operational data[3], and 2) a MIRA Final Report, at approximately 2 weeks.[4] The Preliminary Scenario Definition is critical in helping IASC Principals to gauge the severity of a new or deteriorating emergency, and to decide whether to make a **Level 3** designation and activate a system-wide response. Following issuance of the PSD, data collection will continue in the field, leading to a more detailed and comprehensive MIRA report by the end of two weeks.

- Harmonized assessment[5]: This is used most frequently in protracted crises in alignment with planning and review cycles. Agencies or clusters undertake separate assessments in a way that ensures temporal and geographical coherence. The data is then aggregated and analysed to produce a shared picture of the humanitarian situation.

Strategic Response Plan

The strategic response plan is an HCT management tool that guides the international response to a humanitarian emergency, informing sectoral/cluster/organisation planning and interventions. The development of the strategic response plan is led by the HC, with the full participation of the HCT, and the support of OCHA and the relevant sectoral/cluster groups. The HC/HCT should seek to engage the government of the affected state, national aid organisations and affected people in all appropriate aspects of the planning process. Based on the output of the assessment exercise, the strategic response plan will outline *what* the HCT is trying to achieve *where* and will indicate what resources are required to implement it. The strategic response plan will also form the basis for monitoring the overall response to inform strategic and operational decision-making. The strategic response plan will serve as a roadmap for humanitarian organisations to plan and prioritise activities, and design projects. It should also serve as a guide for the allocation of humanitarian funding bilaterally by donors and through system-managed funding mechanisms (CHFs, ERFs, CERF).

A complete strategic response plan will contain, at a minimum, the following elements:

a) Numbers, locations and priority needs of affected people;

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[3] Predictable, core sets of data (Common and Fundamental Operational Datasets) required to support decision-making should be readily available following a crisis and maintained on an on-going basis.

[4] Preparedness is an important element in helping to ensure the timeliness and quality of the Preliminary Scenario Definition, most notably data preparedness. Assessment preparedness, as a whole, strengthens the MIRA process, helping to ensure an assessment plan is in place and trained capacity on site.

[5] Reference to Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises will be inserted here

b) A limited number of cross-cutting strategic objectives (no more than 3 to 5), each of which will require a coordinated multi-sector/cluster response;

c) A few key outcome and (whenever possible) output indicators for each strategic objective that can be easily monitored by clusters or other sector groups;

d) A summary of sectoral/cluster activities required to achieve each strategic objective;

e) An estimate of funding requirements per activity, per sector/cluster.

Within five days of a **Level 3** designation, the HC and the HCT, supported by OCHA and other experts as required, will produce a strategic response plan. Ideally, the strategic response plan will be developed on the basis of a contingency response plan (formulated as part of preparedness), updated with information which is available at the time (from the MIRA and other sources, especially secondary sources) and in consultation with relevant actors. It will draw heavily from the Preliminary Scenario Definition produced by the MIRA exercise. The strategic response plan will need to be revised and updated as more and better assessment information becomes available, preferably within 30 to 60 days of the **Level 3** designation. Strategic response plan templates will be developed for different types of crises to serve as a guide for HCs and HCTs. These will be included in the forthcoming reference modules.

Resource Mobilisation

The Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) is the mechanism and the platform for HCTs to develop and publish their strategic response plans. Consolidated Appeals and Flash Appeals have also historically been used as tools for mobilising funding or other resources for the humanitarian system. They are intended to complement and not duplicate or replace the fundraising efforts of individual organisations. Their function is to demonstrate to donors a coherent, well-coordinated, properly budgeted plan and to guide funding towards the highest priority humanitarian needs. The strategic response plan will form the core of the narrative of both CAP documents and Flash Appeals. All efforts should be made by humanitarian organisations to ensure that funding resources are allocated in line with the strategic response plan, whether coming directly from donors or from system-managed funding mechanisms (CERF, CHF, ERF). For protracted humanitarian emergencies working on an annual cycle, there is a well-established calendar and guidance for the preparation of CAPs. The Flash Appeal is used for new or escalating crises. Within seven to ten days of a **Level 3** designation, a Flash Appeal will be developed and published based on the strategic response plan. Within 72 hours of a Level 3 designation, the ERC will also announce the first CERF allocation[6] to frontload the response's financing, in anticipation of the Flash Appeal.

Monitoring and Accountability

The strategic response plan sets out a limited number of collectively agreed output and outcome indicators. These indicators will form the basis of a monitoring framework that clearly presents which indicators are to be reported by whom, and how often. Relevant clusters and sectoral groups will play a critical role in helping to collect and compile the strategic-level reporting data. The HC/HCT will meet on a regular basis to review the information gathered through the monitoring framework and take any strategic and/or operational decisions that are deemed necessary. Reporting on the strategic response plan indicators must be done at agreed intervals, but at a minimum every three to four months. The IASC Programme Cycle Steering Group is

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[6] In an L3 context, this initial CERF allocation will be between $10-20 million and 'will be issued by the ERC within 72 hours of the crisis onset, on a "no regrets" basis, to be allocated by the HC in support of priorities identified in the strategic response plan.'

currently guiding work on developing a framework to guide system-wide monitoring at the country level.

In order to further support strategic and operational decision-making and problem solving, the IASC will develop the concept of Real-Time Operational Review (RTOR). This will be based in part on the concept of the Real-Time Evaluation (RTE), but place much greater emphasis on the validity of the strategic response plan and how the system is performing against agreed targets. The RTOR will focus on "why" any response targets are not being met, with corresponding immediate and medium term recommendations to overcome challenges. At the request of the HC/HCT, HQ support can be provided to the RTOR.

In a **Level 3** emergency, monitoring of output and outcome indicators, particularly at the strategic level, will prove challenging. In the early days of such an emergency, the initial focus of monitoring may need to be on a more limited set of the most essential indicators. Monitoring in a **Level 3** emergency nonetheless remains a critical activity that is necessary to guide decision-making about the strategic response plan and the associated response. In a **Level 3** emergency, reporting and HCT review of reporting information may need to occur more frequently (monthly or even weekly) than in other types of emergencies. Gradual development of the monitoring framework will follow as the emergency situation stabilises.

Information Management
Information management supports every stage of the humanitarian programme cycle. For example, data preparedness is a Minimum Preparedness Action in the ERP that underpins Risk Assessment and Monitoring and formulation of contingency response plans through the maintenance of baseline data and the development of risk models; assessment activities rely on structured information management methodologies, processes and tools; the Strategic response plan is informed by the Preliminary Scenario Definition which in itself is based upon wide data collection, processing and analysis; and monitoring and evaluation activities require appropriate information management methodologies that align with the next cycle of assessment activities.

The humanitarian programme cycle is to be supported by standardized information management processes, systems and tools. These include a common web platform (humanitarianresponse.org), the Common Operational Datasets (CODs) and Fundamental Operational Datasets (FODs) registries, the Financial Tracking Service (FTS), and the On-line Projects System (OPS), as well as cluster and/or agency specific systems. Information systems will also support information sharing with national authorities and affected people. IASC organisations have a key role to play in ensuring the quality control and coherence of the above actions, along with refining system-wide tools and supporting HCTs in overseeing their use.

IV   What does a well-managed humanitarian programme cycle look like?

Seven key success factors have been identified to assess if the implementation of the HPC is making a difference:

- Time taken to respond effectively is reduced, in particular through implementation of the ERP approach.

- The Contingency Response Plan is relevant to the production of the strategic response plan. This also validates Risk Assessment and Monitoring.

- The strategic response plan proposes a coherent and convincing humanitarian programme targeting the most vulnerable and mitigating the major risks to the operation. It focuses on saving lives and getting people back on their feet as soon as possible.

- Feedback collected through monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms is continuously used to self-correct and deliver results.

- The output and outcome indicators outlined in the strategic response plan are achieved in a timely fashion, as indicated by periodic reporting.

- Through better information management around the humanitarian programme cycle, there is a notable improvement in the quality and timeliness of the analysis provided to support decision-making and overall programme management.

- Timely Real-Time Operational Reviews allow interventions to be adjusted to respond to changing needs or barriers to reaching target populations.

- Surveys indicate that as a result of the humanitarian response, affected people are increasingly able to address the needs/risks brought about by the emergency and are more resilient to future crises.