Information Management: Is it Guiding Strategic Analysis and Supporting Operations?

Webinar summary
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Panellists

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Information management is central to humanitarian operations. It helps identify needs and determine what actions to prioritise. Information management also provides critical evidence for decision making when planning for responses.

Reliable information and strong analyses improve the quality of actions. It also brings credibility to the system. However, information can be hard to receive due to restricted access and insecure environments, which can make information gathering dangerous. Competition between humanitarian organisations may also cause information sharing to be challenging.

This webinar discusses field experiences from experts in information management and how it is used to support operations.

Top Elements that make an Information Management System Work

1. **Clearly identify the purpose of information**: The primary purpose of information is to support the Humanitarian Country Team's (HCT's) strategic decision-making function. Information management officers (IMOs) work closely with the inter-cluster coordination group to make sure information is relevant to decision-making processes.

2. **IMOs work with the inter-cluster group in support of the HCT**: IMOs work with cluster coordinators and Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) representative to support the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and HCT in making strategic decisions. IMOs should not be diverted from their primary task by regional offices, agency headquarters, or donors.

3. **Establish a relationship between the HCT and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG)**: Information sharing helps create relationships and encourages cooperation between operations. The HCT needs to maintain a solid, two-way relationship with the ICCG.

4. **Invest in Information Management capacity**: Cluster Lead Agencies should deploy an IMO to support cluster coordinators and to participate in the IM working group.

5. **Common data sets, analysis, and information products:** Common data sets and standards are important for consolidating data from a range of actors. IMOs need to work closely with cluster coordinators to process and analyse information, in order to create products that informs on the response, in terms of its coverage and needs and gaps.

Kevin Kennedy WoS

"Information management made a difference… for the first time, we had a good picture of what the needs are, where the needs are, and where we need to focus our energy and resources."
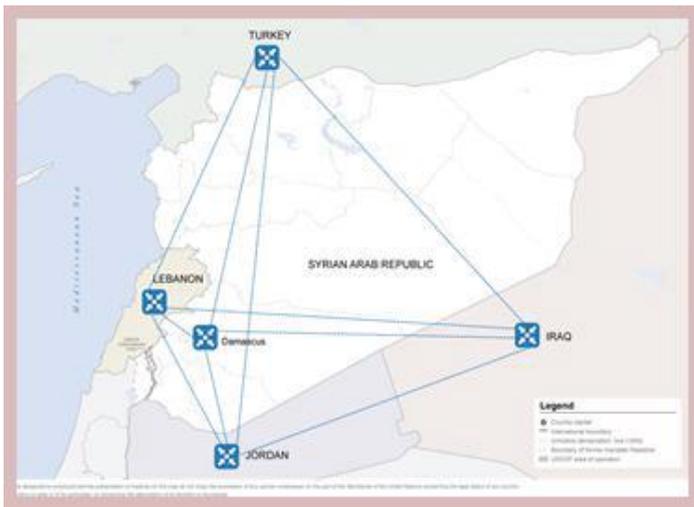
The Syrian response was fragmented. It consisted of an 'inside-Syria' operation of about 200 staff and operations in 4 neighbouring countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey). There was very little contact among these 5 different strands, and this lack of coordination made the response ripe for duplication, overlap, and misunderstanding.

The Whole of Syria construct aimed for greater collaboration. Information management was a central part of constructing and improving information sharing, which helped identify where energies and resources should be focused on. For example, through more collaborative information management, it was learnt that nearly 3 dozen NGOs operated in besieged cities. This knowledge became crucial for learning about access issues in these areas, and identifying possible solutions for access of other organisations and operations.

Mathieu Rouquette SIRF & SIMAWG

"Information Management is the engine room of operations."

Early in the Syrian response, operations were based in government-controlled areas. As the conflict progressed, humanitarian needs rapidly increased, especially in opposition areas. NGOs began to give assistance 'cross-border', while the UN essentially worked in controlled areas with only sporadic access to conflict areas.

This lack of coordination led to a fragmented response delivered in silos, with little to no information sharing between operations. A fragmented response meant a fragmented information system: incomparable datasets, different norms, tools, and methodologies. This led to growing rifts and mistrust between humanitarian actors. It was also difficult to map responsibilities and define parameters of the different subsidiaries, with dispersed operations (UN in controlled areas, NGOs in opposition area) and a multitude of actors (3 HCTs, 3 Inter- Cluster working Groups, the Strategic Steering Group…).

Has Information Management and data Analysis led to better programme efficiency in the WoS response?

Successes

♦ SIMAWIG, acting as the engine room of the WoS approach, allowed for the best Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) the response has experienced. The success of the HNO was critical in designing more refined sector and cluster strategies:

  • Protection Cluster: When analysing what the main concerns for Syrians were, the Protection sector overview revealed that a lack of national documentation - and not barrel bombs as previously assumed - was a main concern. This information enabled the Cluster to shift its strategy.

  • Health Cluster: IM tools (early warning response and alert systems to monitor outbreak of diseases) enabled timely and reactive responses. When alerts of diarrhoea and Cholera outbreaks were reported in Iraq, partners were able to respond with hygiene promotion messages and partitioning of children infected by Cholera. These actions prevented a total outbreak.

♦ SIRF played a critical role in the articulation of the collaborative structure, with the 50+ members benefitting from permanent representation and a common information-sharing platform.

♦ More collective initiatives are underway. The approach is 'looking downstream' to improve the monitoring of responses in besieges areas to better inform operations in other areas. This will help decision-making across operations have the same norms and methodologies.

Challenges

♦ Because of the multiple degrees of separation between decision makers and practitioners, data needs to go several layers of aggregation - meaning that the system loses in regularity. Better management of the information flow is needed to improve consistency, channelling, and dependency.

♦ It remains difficult to receive appropriate sequencing of meetings, to design common agendas, and to share minutes of meetings effectively. While these sound mundane, information flow is critical to put everyone on the same page.

♦ The role of NGOs and their place within the humanitarian architecture must be recognised more strongly and further institutionalised. A clear mandate from the IASC, along with a clear set of expectations to further include NGOs, and to recognise their potential to assemble and channel information, would be welcome.

♦ Sensitivity of information sharing needs to be further explained to partners. There are some concerns about data protection and the consequences on beneficiaries if information fall into the wrong hands, which sometimes leads operations to refrain from sharing the data they have gathered.

This summary is a combination of presentations from the webinar and broader learnings from the STAIT team. To listen to the full webinar, and to access recordings of past webinars, visit the STAIT website http://www.deliveraidbetter.org/