

Emergency Information Management Coordination

02 December 2024

Key points

- Information Management (IM) is central to coordination in emergencies
- To be effective, IM activities must be coordinated
- The primary mechanism for coordinating IM activities is an Information Management Working Group (IMWG)
- The Who does, What, Where (3/4/5W) tool is key for supporting coordination in an emergency

1. Overview

Information Management (IM) is central to coordination in emergencies. Humanitarian agencies need timely and accurate information to ensure an efficient and effective response. IM helps to determine the number of people in need of assistance and what kind of response is most appropriate, track the assistance provided and highlight and address the gaps. For these reasons, robust and coordinated IM is a required element of every emergency.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Because emergencies create situations of rapid change and fast, large-scale decision-making, rapid cycles of processing data are required when compared with stable situations. Rapidly refreshed strategic information will help establish the scope and scale of the emergency and how the situation is evolving over time.

3. IM Coordination mechanisms and tools

To be effective, IM activities must be coordinated. This ensures that agencies are not wasting time collecting the same information from the same people. It also helps to develop a common understanding between agencies so that there is consistent information and messages about the response. IM activities should never be done in isolation, but rather in a coordinated manner, regardless of the context.

Emergencies may involve the creation of new coordination mechanisms or the evolution of existing ones, given the arrival of new populations and new partners, or shifts in the government's role in the response. Emergencies require frequent cycles of fresh information about the activities of organizations, and UNHCR's coordination mandate requires UNHCR to produce this. New data sources should be considered and leveraged, and coverage with assessments and monitoring systems between organizations should be complementary, not conflicting or redundant.

The coordination of information management and needs assessments in humanitarian situations is vital for:

- Prompt and predictable responses
- Evidence-informed decision-making, including for strategic planning. Programme delivery, resource mobilization, advocacy.
- Making the most effective use of all the information that has been collected and is available in the operational context.
- Avoiding duplicative data collection exercises that waste time and resources and expose refugees and host communities to unnecessary interactions with enumerators.
- Maximizing the efficiency of spending on information management to the benefit of the wider response and the impact on refugees and the communities that host them.

a) Information Management Working Group

The primary mechanism for coordinating IM activities is an Information Management Working Group (IMWG). This forum is a means for colleagues from different agencies (Government, UN, NGO, Red Cross, etc.) to come together, coordinate their activities, and jointly plan and implement IM activities, and to share data and information products. IMWGs can be found in most humanitarian settings.

The IMWG will seek to:

- **Coordinate Information Management activities**, including sharing of IM products and tools (registries, databases, maps, 3/4/5/6Ws, websites, Common Operational Datasets, etc.) and coordinating the development and implementation of IM systems.
- **Establish interagency data interoperability**, by ensuring that a core set of information management standards are in place for collecting, storing and sharing data. Interagency data interoperability will ensure that data produced by different organizations can be compiled, compared and triangulated, and responsibly (re)-used by more actors. Prioritizing the establishment of an Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) at the outset of an emergency helps raise awareness of data responsibility and lays the foundation for additional actions at all levels of a response.
- **Support Needs Assessment activities**, including supporting and coordinating joint and

multi-sectoral assessments and ensuring the responsible sharing of data and information about concluded assessments in order to reduce gaps and overlaps in geographic and thematic coverage.

- **Support Interagency Appeal Monitoring**, including by aligning implementation monitoring processes and practices for Refugee Response Plans and Humanitarian Response Plans, etc.

aa) In a refugee situation, [the Refugee Coordination Model \(RCM\)](#) is the coordination mechanism. UNHCR convenes and chairs the Refugee IMWG.

Additional information can be found in the Refugee Coordination Model toolkit. There is a template for the terms of reference (ToR) for the Refugee IMWG.

As chair of the RIMWG, UNHCR must identify relevant technical focal points from the partners and participating agencies to participate in the Working Group. UNHCR is responsible for planning and organizing meetings, documenting the meetings, establishing efficient information sharing and data sharing arrangements, establishing joint data standards and inter-agency tools, developing and supporting the release of information products, establishing assessment registries and other databases that facilitate an understanding of the ecosystem and the re-use of information, and ensuring follow up on planned activities. Keeping the RIMWG active and relevant to the objectives of the operation's multi-year strategy is an important task and vital to ensuring high-quality IM support to refugee responses, including emergencies.

bb) In an IDP or another context where OCHA is coordinating the response, it is normally they who would convene the IMWG. UNHCR therefore becomes an active participant, normally representing those clusters in which UNHCR is the Cluster Lead Agency. This role requires UNHCR to ensure its IM activities meet its own needs, while also fitting into the larger operation, to the extent possible. Given that UNHCR may lead several clusters, each with IM capacity, it is possible that more than one UNHCR staff member would participate in the IMWG.

More information on OCHA led IMWGs [can be found here](#).

Interagency coordination between all agencies at the IMWG is important. In addition to inter-cluster IM coordination, IM officers supporting UNHCR-led clusters are expected to coordinate IM activities WITHIN their respective clusters. More information on the roles and responsibilities of cluster IMOs can be found:

- [Global Protection Clusters](#)
- [Global CCCM Cluster](#)
- [Global Shelter Cluster](#)

In an emergency, the IMWG chair will need to pay close attention to new organizations and personnel arriving to support the response and who should be invited to the forum.

Emergencies tend to generate new places where affected populations move to or from, and these new locations should be assigned a p-code and included in the standard IMWG gazetteer, so that location data remains aligned between responders. A new multi-sectoral needs assessment (possibly to support a new appeal) is also often part of an emergency response and

could be coordinated by the IMWG in the absence of an Assessment Working Group. And with the increase in population movements an emergency brings, coordinating population figures in the IMWG is often a standing agenda item.

b) IM Tools

1) Who does What Where (3/4/5W)

Coordination requires an understanding of WHO is active in the response, WHAT they are doing, and WHERE they are doing it. The basic tool humanitarians use to collect and share this information is known as a “Who does, What, Where” database, also known as a 3W. Many of these systems collect additional information on WHEN an activity is taking place (4W), as well as for WHOM the interventions are being delivered, i.e., targeted and reached beneficiaries (5W). A 3/4/5W tool is a valuable information management tool for coordination and activity gap analysis.

An emergency situation will necessitate a rapid shift in response activities that need to be mapped. Many new activities will be planned and some pre-emergency activities might be stopped. The 3/4/5W tools should distinguish between “planned”, “implemented” and “completed” activities. Because sometimes many “planned” activities at the start of an emergency may not receive enough funding or face security or practical challenges that prevent them from starting. Management may decide in some situations to publish the activities that are actually being implemented or that have funding confirmed.

These types of 3W tools can be implemented in a variety of ways, from a simple Excel table, to a more complicated database using tools such as [ActivityInfo](#). Whatever the approach, it is important to facilitate reporting for partners (e.g., by avoiding approaches that require them to resubmit data that should already be documented) and to establish a clear process flow, with timelines and roles. An SOP document, however short, is often helpful to create predictability around the production of 3Ws and information products that rely on that data.

Typically, a simple solution (.xlsx or Google sheet) is used in the first weeks of an emergency. The sensitivity of the data allowing, flexibility is required since it may not yet be known who is involved in the response, the exact locations where the response is happening, and the type of activities underway. It is not possible to impose the ‘controlled vocabularies’ of a data collection form if the acceptable answers are not yet known. Once a response is more stable, it is better to set up a data collection solution that standardizes information and its collection process. For example, early versions of a 3W can allow a free text answer for WHAT a humanitarian agency is doing. Later versions may restrict this to a dropdown-menu with a list of activities included as part of the HRP or RRP.

An information management officer may lead this process, with support and collaboration from programme, protection and sector leads, the external relations officer, and senior managers.

The 3/4/5W is an essential aspect of coordination. It should be an output of the Information Management Working Group (see above). The IMWG should design the tool, including which information is being collected, the frequency of reporting, and process flow, e.g., who should report to whom, etc. All organizations active in the response should be encouraged to contribute to the 3Ws including UN agencies, the Red Cross/Crescent, international and national NGOs, and

the government.

The 3W has several objectives:

- Map and define **operational presence**. It should answer the question, “I am planning to work on shelter in XXX location, who should I contact to ensure effective coordination?”, or “What is our response in community-based protection?”.
- Ensure **visibility** for the humanitarian response. Anyone interested should be able to quickly see an overview of what humanitarian partners are doing for and on behalf of the people we serve, with the money entrusted to us by donors. For this reason, activities in a 3Ws should focus on relief goods and services that materially improve the lives of refugees. Planning, monitoring and reporting activities like meetings should not be included as these are not of an operational nature, i.e., they are not part of the refugee-facing operational response.
- Ensure **accountability**, particularly with the Government. UNHCR and the RCM work in support the Government, which has the primary responsibility in protecting refugees and asylum-seekers who have arrived in their country. At a minimum, the RCM should always be able to explain and show to the government which actors are involved in the response (both international and national), where they are working, and what they are doing.

Since emergencies can vary from context to context, there is no standard 3/4/5W template that operations must use. Any solution which meets the objectives above will work, as long as the necessary measures are taken to manage data sensitivities. If OCHA is coordinating the response, OCHA may introduce standard templates for all agencies to follow, while if UNHCR is coordinating the response, UNHCR should issue the standard templates.

Before creating a 3W system from scratch, always check with colleagues in-country to see what approach is being used now (or in the past), what is preferred by partners, what works well, etc. If there has not been IM capacity in the operation for some time, check with the relevant Data, Identity Management and Analysis (DIMA) Unit in your Regional Bureau to see if there are standard or suggested tools used in the region. This is particularly relevant when there is a regional refugee response plan (RRRP). A 6W template can be found on the [IM Coordination page of the Data Community Hub](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only). This template, as well as questions from the Kobo library can be downloaded, edited for your context and used.

It is important to remember that 3W information is meant to be used. Information products such as reports, dashboards, maps, and infographics should be created and published, using the information from the 3Ws. The products should always be developed with the intended targeted audience, so they are tailored to a specific objective(s) that is relevant to the response and the positive impacts UNHCR aims to achieve for refugees and host communities. These products may be internal and/or public, with different information provided in both to address risks or other concerns related to context-specific sensitivities.

UNHCR’s role in a 3/4/5W will vary depending on the context. In a refugee emergency (RCM) it is UNHCR’s responsibility to consolidate a wholistic overview of the entire response, including all relevant sectors. It is UNHCR’s job to determine the most efficient way to gather this information and to make it available to the humanitarian community.

In an IDP or other humanitarian context, it would likely be OCHA's role to provide this broad overview of the entire response. Therefore, UNHCR would be expected to:

- As cluster lead agency (Protection, CCCM, Shelter): Collect information on the activities of all cluster members and share this into an OCHA-led inter-cluster 3/4/5W. In this scenario, cluster lead agencies are expected to have a detailed understanding of what is happening in their cluster, while OCHA is expected to have basic information across all clusters.
- As a cluster member (e.g. WASH, Health, etc.) contribute information on UNHCR's activities to the cluster-lead agency using a cluster specific system.

2) Assessment registry

The assessment registry, sometimes called the survey of surveys, provides a way for organizations to share the data and/or findings of their assessments (i.e., in the form of a report) and coordinate plans for future assessments.

An assessment registry is an important tool for helping the Information Management Working Group (IMWG) to coordinate assessments, maintain an overview of the available evidence base, deduplicate and prioritize activities, and promote the effective use of available information, including for strategic planning and programme design, delivery and monitoring.

3) CORE

CORE (Comprehensive Overview of the Response to Emergencies) is UNHCR's solution for establishing recognizable, predictable, and consistent information products that are publicly released in the early days of an emergency response.

CORE products support UNHCR's leadership and coordination role in refugee emergencies through the development and dissemination of quality information products to support evidence-informed action, enhance the visibility of the response and its impact, mobilize funding, etc.

4) Operational Data Portals

The UNHCR [ODP](#) was created in 2011 to enable UNHCR's institutional responsibility to provide an information and data dissemination platform to facilitate the coordination of refugee emergencies.

The ODP contains several tools for coordination: population data and key figures, documents, reports and infographics, meeting calendar, etc.

Post emergency phase

Review what went well and what did not. Document lessons learned and share with the functional unit in UNHCR Headquarters.

Checklist

- Coordinating IM in Refugee emergencies:
 - Establish a Refugee Information Management Working Group (RIMWG).
 - Encourage active participation in the RIMWG and jointly plan IM activities.
 - Identify who is doing what where.
 - Establish common datasets including population data; compile and share.
 - Agree on standards to use for data collection and analysis.
 - Set up an online platform for sharing of data, information and reports with all stakeholders.
- Coordinating IM in Humanitarian / IDP emergencies:
 - Join the inter-cluster IMWG
 - Actively represent the relevant UNHCR (co-)led clusters in joint IM activities.
 - Establish cluster-specific 3/4/5W processes for UNHCR (co-)led clusters.
 - Ensure cluster activities are reflected in the inter-cluster 3/4/5W mechanism.

Annexes

[IASC Operational Guidance on Responsibilities of Cluster/Sector Leads & OCHA in Information Management, 2006](#)

[IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action, 2023](#)

4. Learning and field practices

Accessible to UNHCR staff only

[IM Coordination on the Data Community Hub](#)

5. Links

[UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#)

6. Main contacts

UNHCR Information Management: HQIM@unhcr.org