Emergency information management strategy

27 March 2023

Key points

- Ask the IMO in your operation for the IM strategy.
- Involve IMO staff at the beginning of any data collection exercise.
- Ask for technical advice on collection, processing and analysis of data in your operation.
- IM staff must be involved in assessment initiatives. Contact them early in the process for best results.
- Ask for support when you establish monitoring systems.

1. Overview

An information and data management strategy is a plan that defines the purposes, outputs, time frames and responsibilities of all operational information services in an emergency.

A strategy should be developed in the first two weeks of a refugee or IDP emergency and maintained through all its phases. The strategy should provide a broad overview of how information systems relate to one another and which organizations are stakeholders in each system, allowing the information manager to better coordinate information. It also helps to identify information gaps and redundancies across systems.

In terms of consensus-building, the strategy provides an opportunity for managers and operational staff to agree on reporting frequencies and data ownership. On a practical level, it details how information systems will operate. It is also a starting point for budgeting information management costs (implementing partner agreements, data-entry staff, mobile data-collection devices, laptops).
Defining and implementing an explicit strategy will help to deliver information more predictably and more reliably.

2. Main guidance

Associated risks

- Information and data management requires the coordination and dissemination of reports and operational information throughout UNHCR and with our partners. By doing this in a regular and predictable manner, guidance and information management products will improve coordination among first-phase refugee emergency responders.
- If an IM strategy is not in place, embedded in the strategic plan, valuable IM services may focus on the wrong operational priorities.
- An IM strategy is a communication tool but can also help UNHCR and partners to focus strategically. If IM functions are not well targeted and understood, they may be misallocated.

Steps to be taken

Step 1. Preparing and coordinating an IM strategy

To develop an information and data management strategy, information managers need to answer the following questions:

- What information gaps exist?
- What types of analytical products are needed?
- Who are the focal points responsible for implementing each system?
- What methods should be used to obtain required data?
- What human resources are required to run the systems?
- What is the frequency of reporting that each system requires?
- When should each system be implemented?

Step 2. Considerations during planning

During planning, information managers need to consider some of the following factors, which will affect the design of information management systems:

- Contingency plans. How is the emergency most likely to evolve? How might information systems need to change in the future?
- Programme and intervention plans. Which sectors are now, or likely to become, the most active? Do some sectors have exceptional information management needs?
- Displacement pattern. Is the displaced population moving en masse or is it scattered? Is there secondary displacement? Is the population stable or is new movement occurring? What is the scale of the displacement?
Physical access. Is the population of concern accessible? Is remote monitoring required? How will the logistics of data collection influence the choice of information systems? How will the logistics of data collection affect the frequency of information products?

Security issues, humanitarian space and the Government's stance. Do security conditions make it hard to obtain certain data from the population? What constraints limit the dissemination of information? What kinds of information are subject to these constraints?

IM activities of other partners. Which data management activities should be undertaken by UNHCR, and which by implementing partners, operational partners, the Government? What IM activities should be undertaken jointly?

Internet connectivity and other IM technology. Given the context, are website and e-mail dissemination systems the best option? Should burned DVDs and hardcopies of information be shared with partners who have no Internet access? How will data from deep field locations be transmitted to the operational hub?

Refugee emergency: weeks one and two

**Step 3. Set IM objectives and reporting lines, produce initial IM products**

Before drafting a strategy, information managers will need to discuss IM objectives and products with the Representative and senior managers, including programme, protection and sector leads. Discuss what type of information decision-makers in the office need to know, what level of detail is necessary, and why they need the information in question. It is important to set up a regular and clearly communicated weekly dissemination schedule, so that colleagues and partners know what type of information products they can expect and when to expect them.

The Information Manager, Representative and senior managers should ensure that IM is included in coordination meetings or that IM coordination meetings are established, and agree a plan for preparing the following standard IM products during the first four weeks of a refugee emergency:

- An IM strategy.
- A review of secondary data available from other sources and situational analysis.
- Initial rapid population estimates.
- A contact list of operational partners.
- An initial needs assessment report.
- Maps, including security, situation, and 3W maps.
- Web portal deployment.

The Representative and other senior managers, the emergency team leader (if deployed), sector leads, and the information manager will need to agree on clearance procedures and a dissemination schedule for the above products. The information manager should also help (as needed) to develop IM strategies for producing sector-specific reports, a process that includes dissemination of sector-specific information products.

To do the above, information managers should do the following on arrival at the emergency:

- Ask to see the operation's contingency plan, or (if one does not exist) ask management to describe (scenarios) how the emergency is most likely to evolve.
Ask colleagues whether any information management preparedness activities have been undertaken, such as a needs assessment.

Find the standard geographic data being used by the humanitarian community and learn the process for updating this. (If no process has been agreed, the information manager should create one.)

Meet the protection officer to clarify what the operational protection risks and constraints are, and to understand what types of information are sensitive.

Search for pre-emergency baseline data (in the country's annual statistical report, UNHCR's Global Focus Insight at gfi.unhcr.org, the Government statistical office, from development actors, etc.).

Identify UNHCR and partner staff who can assist with data collection and analysis, because the skills that are available will influence the adoption of more or less complex information systems. Design an information management strategy that is realistic and sustainable in terms of operational capacity.

Determine SOPs for clearance and release of IM products.

**Step 4. Include IM in coordination meetings**

With the agreement of the Representative, the information manager should ensure that IM is included as an agenda item for discussion at all inter-agency coordination meetings in the field and in capital.

Immediately attend inter-agency coordination meetings and begin reaching out to partners. Post contact lists on the UNHCR web portal and circulate them at meetings. Always bring information products, population figures, maps and contact lists to meetings, to strengthen relations with partners and identify information needs.

**Step 5. Establish a contact list and weekly meeting schedule**

Information managers should immediately start work with a UNHCR administrative colleague (designated by the Representative) to create and track a contact list of all operational partners. The list may be circulated to partners. The information manager should be the focal point for all changes made to the list, and should remain its custodian, unless otherwise agreed. If available, it is good practice to keep a copy of the contact list on a shared drive, so that all UNHCR staff have access. The information manager should always keep a backup copy of the master contact list, saved each day on his or her personal drive.

Selective contact lists may be extracted from the master contact list and used for specific purposes. For example, the WASH sector contact list includes only staff members in that sector, and can serve as a sign-in sheet at coordination meetings. This enables colleagues to make sure that their contact information is correct, and reduces the time spent on tracking meeting attendance.

It is also useful to circulate a list of technical experts (UNHCR protection colleagues, programme colleagues, sector leads for WASH, health and shelter, etc.). A sample template for contact lists is included in this section as Annex 4: IM Strategy Template; tab 2: E-mail Dissemination List. A contact list by sector may be produced by filtering the master contact list by activity.
Step 6. Secondary data and situational analysis
Within two days of arrival, information managers should start work with the protection officer on a joint analysis of secondary data and production of a situational analysis.

‘The situation analysis is undertaken through a desk review of existing information, including data gathered about the population. It also involves identifying the different stakeholders to learn about their interests and priorities, and mapping their activities, resources and expertise.’ (UNHCR, A Community Based Approach in UNHCR, 2007, p. 27.)

When compiling the situational analysis, identify what types of camp administration (if any) have been set up by the refugee community, and note refugee coping mechanisms at camp level. The situational analysis should describe the host Government's involvement and response to the refugee situation, and track developments in camp coordination and host Government assistance.

UNHCR's Protection Gaps Framework of Analysis Tool may be adapted for emergency situation analysis (see UNHCR, Handbook for Emergencies, 2007, p. 28). The tool is available online at www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/430328-b04.pdf.

Step 7: Analyze emergency registration and population statistics
Information managers should work with the registration officer to compile and triangulate population figures. A Population Reporting Template should be completed and maintained for triangulation/analysis of population figures. One may be found in the Population Statistics section of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.

- If emergency registration has been done, begin compiling a cross-sectoral analysis based on population figures, taking account of any operational coverage of specific locations based on information compiled in the 3W and survey of surveys.
- If emergency registration has not occurred, consult the Registration in Emergencies section (Section 4) of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit for guidance on emergency registration and related IM considerations.
- If emergency registration is not possible in all areas, use rapid population estimation techniques (see Section 5 of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit for guidance).

Information managers should work closely with other information specialists in the operation. Include those employed by UNHCR and by other organizations, to ensure that all data collected, analyzed and released observes UNHCR's standards for age and sex demographics.

Information on age and sex should be included in all standard IM products. Share demographic profiles of the refugee population with partners on a daily or weekly basis (depending on the situation), via the UNHCR web portal and by other means.

Step 8. Who does what where (3W)?
Information managers should continuously involve sector leads and new organizations and partners on the ground. Throughout their assignment, they should establish and track 3W information, using the 3W tool included in the 3W section of the Toolkit, to ensure that
operational coverage and emergency needs continue to be well understood.

**Refugee emergency: weeks three and four**

**Step 9. Survey of surveys**

It is important to compile a survey of the surveys and assessments that UNHCR and partners have carried out. UNHCR management, programme and protection colleagues will be in a position to identify partners and contacts who can help with this task. The survey of surveys template (included as an annex in this section) requires information on the organization involved in each assessment, its type and name, its location, the start and end dates of fieldwork collection, and the type(s) of population(s) assessed.

Official UNHCR population types are: refugee, person in refugee-like situations, returned refugee, asylum-seeker, internally displaced person, person in an IDP-like situation, returned IDP, stateless person, and other person of concern. For a complete definition, see UNHCR, *Annual Statistical Reporting Guidelines* (2012, p. 37, at: [http://www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html)).

As soon as all major partners have been contacted and an inventory of surveys and assessments has been compiled, begin an initial analysis to identify information and knowledge gaps. These may concern population groups that have not been assessed, locations that are difficult to access, locations that have not been covered, etc. In addition, report if particular geographical or sectoral areas are being over-assessed by several organizations. Coordinate this process with partners (NGOs, UN agencies, Government offices) so that the outcome is shared and owned by partners.

If information managers recommend an emergency needs assessment (ENA), based on analysis of the survey of surveys, this topic should be discussed in plenary at the next coordination meeting with partners. For guidance on ENAs, see the ENA section (Section 7) of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.

**Step 10. The Refugee Information Management Working Group (RIM WG)**

The RIM WG is an IM service that UNHCR provides partners in refugee operations. With the participation of IM focal points outside UNHCR, the information manager sets up and leads a RIM WG. Though in many partner organizations no staff member will be responsible specifically for information management, each should be asked to provide at least one focal point to participate in the RIM WG. RIM WG terms of reference (TORs) are included as an annex in this section.

A RIM WG coordinates IM activities at inter-agency level between partners in refugee operations. Coordination is important to make sure that organizations cross-analyse and harmonize the data they hold, prevent data systems from duplicating or competing with each other, facilitate information sharing, and make the best use of humanitarian information resources. Information managers should map the resources available to the operational hub and in the capital. The map should indicate which organizations have datasets and monitoring systems in place; and which organizations employ data collectors, database administrators, translators, and data analysts who can assist IM projects.
Information managers should ensure that a RIM WG:

- Maps and harmonizes datasets across all operational partners. Information managers should track the locations, coordinates, Pcodes, common operational datasets (CODs) and fundamental operational datasets (FODs) (at http://cod.humanitarianresponse.info/terms-use in an Excel database). Contact the local OCHA office for area-specific Pcodes. Share the Excel database of Pcodes, CODs and FODs with all operational partners, to ensure they use the same units of assessment to analyse data.
- Liaises with implementing and operational partners on data quality issues and data standards; participates in or organizes inter-agency data groups at field level; and, where necessary, advises partners on methodological issues and promotes timely reporting, to agreed standards, of data for which they are responsible.
- Ensures there is agreement on initial population figures, and that partners are updated regularly on registration activities and changing population demographics.
- Distributes information products, CODs and baseline data that all partners should use.

**Step 11: Set up web portal and information kiosk** Information managers should:

- On approval by the Representative/senior managers, contact web portal administrators to initiate an emergency web portal. (For guidance on how to initiate a web portal, see the Web Portal section, section 17 of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.) Working with senior managers, define how frequently IM products are to be updated on the web portal, and begin drafting clearance SOPs for updating and maintaining web portal content.
- Begin populating the web portal with products supplied by information managers. Meet the Representative and the external relations officer to discuss the web portal's needs (news highlights, uploading requirements, dissemination schedules).
- Set up and maintain an information kiosk in the UNHCR office, and ensure that hardcopies of information products become available as they are developed and cleared.
- Use a range of dissemination channels to share information products and analysis (e-mail lists, SMS, meetings), both in the office and with partners.

**Refugee emergency: weeks five and six**

**Step 12. Gather data from sector specialists and understand sectoral information needs**

By the beginning of the fifth or sixth week (or sooner), information managers should meet programme and sector specialists to discover what sector-specific information systems are in place and what information needs sectors have. They should assist sector specialists to cross-analyse and build or adjust sectoral data management and tracking tools. (For protection and sector-specific IM, see the Minimum Sectoral Data sections (Sections 9-14) of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.) Information managers should:

- Meet the programme officer to understand whether a shelter and core relief item (CRI) distribution monitoring system is working, and what current needs have been identified. If no tracking system is in place, establish one. (For guidance on tracking systems, see
Minimum Sectoral Data: C. Core Relief Items, Section 11 of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.

- Work with the protection officer to gather protection monitoring or needs assessment reports on matters that may affect the protection status of persons of concern (security, coping strategies, population movement patterns, etc.).
- Gather health, food security, WASH and mortality reports and analyses from sector specialists.
- Where a vulnerable person case tracking system is operating, factor available information into the cross-sectoral analysis. (For information on registration, see Registration in Emergencies, Section 4 of the Emergency Information Management Toolkit.)
- Notify sectoral leads if information that sectors submit to the cross-sectoral analysis is conflicting or inconsistent, so that discrepancies can be resolved.

When these steps have been completed, incorporate sector-specific cross-analyses into information products, with the Representative's agreement.

In camp situations, camp profiles should be produced, to coordinate humanitarian activities across camps and to disseminate multi-sectoral information about particular camps.

**Step 13. Identify IM needs, production of information products, contingency planning**

Continue to monitor minimum sector data reports from the sector leads and identify other emergency IM needs as they arise. Include this information and analysis in standard emergency IM products. Present the most compelling sectoral information visually, as an info-graphic.

It may be necessary to move information from information systems established at the start of the emergency to systems that are sustainable over a longer period of time or permit more detail. For example, rapid population estimations may be replaced by an emergency registration.

**Resources / inputs required**

- Content management focal points for the data and information dissemination plan.
- Meeting schedule focal points for each meeting.
- 3W data focal points per sector/cluster.
- Needs assessment and monitoring focal points by sector/cluster/inter-agency initiative.

**Related UNHCR management system(s)**

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- Focus. Sometimes, when an operation preceded an emergency, sectoral data on protection and sectors may be gathered from Focus.
- proGress. Registration and case management staff working with proGres make a vital contribution.
- MRSP. Staff working in MSRP for logistics and human resources should coordinate closely
with IM staff.
- Twine and GBVIMS. Sector and cluster systems (Twine for health, GBVIMS for gender based violence monitoring) make essential contributions to the overall response.

Annexes

Information Management Officer Terms of Reference

Senior Regional Information Management Terms of Reference

Refugee Information Working Group Terms of Reference (RIM WG)

IM Strategy Template and E-mail Dissemination List

Survey of Surveys

Weekly Meeting Schedule Template

Sample ToRs - refugee information managment working group

Guidance Note on Information Management in Emergencies 2012

3. Links

UNHCR, A Community Based Approach in UNHCR, 2007 UNHCR, Annual Statistical Reporting Guidelines, 2012 UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response, Common and Fundamental Operational Datasets Regi...

4. Main contacts

FICSS in Geneva. At: HQIM@UNHCR.org