

Disaster Response Dialogue – session at the INSARAG XII Regional Group Meeting

4th December 2013

This note summarises the main points that came out at the session on the Disaster Response Dialogue, as part of the INSARAG regional group meeting in the Americas.

Building on the outcome of its first meeting in 2011, the Disaster Response Dialogue, which is convened by IFRC, ICVA, OCHA and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, aims at improving trust and cooperation between disaster-prone countries and humanitarian actors. Recognising a number of well-documented challenges that can negatively impact on international responses to natural disasters, the dialogue seeks to identify practical solutions for improving the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian responses. It will build on experiences and initiatives at regional level. The importance of the MIAH process was highlighted, and the Plan of Action agreed at the recent sixth meeting of the MIAH in Jamaica will be an important contribution to the work of the Disaster Response Dialogue at the international level. More information on the dialogue is available at www.drdinitiative.org.

The objective of the meeting was to seek some initial feedback on the issues the dialogue should be focusing on, and on some of the key areas that may require changes. These discussions will ultimately contribute to the agenda of the next international meeting of the dialogue that will be hosted by the Philippines in September 2014.

Groups were asked to discuss the following two questions:

1. What are the necessary changes that are required from national, regional and international actors for more effective humanitarian response to face the above challenges?
2. What should be the priority areas the Disaster Response Dialogue should be focusing on in the coming months for more effective and inclusive humanitarian responses?

The main points from the group discussions are summarised below:

An overarching point made by the groups was the need to build on existing initiatives and experiences, rather than reinventing the “humanitarian wheel”. There is a plethora of good practice examples at regional level which can be useful lessons at the international level. It was reiterated that the dialogue has no intention to duplicate existing regional initiatives, but that it will instead seek to build on these experiences, and bring them to the attention of the international community.

Facing the above trends and challenges, participants noted that it is important to respect existing agreements and rules such as UN General Assembly resolutions 46/182 and 57/150 as well as to make better use of knowledge and tools already available. For example, international disaster response laws, rules and principles (IDRL) was appreciated by participants as a means to standardize and regulate international assistance in disaster situations.

On the other hand, the plethora of initiatives for international disaster response often overwhelms states. For example, participants expressed their frustration over the multitude of assessment methods challenging government's coordination efforts even more. Hence it is absolutely necessary to have a universal format for assessment and a stronger coordination under the leadership of the government.

Participants highlighted the central importance of recognising national sovereignty and national capacity in international disaster response. Regional and international actors should abstain from acting without coordination with the affected country. Also, procedures and mechanisms for accepting international aid have to come from the country concerned. A single government entry point has to be designated to harmonize information, rules and procedures. A critical aspect of the government is to map out international actors and set up some rules as part of emergency preparedness, so that they can better manage incoming international assistance. An important aspect is to streamline standards and agree on a universal format for accountability, so that assistance can be more predictable and of equal quality. It was noted that there are currently too many international standards that makes it challenging for affected countries. A more central role of the government should minimise duplication of efforts and competition for resources.

Participants noted that capacity building based on lessons learned from past experiences, taking into account the conditions of the most vulnerable people is key for successful international disaster response.

A few practical suggestions were made:

- To develop training and situation exercises for coordination to bring all national level partners together (current training and exercises tend to concentrate on limited aspects of disaster response mechanisms, with insufficient cross-fertilisation between existing mechanisms at national, regional and international levels).
- To develop guidelines and rules of engagement for international partners and to document the roles and responsibilities of national actors.
- To define processes, checklists, standardized methods and approaches to facilitate nationally-led coordination
- To recognize at the national level the coordination role the UNDAC team plays in coordinating international partners
- To recognize that state authorities lead assessments and to streamline the different assessment processes to make it manageable by the affected country

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