

OCHA and slow-onset emergencies

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1. INTRODUCTION

1. There is a widespread recognition that the nature of humanitarian emergencies is changing. Although catastrophic, sudden-onset events like tropical storms, earthquakes and tsunamis will continue to happen, and will require rapid and well coordinated humanitarian interventions, many more humanitarian crises emerge over time based on a combination of complex and interrelated circumstances.
2. For the purpose of this study, a slow-onset emergency is defined as one *that does not emerge from a single, distinct event but one that emerges gradually over time, often based on a confluence of different events.*
3. Drought is a common example of a slow-onset emergency. In addition, global challenges – such as climate change, food and energy price spikes, macroeconomic trends, irregular migration, rapid population growth, and urbanisation – are contributing to increasing vulnerability and humanitarian need. In combination, these trends may result in more slow-onset emergencies in the future.
4. This paper discusses OCHA’s role in slow-onset emergencies and recommends how OCHA can support national and international humanitarian partners to prepare for and respond to them more effectively. It is primarily based on research commissioned by OCHA.¹ This included a review of literature in the fields of disaster risk reduction, contingency planning, slow-onset emergencies, food security, and vulnerability reduction, as well as more than 100 interviews with OCHA staff and partners in the field and in headquarters.
5. Although the main focus of the research was on drought in Africa, it is also relevant to other kinds of slow-onset emergencies, including compound crises resulting from global challenges such as food and energy insecurity, which are increasingly recognised as important emerging drivers of vulnerability and humanitarian need.

2. CONCEPTS IN SLOW-ONSET EMERGENCIES

2.1 *Why distinguish between slow and rapid-onset emergencies?*

6. When vulnerable populations are exposed to recurring or cyclical hazard events, such as drought, the resultant humanitarian emergencies often a result, not just of the most recent event, but the cumulative impacts of a number of previous events. When livelihoods fail to recover full resilience after a drought or another slow-onset event, a subsequent event, even if less severe, can push them more quickly into a situation of acute humanitarian need. If livelihoods are not restored or strengthened between events through recovery and development activities, then smaller and smaller hazards can push households over the edge, resulting in a vicious cycle.

¹ The research on which this paper is based was carried out by an independent consultant. The opinions expressed in this paper therefore do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The full report can be found on OCHANET at: <http://ochanet.unocha.org/CC/Community%20Content/Background%20Documentation%20%28Basic%29/OCHA%20and%20Coordination%20in%20Slow%20Onset%20Disasters,%20Final%20report,%2030%20April%202008.pdf>

7. The lines between types of emergencies are often blurred. For example, flooding is normally categorised as ‘rapid-onset’, yet it may take a month for heavy rains upstream to flow into rivers and flood downstream communities. Many emergencies evolve from a series of related or unrelated events. Even when there is a distinct shock that prompts a humanitarian response, the emergency situation is also a result of the vulnerability of the population, which may have been increasing for some time prior, and for a variety of reasons.
8. However, there is one key reason for OCHA and humanitarian actors to distinguish, in general terms, between slow and rapid-onset events. Slowly unfolding emergencies can be mitigated by early response. If preparedness, early warning and early response systems are fully functioning, coordinated and integrated, the longer lead time means the humanitarian community can step in early enough to reduce human suffering and help prevent the downward spiral of increased vulnerability to future hazards.
9. Unfortunately, the response to most slow-onset emergencies often ends up resembling the response to rapid-onset events – a large influx of resources aimed at saving lives, the creation of temporary and often parallel coordination structures, and a response dominated by food aid. Time after time, the international community waits until a slow-onset event reaches the acute phase and then needs to be dealt with using the tools created for a rapid-onset disaster. This is both inefficient and ineffective, wasting resources and exacerbating human suffering.

2.2 *Understanding vulnerability, livelihoods and coping*

10. Vulnerability is defined by UNISDR as the “*conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards*”. People affected by slow-onset emergencies are not passive victims of external events. Instead, their way of living (or livelihood strategy) is constantly evolving as they attempt to cope.
11. Humanitarian agencies have made major strides toward improving their understanding of vulnerability, livelihoods and coping over the past decade. However, the compounding nature of multiple hazards and people’s ever-changing attempts to adjust to new circumstances makes it very difficult to fully understand, prepare for and respond to slow-onset emergencies.
12. Many households that experience periodic slow-onset disasters, especially drought, have very well developed strategies to cope with them. *The first response to an impending crisis by the humanitarian community should therefore be to look for ways to bolster existing coping strategies.* The knowledge of these coping strategies often exists among development partners. Ensuring that the first response directly supports normal household strategies is often overlooked.

2.3 *Chronic and acute needs*

13. It is widely recognised that some of the world’s worst humanitarian situations are not transitory problems but long term “chronic emergencies” (for example, the

persistently high levels of acute malnutrition in the Sahel), which continue to exist even in the absence of shocks like drought.

14. In such situations, humanitarian actors are often forced to make artificial distinctions between chronic and acute (or emergency) needs, perhaps to justify an emergency response from donors. In reality, where there is a high level of chronic food insecurity, for example, it is often difficult to pinpoint when people enter into a situation of acute humanitarian need.
15. There can be a tendency to view ‘normality’ and ‘crisis’ as opposites, to which the appropriate responses are either small-scale development or large-scale humanitarian intervention. But this on/off view of crisis masks the reality that many people live perpetually close to the edge of crisis, and that small deviations from the norm may tip them over the edge. Early intervention to stop people’s livelihoods collapsing can in principle prevent escalation to a full-blown crisis.
16. This issue reaches to the heart of the definition of ‘humanitarian emergencies.’ It is no longer possible to equate humanitarian emergencies solely with short, sharp disasters. Human suffering, when measured by the most agreed indicators such as acute malnutrition (wasting) or excess mortality is often higher in situations of chronic vulnerability than in situations in which there is a clear trigger for humanitarian action.

2.4 General preparedness planning and contingency planning

17. Two broad approaches to planning for an emergency are discussed in this paper. The following definitions are taken from the Inter-agency Contingency Planning Guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance.
18. *General preparedness planning* aims to establish a standing capacity to respond to a range of different situations that may affect a country or region by putting in place a broad set of preparedness measures. General preparedness planning is a continuing activity which all Humanitarian Country Teams are expected to undertake and maintain. These plans and systems should be assessed and reviewed regularly.
19. *Contingency planning* is undertaken specifically for an emerging or anticipated crisis. This may be a new situation or a potential deterioration in an existing situation to which the international humanitarian community must respond. Early warning is an important tool to help determine when to engage in a more detailed contingency planning process. Humanitarian agencies/organizations are encouraged to establish or create linkages between existing early warning systems and their contingency planning processes.
20. While these two approaches share many of the same planning elements, the primary difference between them is in the level of specificity – with the former outlining preparedness actions to respond to a range of threats and the latter focusing on the preparedness and response capacities required for a specific situation.

3. ESSENTIAL ROLES FOR OCHA IN SLOW-ONSET EMERGENCIES

21. In the last several years, consensus has emerged within the humanitarian community about the need to move beyond merely responding to specific shocks toward contingency planning, general emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction.
22. This chapter looks at several areas in which OCHA can help mobilize coordinated action to respond to slow-onset emergencies before they reach an acute phase, given the real limitations in terms of its staff, country presence, budget and mandate.

3.1 *Encourage operational contingency planning for early response to emerging slow-onset events*

23. OCHA leadership and coordination has encouraged broad participation in contingency planning and has heightened awareness among country teams, governments, donors and other partners about the value of contingency planning. However, the next major challenge will be to make contingency plans more operational.
24. *In slow-onset emergencies, when there are clear early warning signs of an impending crisis, contingency planning should be initiated.* It can allow agencies to identify livelihood-based interventions that can be effective in early response – for example, selling animals, water conservation interventions, short cycle seed distributions, etc.
25. Contingency planning for slow-onset emergencies offers a unique opportunity to do contingency planning in a way that has immediate utility, leads to early action, reduces human suffering and builds resilience to future shocks. While it is generally accepted that it is better to intervene early in a slow-onset event rather than wait until the critical stage when human suffering is obvious, it remains difficult to identify and intervene at the right time with the right type of responses.
26. Because of the gradual build-up in slow-onset disasters, contingency planning for slow-onset events can be triggered by a real, emerging threat rather than a potential, future threat. In this way, the plan can be transformed into a tool for early action, rather than a static and generic plan that sits on a shelf once completed.
27. One model for dealing with the different lead times inherent with different hazards emerges from current practices of some agencies. General, all-hazard preparedness planning is done on a regular, often annual, basis. When early warning signs indicate a potential humanitarian crisis is emerging, contingency planning is undertaken including specific response plans. In this way, the significant investment made in developing detailed scenarios and response plans is focused only on situations with a high likelihood of occurring.
28. Contingency planning based on clear triggers and early response can help break the cycle of increasing vulnerability, costly interventions and food-focused responses. While general multi-hazard preparedness planning is important and the two processes should be linked, OCHA's comparative advantage – and its greatest potential impact – lies in action-oriented contingency planning.

29. OCHA should attempt to ensure that operational contingency planning is carried out whenever an emergency is imminent, even in countries where it has no permanent presence. This would require a significant investment of staff resources, especially from regional offices, and a serious management commitment to preparedness and early action.

3.2 *Promote tipping point analysis and strengthen linkages with early warning*

30. *In order to launch contingency planning at the right time, specific triggers need to be developed and agreed upon in advance.* When the triggers are reached, contingency planning should be launched automatically. One reason the response to slow-onset emergencies is often late is the difficulty determining if and when a developing situation will become an emergency.
31. Traditionally, some agencies have relied on nutritional indicators of acute malnutrition to ‘prove’ a slow-onset emergency exists before responding. Given more than a decade of work on understanding livelihoods and vulnerability, it is possible to define more sophisticated and earlier indicators of an impending crisis. Development, early warning and emergency response actors can all play an important role in defining the triggers that would indicate a likely crisis for a particular country or region.
32. The triggers would be different for each country or region or sector and would depend entirely on data availability. In terms of drought-related food insecurity, food prices and rainfall data are available in nearly every country, with varying levels of geographic coverage and timeliness. With only these two broad indicators, certain triggers could be agreed. In most countries, analysts can create more sophisticated thresholds for triggering a contingency plan.
33. The analysis and definition of triggers should be part of the general preparedness planning process, cluster work plans, or even included as part of the UNDAF process. Pre-determining precise triggers can have the added advantage of removing any real or perceived political influences from the planning process.
34. The linkages between early warning and contingency planning also continue after the initial tipping point is reached and the planning is undertaken. Even when signs of an impending emergency are clear, the evolution of a slow-onset event can proceed in many different directions.
35. Scenario building in contingency plans can take on a new meaning when the scenarios are no longer hypothetical but based on a real event that is currently unfolding. Tying the scenarios with early warning information and pre-determined tipping points would allow analysts to monitor the progression of a scenario and recommend appropriate actions as the situation evolves.

3.3 *Engage development, academic and private sector actors in defining appropriate early responses*

36. *OCHA should actively engage non-emergency actors in the contingency planning process, including in helping to identify indicators for monitoring vulnerability, tipping points, and design interventions.*
37. NGOs working on development activities are sometimes perceived as reluctant to shift gears into emergency mode, fearing it will derail longer-term development activities. In many cases, they are correct when the response is late and dominated by food aid interventions. But if OCHA and the humanitarian community reach out to the development community early and ask for support in designing early response activities to prevent or reduce the need for large-scale emergency responses, development actors will be much more inclined to cooperate.
38. Academic and technical bodies also can play a role in designing early response activities. Many studies have been carried out on the coping strategies employed by vulnerable groups. The analysts who carry out these studies can be asked to identify ways to support existing coping strategies to help protect livelihoods and build resilience to future shocks.
39. One way to encourage the linkages between development programming and humanitarian response is for OCHA to participate actively in the UNDAF/CCA process. During this strategic planning process, OCHA can help ensure the entire country team acknowledges the existing disaster risks and considers strategies to build in risk reduction and early response into the overall framework for assistance.

3.4 *Monitor early warning indicators and foster innovations in humanitarian classification systems*

40. Once tipping points and triggers are agreed (for various clusters, sub-national regions, etc.), *OCHA can monitor, consolidate and report on the situation.* If clear triggers have been pre-defined by clusters or sectoral working groups, most of the analytical work would have been completed. OCHA, in collaboration with national disaster management, early warning or IASC structures in place, can then track the evolution of various indicators and consolidate them, highlighting to the humanitarian community when multiple indicators are reaching a critical level.
41. This role does not necessarily require OCHA staff with highly technical skills, but it requires staff with a thorough understanding of key concepts in slow-onset emergencies, such as vulnerability, livelihoods and coping, as well as an appreciation how the triggers were defined for each sector. *OCHA's role would focus on advocacy and information sharing, knowing when and how to raise the alarm.*
42. In an effort to improve consensus among humanitarian agencies and to develop clear indicators for measuring the severity of crises, a number of initiatives are underway to develop classification systems for humanitarian situations, such as the Integrated Food Security and Humanitarian Phase Classification (IPC) system.² Such tools can

² <http://www.ipcinfo.org/>

be used to build consensus about the existence, nature, severity and geographic extent of an emerging slow-onset event. This consensus can be the key to early action.

3.5 *Encourage development of contingency planning triggers for conflicts and longer term, compound threats*

43. While many examples of preparedness for slow-onset events focus on drought, slowly emerging conflicts and compound crises resulting from the combined effects of global challenges require additional attention. Just like for other types of slow-onset events, triggers can be defined for potential conflict and compound crises and action oriented contingency planning can be launched when the tipping point is reached.
44. Monitoring conflict and the complex, interrelated impacts of global challenges require a different set of skills than monitoring natural disaster indicators. In these cases, *OCHA should consider bringing external experts, such as political scientists, into the contingency planning process.*
45. Indicators and triggers for potential civil unrest can be politically sensitive. While triggers for most slow-onset emergencies must be developed locally, based on data available in country, there could be justification for using standardised global indicators for potential civil unrest, to reduce the local sensitivities. Generic indicators, like upcoming closely contested elections with existing social/ethnic tensions, could trigger contingency planning without suggesting a judgment on the part of the UN about the likelihood of conflict.
46. Many agencies are developing their own tools and systems to monitor emerging global challenges such as food and energy price spikes. While OCHA does not necessarily have the technical expertise or capacity to develop such systems, it can bring people together to share results, discuss and debate at a national, regional or global level. Rather than focus on its own analysis, *OCHA can facilitate the sharing of analysis and work toward developing a consensus, as well as raise awareness among any partners not already developing plans.*

3.6 *Foster cross-border and sub-national contingency planning*

47. A key role for OCHA regional offices is to recognize and analyze potential regional impacts when a slow-onset emergency threatens. However, instead of major, multi-country exercises, smaller cross-border contingency planning may be more valuable for slow-onset events. While there are cases where regional (i.e. multi-country) contingency planning makes sense, such as for pandemic disease outbreaks or a major regional drought, cross-border planning (i.e. sub-regions of multiple countries with natural linkages) should occur with much more frequency.
48. In countries with a very high degree of risk, emergency preparedness and contingency planning needs to take place at the sub-national level. Adequately addressing risks and thoroughly understanding vulnerabilities and coping strategies can not take place only at the macro or national level. *In places where OCHA has a*

presence outside of the capital city, it can play a significant role in encouraging this process.

3.7 Evaluate the impact of early response actions

49. Although most analysts believe that early response is not only better for the lives of people in need but also more cost-effective for donors, better evidence to support this belief is needed. *OCHA should support monitoring and evaluation of early response initiatives so there is some clear proof that they work.* By adopting an evidence-based approach, the case for early response rather than late response will gain credibility.
50. Evaluating early response is often difficult – how can it be demonstrated that a disaster was mitigated or averted? In order to secure stable and sufficient funding for early response (or any other disaster risk reduction activity) rigorous impact assessment must be carried out. Links with research and academic institutions in the design of appropriate early response activities can help ensure monitoring and evaluation is included.

3.8 Support the creation of flexible funding mechanisms for early response

51. Improvements in monitoring the emergence of slow-onset disasters and developing early response interventions will be ineffective unless funding is in place for early response activities. Currently, there is a major gap in funding mechanisms for early response.
52. To help address this gap, *OCHA could request donor support for a funding mechanism for early response.* A relatively small pooled fund could be developed on a national or a regional basis. A set of triggers would be pre-agreed for a specific region. Once the thresholds are crossed, early response-oriented contingency plans would be developed. Activities defined in the early response contingency plan could be funded quickly through the pooled fund.
53. Several donors clearly appreciate the need to respond to slow-onset disasters before people begin to liquidate productive assets or engage in negative coping strategies. These donor agencies understand the negative effects caused when donors wait for a crisis to become acute and then respond with massive food aid interventions. Donors that share this appreciation should be approached and asked to support a pilot early response fund.
54. It would be critical to ensure such pooled funds are used only for activities that prevent deterioration in livelihoods and reduce the impact of an emerging drought or other slow-onset disaster. If funds begin to be used before triggers have been reached or for activities not directly tied to reducing the impact of the crisis, the effectiveness will be lost.
55. Humanitarian Response Funds (HRFs) have had more success than any other mechanism in addressing early response needs. Although the HRF has been used mainly to respond to rapid-onset emergencies, it has also been used successfully to

fund early response activities for slow-onset situations, for example for disease outbreaks and localized droughts.

4 POTENTIAL USES OF THIS OCCASIONAL BRIEF

56. This paper aims to prompt discussion and advance joint analysis within OCHA and among other key actors around improving the effectiveness and timeliness of slow-onset emergencies. As more knowledge, analysis, field inputs, and data become available, it will be updated accordingly. OCHA may want to consider the following actions:

- There is a clear need to respond to slow-onset emergencies earlier and with more appropriate responses. This requires complex coordination between government and donors, development and humanitarian actors, early warning systems and multiple sectors/clusters. OCHA is in a unique position to lead this process and mobilize coordinated action to respond to slow-onset disasters before the acute phase of an emergency, before irrevocable damage to lives and livelihoods happens.
- While OCHA can and does engage in activities to support disaster risk reduction, it should guard against over-commitment in this complex area. Given the predicted future increases in the number and scale of both rapid-onset and slow-onset emergencies, OCHA should assume new roles only in areas where it can consistently and effectively add value to humanitarian efforts, given the real limitations in its size, staff and budget. Operational contingency planning for slow-onset emergencies is one such area.
- OCHA can play a catalytic role in slow-onset disasters, bridging the gap between long-term disaster risk reduction and short-term emergency response through promoting action-oriented contingency planning, once a slow-onset event begins to emerge. Although OCHA already plays a leadership role in facilitating inter-agency contingency planning, the nature of slow-onset disasters presents a unique opportunity to transform this process beyond generic preparedness planning toward actionable interventions that protect livelihoods, as well as save lives.