



WEBINAR SUMMARY

**Joint Needs Assessments:
Doing it Right**

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Accurate and complete information is essential for creating a solid evidence-base to help Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams analyse humanitarian needs, identify priority issues, and provide the strategic direction for operations to respond effectively. Joint Needs Assessments was a major topic at the World Humanitarian Summit and raised many discussions on how best to bring data and information together to inform and direct humanitarian operations. Based on their experience, speakers provided practical examples on the steps that Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams can take to ensure humanitarian operations are based on impartial, unbiased, comprehensive, context-sensitive, timely, and up-to-date information that is collected and analysed in a transparent and collaborative manner.

Panellists

John Ging

Director of Operations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Peter de Clercq

Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG), United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNISOM), and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Somalia



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What is joint needs assessments and why is it important?

The Grand Bargain commits humanitarians to "provide a single, comprehensive, cross-sectoral, methodologically sound, and impartial overall assessment of needs for each crisis" and to "coordinate and streamline data collection to ensure compatibility, quality, and comparability across different agencies and NGOs, and minimise intrusion by many different organisations into the lives of affected people". This requires an alignment of data-collection efforts, analysis of information, and sharing results to all actors involved in the response. Doing this successfully depends on effective collaboration across all stakeholders, including UN agencies, NGOs, government, and donors.

Collection: Multiple and disconnected information collection exercises add an unnecessary burden on people that are already affected by conflicts and/or disasters, highlights the inefficiency of humanitarian organisations, and lessens the trust of affected people in humanitarian efforts. The Grand Bargain does not demand single multi-sectoral data collection. Different stakeholders require different types of information depending on the decisions they have to make. Multiple assessments at different stages of a crisis are not in themselves a problem, provided they are done with a common methodological approach and are complementary. In coming up with a common understanding of people's needs, stakeholders should consult each other to avoid gaps and duplication, and make sure data and information collected is mutually compatible and useful to each other.

Analysis: It is important to distinguish between information collection and analysis. The ultimate goal of joint needs assessments is to produce a single analysis, and consequently arrive at a common understanding of affected people's needs. In order to encourage organisations to partake in these joint assessments, they need

to trust the soundness of the exercise and the credibility of the source data. This means that there needs to be a shared methodological approach, verifiable data, and a source base that can be compiled into a single database for everyone to use. This provides the foundation for accurate analysis to make decisions.

Sharing: One of the Grand Bargain's commitments is to "share needs assessment data in a timely manner" but organisations often take a proprietary approach to assessment information and are uncomfortable in sharing data to protect privacy of individuals. While data privacy and data protection concerns must be taken into account, organisations should endeavour to, at the very least, share and explain their analysis of data even if the data cannot be fully shared. In Haiti, after Hurricane Matthew the humanitarian community struggled to agree on protocols to release assessment data from different agencies. This delayed the operation because there was no complete understanding of what happened, where it happened, and therefore what should be prioritised. The Grand Bargain commitments intend to overcome these impediments to an effective response.

Should joint needs assessments be performed by independent, specialised organisations with no responsibility on the implementation of the response?

Tensions between identifying the needs and planning the response may exist within organisations conducting joint needs assessments. The concern is that without appropriate distinction between the two phases (identifying the needs and planning the response), there is a risk that priorities could be set on the basis of what partners have, rather than what affected people need. Through a renewed commitment to information sharing, transparent methodologies, and a joint-up approach to the analysis of needs, the Grand Bargain intends to build a system that can tap into the capacities and resources of all actors on the ground to produce a truly needs- and evidence-driven response. The Grand Bargain does not foresee data collection being outsourced to specialised organisations. Nonetheless, the Grand Bargain does not exclude the use of independent specialists to strengthen a transparent needs assessment process.

Specialised organisations with data collection and analysis capacities can fill information gaps, for example when some sectors, geographical areas, or population groups are not covered in existing assessments. These organisations can also help to build capacities of other partners, including local actors.

When assessment results and analysis are contested, independent assessments, and analyses can serve a triangulation purpose. However, a mechanism of consultation to reconcile different results must be put in place if decision-makers are to be provided with actionable results. It will be of little use to give decision-makers a third point of view without helping them understand why there are differences, and which results are eventually to be used.

Is preparedness relevant for Joint Needs Assessments?

Yes. Effective coordination around the joint assessment of needs should begin before a crisis strikes in order to prepare the operation to respond to the effects of the crisis. Joint needs assessments that have been done before a crisis has struck allow different stakeholders in an operation to understand the potential impact of the crisis, identify areas that will most likely be affected, and to identify and pre-position humanitarian supplies that will be needed, in advance. Joint needs assessments can also be useful to present to donors to secure anticipated resources that will be needed to respond to a crisis ahead of time, and to mitigate the impact of the crisis before it happens. The response to Hurricane Matthew in Haiti was facilitated by the fact that a joint needs assessments was previously done, the humanitarian community had predictable models for the response, donors were approached for funds, and in some cases, food had been pre-positioned in areas identified as most likely to be in need.



Peter de Clercq

DSRSG, UNISOM and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Somalia

What steps can Humanitarian Coordinators take to put in place Joint Needs Assessments in their operation?

Leadership at the Humanitarian Coordinator level

1. The Humanitarian Coordinator's role in a response is to provide a common direction for the Humanitarian Country Team to respond collectively in an organised manner. In Somalia, we started the process by reaching a common agreement with the Humanitarian Country Team members on what information was needed to optimally programme the response. This was a relatively simple process in some regards, as the Humanitarian Country Team has sophisticated systems to conduct food security and nutrition analysis. However, for issues relating to the non-food side of the response the Humanitarian Country Team has still not clearly clarified what information is required from needs assessments.
2. In Somalia the Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Country Team provided clear guidance to the Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG). The ICCG, as the operational side of the response, is a critical player

in organising joint needs assessments, particularly the ‘joint’ part. In Somalia, the Humanitarian Coordinator took the time to bilaterally meet with cluster leads to understand the concerns and diverging visions from different clusters, and to support them in coordination activities.

3. In Somalia the Humanitarian Coordinator worked closely with OCHA, allowing to link the strategic vision coming from the Humanitarian Country Team to the operational realities in the hands of the clusters. OCHA, as the chair of the ICCG and as the support office to the Humanitarian Coordinator function, was involved in both. The ICCG and OCHA’s role in supporting coordination has also been critical in harmonising needs assessments across the country and capitalising on the different capacities and resources of many different organisations on the ground, including recovery and development actors. The coordinated response in the country has allowed us to access a wide geographic area of the country, including Somaliland and Puntland.

Leadership at the ICCG level

1. The process is not always smooth. There shouldn’t be turf wars between different agencies and NGOs, and the importance of Cluster Lead Agencies taking up their responsibilities on behalf of the cluster members is essential. Agencies need to work together to define and come to an agreement on approved tools and methods for assessments so that data can be standardised through clusters (while also retaining the need to be adaptable at the same time).
2. As mentioned, the importance of the relationship between the Humanitarian Country Team and the ICCG is critical for carrying out joint needs assessments successfully. In Somalia there are joint Humanitarian Country Team-ICCG meetings every 2 months.

Leadership at the Cluster/sub-national level

1. The Humanitarian Coordinator recognised the need to engage with sub-national cluster focal points to ensure wide geographic coverage. This has been particularly important in the Somalia context, where sub-national clusters, the Area Humanitarian Country Team and local authorities have a better understanding of the local context and better access to local populations.

What obstacles did you face in implementing Joint Needs Assessments in Somalia?

Obstacles	Steps taken to overcome the challenges
Bringing all actors behind a common vision: Agencies have different visions of where the operation should focus its resources. Some may prioritise ‘life-saving’ activities while others may focus on resilience building. A disjointed HCT can paralyse joint needs assessments.	Stronger HCT with coherent vision: The HC worked with the HCT to agree on guidelines and methodologies together before a joint assessment was proposed. This gave the time and space to all agencies to voice their concern and include their programmatic needs into the assessment, which led to a coordinated approach.
Access and security: The presence of Al Shabaab in Somalia greatly affected logistics supporting the operations and physical safety of staff. Additionally, bureaucratic impediments by local authorities can halt needs assessments.	Use of technology; use of sub-national structures: The use of mobile and satellite technologies helped circumvent access restrictions. While this raised data protection concerns, agencies are working to overcome these challenges. Additionally, using regional and sub-national structures, as well as local partners, enables better understanding of and access to local communities.
National capacity: The capacity of the government institutions to respond to crises in Somalia was not particularly strong, including for collecting data and information.	Support to local disaster management authorities increased the ability of national authorities to maintain data and information, respond to crises, and coordinate with the international system. The capacity still needs to develop further, however.
Assessment fatigue: Many organisations carried out assessments, which became burdensome to affected communities and affected the credibility of humanitarian organisations.	Coordinating assessments: We worked to limit the number of assessments by a large number of organisations, and replaced them with cluster and joint needs assessments. We replaced confusing monitoring tools with more predictable assessment tools with standardised data collection methods.