Content for this topic: **OCHA and NGOs** was informed through a combination of contributions from individuals and desk research.

Complementing the webinar for this topic on the global humanitarian coordination architecture, the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) took the opportunity to talk with **Loretta Hieber-Girardet, Chief of the Inter-Cluster Coordination Section at the Programme Support Branch at OCHA**.

Read below for Loretta’s response to various questions. With thanks to PHAP for undertaking this interview.

**EXPERT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Why should humanitarian NGOs engage with OCHA, either at the global or country level?**

“NGOs are at the forefront of the humanitarian response. They provide the bulk of the assistance, are closest to affected communities, and are present both before and after an emergency strikes, helping communities prepare for disasters and working to restore lives and livelihoods long afterwards. As the global body responsible for humanitarian coordination, OCHA seeks to work closely with NGOs to fulfill their mandates and objectives. Given the critical role that both of our organizations play, partnership, close collaboration, and coordination are absolutely essential.

As a starting point, OCHA’s mandate is to provide vital services to the humanitarian community and to support their response to emergencies. OCHA serves the NGO community by providing information and analysis, humanitarian financing, and support on advocacy, among others (here is a link for detailed information). OCHA can also be the entry point for NGOs to the broader Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and UN system, where those contacts could be useful.

At country level, OCHA compiles the overall view of the needs, requirements, challenges, and contacts with the key actors and decision makers: the national government, UN agencies, regional organizations, donors, non-state actors, etc. This is a critical role as information and analysis are extremely valuable to enable NGOs make informed decisions. In its role as overall coordinator between clusters (inter-cluster coordination), OCHA promotes NGO participation in these bodies, including as co-facilitators of clusters to ensure coordination is strengthened by NGOs’ vital operational experience. OCHA also works to ensure that NGOs, including national
NGOs, are able to participate on Humanitarian Country Teams as well as on Advisory Boards of pooled funds. Engaging with OCHA helps NGOs have better information about how these bodies work and helps reflect NGO concerns on the agenda. By participating, NGOs have the opportunity to shape the response through their field-based perspective.

OCHA is also responsible for negotiating access to people in need of assistance—either with non-state actors or with governments—and for advocating for the protection of civilians. When NGOs are obstructed from reaching populations in need, OCHA's voice in advocating either behind closed doors or publicly raises the matter to the highest level and helps put pressure where needed.

NGOs benefit from having a coordinated approach, not only as far as technical standards are concerned in the various sectors such as health, nutrition, etc., to which they adhere by being cluster members, but also in terms of how and where assistance is provided. By helping humanitarian organizations achieve a coordinated stance on critical issues, OCHA promotes a unified position, leveraging the power of the collective, and directly helps strengthen the role of NGOs. NGOs are therefore more shielded from the pressure of standing out alone on certain issues, and it also helps ensure NGOs are not ‘played’ against each other.

At the global level, the NGO perspective is equally important to influence policy, guidance and the tools that OCHA helps develop. NGO involvement means these products stay relevant and useful to operations. Participation on the Emergency Directors Group, facilitated by OCHA, is another way that NGOs are directly involved in reviewing how humanitarian operations are being implemented, and allows NGOs to bring their perspective on how the response can be improved. NGOs are also represented at the IASC through the Consortia (ICVA, InterAction, SCHR) where they take policy and operational decisions at the highest level on humanitarian response worldwide. OCHA is a strong advocate within the UN system to create opportunities for greater engagement with NGOs, and to see more senior level positions filled from the NGO community. Bringing NGO experience to the global level improves quality, accountability and helps ensure the focus is kept on the action in the field. In short, it matters very much that NGOs engage with OCHA at the global or at the national level—with certain benefits for NGOs and the humanitarian response as a whole.”

**Coordination can be time-consuming and its value is not immediately evident. Is “over-coordination” possible?**

“The last thing coordination should be is an end in itself. The idea around coordination is that we are exchanging information and ideas, and finding ways to work together that can lead to faster, better response for affected people. But the fact is that we have seen examples where there are a multitude of events and actions taking place in the name of coordination, e.g. where
there is a duplication of meetings, multiple requests for the same information, etc. This is not a very good use of time or resources and is generally counterproductive. People need to know what they are going to get out of a meeting, and why they are sharing information.

Coordinators, whether they are OCHA staff or Cluster Coordinators or NGO Coordinators – all have a responsibility to make sure they have a clear objective in mind for meetings or for information requests, and are effective in bringing the group to a shared understanding, and where possible, decisive agreement on the priority actions to be taken. So, yes, over-coordination is possible and it does happen. When it’s a smaller emergency and coordination is mainly among humanitarians it can be easily corrected as it will soon be obvious that there is little value added to the meetings, and participation starts to naturally wither. It becomes more difficult either in large scale disasters or in complicated environments where humanitarians have to coordinate with other entities, for example actors involved in peacekeeping, etc. or where it is a massive natural disaster and a very large number of organizations are responding. These can be very challenging situations, but we must play our part to address any aspects of over-coordination or duplication on the humanitarian side. The Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team, with OCHA’s support, are responsible for ensuring that coordination is relevant to the context and meets the needs. Internal procedures require that coordination be reviewed once a year to make sure that this is the case. NGOs participating in coordination fora play an important role by stressing that the focus remains on addressing the needs and offers an added value to operational actors.”

How can an NGO get the most out of the services that OCHA offers? What are some first steps that an NGO can take if it has not yet participated in coordinated response?

“OCHA’s role is a service provider – we’re there to enable and support humanitarian actors to deliver the response. Engagement with NGOs is a priority for OCHA, and we will seek many opportunities to reach out to the NGO community, both international NGOs as well as local organizations. NGOs should feel welcome to approach any OCHA office for support. Here are a couple tips I’d like to suggest to NGOs in getting the most out of OCHA. First, remember that we are a service provider – in other words, don’t feel shy to ask for support or help or information – that’s our job! I would suggest that NGOs get to know their key OCHA counterparts to get the latest information on the issues they are most concerned about. For example, who is the Humanitarian Affairs Officer that is following a certain geographical zone or region to give you information on the situation there? Who is the person involved with managing the pooled fund process that can inform you about how to apply? Second, I’d ask about what information products are available that could be of use to you. Maps of where there are needs? Contact lists? Information on what coordination meetings are taking place? Up-coming workshops or training events? Third, if your NGO is facing challenges delivering assistance as a result of access constraints or bureaucratic challenges, OCHA needs to be
aware. Please share these concerns with us so we can monitor any impediments to delivering assistance and advocate on behalf of the humanitarian community for safe access to affected people.

Another suggestion, if your NGO is not very familiar with the humanitarian system, would be to ask OCHA to better explain how the humanitarian system works and how your NGO can participate in the different coordination meetings and response efforts. Staff in our field offices can help guide you and explain how the system works and how you can participate. You can ask OCHA to do a briefing for your NGO or for a number of NGOs together to explain this. Feel free to share with OCHA your thoughts on what we can do to facilitate local NGO participation – either in OCHA-led meetings or with clusters.

I’d like to add one further point: indeed, the Coordinator needs to be skilled and should make efforts to be inclusive. At the same time, NGOs can get the most out of coordination where they are proactive and share information, offer their views and concerns, and bring their experience and the voices of affected people to shape the response. Coordination is not simply about the Coordinator - it is a combined effort among all participants who have a shared purpose: to save lives, alleviate suffering, and ensure affected people retain their dignity. OCHA is fully committed to working with NGOs and making sure they feel a sense of ownership in coordination, and that it meets their needs.”