

# GUIDANCE FOR NGO SPEAKERS: OCHA MEMBER STATE BRIEFINGS



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

## Background

ICVA is committed to ensuring the voices of local actors and crisis-affected people are at the centre of global advocacy initiatives. Our work aims to ensure consistent NGO representation, and particular local NGO representation at humanitarian briefings, policy fora and dialogues with UN agencies, donors and governments, including UN Member State briefings. This paper outlines key considerations and practical tips for NGO speakers representing at UN Member State briefings in Geneva.

## Overview of MS briefings

OCHA organises monthly briefings for UN Member States (MS) at the United Nations in Geneva. Some briefings focus on a specific country or region, while others have a thematic element. The format of thematic briefings is generally in three parts: an operational update on a specific context; a thematic update or update on the work of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee; and a funding update focused on needs, trends, and analysis. In addition, there are occasional pledging conferences and launches of appeals or response plans for specific contexts.

The monthly briefing and ad hoc geographic briefings are generally held in person and by invitation only. Pledging conferences and launches are broadcast online on UN Web TV. For risk assessment purposes, it is important to be aware if the briefing is public or private before selecting a speaker and preparing their remarks.

These events are attended by representatives of the Permanent Missions of UN Member States, usually at Humanitarian Attaché level, regional bodies, UN agencies, and NGOs. All UN Member States are invited. MS representatives will often prepare a report of the briefing that they share with their respective capitals and relevant embassies.

The briefings are moderated by an OCHA representative. Speakers at geographic briefings generally include the Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator (HC/RC), a representative of the host country government, another UN agency from either country, regional, or global level, and NGOs.

ICVA is committed to promoting locally led response and elevating the voice of local actors in global platforms. ICVA actively promotes NGO participation, consultation and representation in regional and global fora, including Member State Briefings.

Panellists generally speak for 5-10 minutes, following which, the moderator opens the floor to comments and questions for the speakers. Speakers may be given the opportunity to respond to questions depending on time, which is strictly kept to.

## How can NGOs secure a speaking slot?

Member State Briefings organised by OCHA are often initiated on the request of the Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator at country level. While ICVA and other Geneva-based NGOs regularly advocate with OCHA in Geneva for strong NGO representation at these events, it is critically important that NGOs at country level raise their interest in having speaking slots for INGOs, NNGOs, and LNGOs at these events.

## What support does ICVA provide?

ICVA has developed a Speakers Bureau to help quickly identify expert NGO speakers for a context or theme, if you are an ICVA member and interested in joining please contact [ICVA](#). ICVA engages with the national and international NGO fora and members to identify speakers for MS Briefings. ICVA endeavours to ensure a diverse range of speakers are selected and gives preference to speakers with strong humanitarian backgrounds and expertise who can effectively represent the humanitarian needs and humanitarian community.

ICVA can provide support to members and NGO forum representatives in reviewing talking points, advising on relevant recommendations to include, supporting the speaker to do a practice run, and providing feedback.

Please contact the [Speakers Bureau](#) with any questions.

## How should an NGO speaker prepare for a member state briefing?

- Engage with the NGO forum and other NGOs to develop talking points. The level of engagement that is possible will depend on the amount of lead-in time provided. While it may not always be possible, it would be good to strive to:
  - Ensure you have up-to-date information on the scale of the collective NGO response (number of NGOs operating, number of people reached, number of staff employed, funds raised, impact).
  - Contact a range of NGOs operating in the context to seek out their diverse viewpoints and share talking points in advance for feedback to ensure they reflect the nuances of the NGO collective. Where possible, visit affected areas in advance of the briefing and reflect the experiences and key concerns of crisis-affected populations.
- Ensure that actionable recommendations for strengthening principled, effective, and people-centred response are identified and that these have support from the NGO collective (INGOs, NNGOs, LNGOs).
- Coordinate with OCHA or the HC/RC office in advance of the MS Briefing to avoid repetition. The UN and government will generally be quite formal and focus on the overall humanitarian needs, challenges and what they are doing to address them – NGOs can provide a more human voice to the crisis narrative, while raising key advocacy issues.
- If appropriate, consider coordinating with the representative of the affected or host country government on messaging. The MS Briefings are an opportunity for governments to raise resources for their contexts and for humanitarian practitioners to discuss how best to improve and strengthen the response. Depending on the specific context under discussion, the briefing may offer a strategic opportunity to engage with the government representative in advance and coordinate on messaging. This may also offer an opportunity to bilaterally raise issues that are creating barriers to the response.
- If you are attending an in-person briefing you may wish to organise additional meetings to make full use of the opportunity to speak with different stakeholders and decision-makers in Geneva, and to share sensitive information that it is not possible to raise at the formal briefing. This could include:
  - An ICVA-hosted NGO meeting;
  - An ICVA-hosted NGO dialogue with the HC/RC;
  - An NGO briefing for a select group of Member States, including donors;
  - Bilateral meetings with representatives of the Permanent Missions.
- Consider preparing some written materials that you can share at the meetings or in follow up by email.
- In general, slides are not necessary. NGO interventions are usually spoken without visual accompaniment.

## Details for online attendees

- Ensure you have the **dial-in details!** If the OCHA representative has not been in touch to provide them, please inform ICVA asap.
- Do not share the dial-in details with others – only the nominated speaker can join the link.
- Ensure your internet connection is stable – if you do not have access to a good internet connection, ask another NGO or UN agency to facilitate you. OCHA is usually able to support.
- If the internet connection is poor, you can submit a pre-recorded message and send it via a service like [wetransfer.com](https://www.wetransfer.com).
- You'll be on a really large screen – ensure you are well lit, free from interruptions, and that your background is clutter free.
- Join early to check your sound is working. Stay on mute until it is your turn to speak.
- Look at the camera while speaking, if you are reading from notes (which it is recommended you do), put the notes directly underneath the camera so that you can maintain as much eye contact as possible.

## Important points to note when preparing your intervention

- Interventions are generally 5-10 minutes. Usually, NGOs are the last speakers. The floor is then opened for questions.
- Practice reading your intervention aloud a couple of times in advance and time yourself to ensure it fits within time constraints.
- In general, speakers can deliver 130 words per minute while speaking at a comfortable pace.
- There may be simultaneous interpretation in English and French, so it is important to speak slowly and clearly to facilitate the interpreters in their role. If interpretation is provided you will need to provide a written copy of your intervention to OCHA by email that they can share with the interpreters.
- Represent the NGO community and overall humanitarian situation, not just your own NGO or the needs of people in the areas where your organisation works.
- Highlight your credibility by briefly outlining your collective expertise, track record, and added value. For example, *there are 60 INGOs and 240 NNGOs currently responding to the crisis. Collectively we have deployed over 3,500 expert staff to support over 1.5 million people and have raised over \$30 million to enable a swift and effective response. Services provided include...*
- Consider focussing on the humanitarian situation, voices of people affected, coordination and services needed and leave funding requests to the end and not as the primary ask. Highlight what has been achieved with existing resources. Often both NGOs and UN representatives speak about resourcing gaps and financial asks before speaking about the humanitarian situation. This has been met with criticism from Member State representatives.
- UN MS representatives may receive talking points and briefing notes from their capital or in-country embassy. Liaising with embassies in-country will give an understanding of their key interests and concerns. Tailor your message to provide information you expect will be of interest to them.
- Donors to the specific humanitarian response, in particular, will be interested to learn how the NGO response is proceeding and to hear about practical solutions that can save lives, reduce suffering and promote dignity. This may also be an opportunity to highlight specific operational challenges, where appropriate.
- Interventions should, as much as possible, be grounded in the humanitarian principles, and therefore ideally reflect the principle of neutrality, which guides humanitarian work.
- MS Briefings are an opportunity to build awareness of the scale and nature of the humanitarian crisis, leveraging support and financing.
- MS Briefings may not be the most strategic platform for direct criticism of the authorities or the UN. It is advised to make concrete and constructive recommendations aimed at improving humanitarian coordination and response. As outlined above, more sensitive issues might be better discussed in a smaller setting, such as bilateral or closed-door briefings.

## Other practical speaking tips

The following are some suggestions that you may wish to take into account as you prepare your intervention:

- Be your authentic self. Use language you are comfortable with using.
  - Avoid being overly formal. You have personal experiences and stories about the crisis and speaking to this will make your intervention memorable.
  - Trust yourself. It can be intimidating, but your audience knows much less than you do about the context and are genuinely interested in what you have to say.
  - Describe the situation through the senses (e.g. I saw, I smelt, I heard, I felt) to create a vivid picture of the context and draw people in.
- Make the first 30 seconds count. Less is more: Craft a clear and concise message that can be easily understood and remembered by the audience.
- Do not repeat overarching themes already covered.
- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms. Use figures and statistics wisely, but keep them to three at most and use them to tell a story of change, trends and comparisons. People lose interest in numbers quickly.
- Structure your intervention: Let your audience know how many points you will present or what you will be talking about e.g. "Today I want to raise three key points before turning to recommendations"

- Briefly thank the organisers and previous speakers before providing your intervention. To help maintain engagement, refer to the other speakers points if possible in your intervention e.g. “To build on the point of the HC/RC, we need...”
- Provide actionable recommendations and solutions but keep the list short and focus on key priorities that the UN, host government or member states can easily support, e.g. fund the Country Based Pooled Funds.
- Examples of messaging are provided in Annex 1.

## Follow up

After the briefing:

- If appropriate, prepare a technical brief that can be shared with interested stakeholders after your intervention.
- Write to the organisers to thank them for the opportunity to speak and their support in the process.
- Prepare a short report of the briefing and adjacent meetings for sharing with the NGO forum, noting any specific points of interest that were raised, interventions and questions by Member States or other attendees, and opportunities for follow-up engagement and advocacy.
- If safe and strategic, and common messages have been signed off as required, broadcast your remarks, key messages through your networks and social media. Utilize platforms like ReliefWeb or X to amplify your message.
- Maintain contact with Member States and offer additional information or resources if needed.
- Follow up on any commitments made during the briefing and provide assistance or collaboration opportunities. Building relationships and keeping communication channels open is essential for ongoing engagement.

## Annex 1: Examples of NGO inputs

While every crisis context has unique features, many contexts struggle with underfunding, unmet humanitarian needs, limited humanitarian access, and a lack of understanding or support for humanitarian action. NGOs – local, national, and international – are specifically and differently affected by these challenges.

Some key asks from NGOs may be around the following themes:

- Better inclusion of civil society and affected communities in design and delivery of response.
- Stronger attention to differentiated needs of affected communities based on a range of factors that can increase vulnerability, such as age, gender, diversity, migration status, etc.
- Support to extend services and/or improve quality.
- Expansion of humanitarian access [Note: If you are advocating for improved humanitarian access, be aware of the implications of the different solutions proposed and ensure other NGOs are in agreement, e.g. humanitarian corridors are military solutions and can imply armed escorts. This point can also be sensitive for the government, so be aware of this when formulating the ask].
- Protection of humanitarian space, including through removal of bureaucratic and administrative impediments and application of humanitarian exemptions to sanctions and other restrictive measures.
- Improved safety and security for NGO staff.
- Better sharing of risk.
- Increased quantity and quality of funding that directly reaches NGOs, particularly L/INGOs.
- Transparency and predictability in funding decisions.

## Demonstrating added value

The MS Briefings offer an opportunity for NGOs to showcase the vital role they play, and build rapport, understanding, and support for humanitarian action. Below is a non-exhaustive outline of ways in which NGOs provide added value to humanitarian response, some of which could be highlighted depending on relevance.

- **Access to populations in need:** NGOs may have access to populations in need of assistance that other humanitarian actors do not. This may be relevant for donors to take into account when making resource allocation decisions.
- **Expertise and experience:** Humanitarian NGOs possess specialized expertise and experience in addressing humanitarian crises, whether they are related to natural disasters, conflicts, or other emergencies. You may wish to highlight this in your intervention in order to encourage governments to recognize and tap into this expertise, leveraging NGOs' knowledge and experience to enhance their efforts.
- **Local knowledge and community engagement:** NGOs often have strong ties with local communities and possess in-depth knowledge of the local context. They work closely with affected communities, understanding their needs and priorities, and incorporating their priorities into decision-making processes. You may wish to highlight the role that NGOs can play in supporting the government of the affected or host country to leverage this local knowledge when formulating policies and implementing humanitarian interventions.
- **Show scale:** Provide concrete examples of what NGOs do and the results reached both in terms of number of people supported, services delivered and how they make a difference for them
- **Long-term development perspective:** Humanitarian NGOs often develop a long-term perspective that goes beyond immediate emergency response. They recognize the importance of sustainable development and resilience-building in communities affected by crises. They can support governments to understand and support this broader approach, acknowledging that humanitarian efforts are interconnected with development goals and require a comprehensive, multi-sectoral response.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** Humanitarian NGOs are known for their ability to rapidly respond to evolving situations and changing needs on the ground. Governments should appreciate the flexibility and adaptability of NGOs and ensure that policies and procedures do not unnecessarily hinder their work. This may involve streamlining bureaucratic processes, providing timely access to resources, and facilitating a supportive legal and regulatory environment.

## Understanding respective roles

As host government representatives are often present on the panel, the MS Briefings can offer an opportunity to foster better perceptions of humanitarian NGOs and improve relationships with host governments for the purposes of promoting better outcomes for affected people. Host governments can have concerns about NGO ways of working. It may be useful to speak carefully about these issues to “set the record straight” and improve understanding. This of course, needs to be handled with sensitivity and discretion.

- **Identify positives:** Where possible, highlight what is going well e.g. *the government has established a humanitarian notification system, which has significantly sped up the response. NGOs have been able to reach 500,000 people with food in the last month as a result.*
- **Coordination and complementarity:** Highlight how NGOs coordinate with government and positive examples of engagement e.g. government staff training, health system strengthening etc. Consider highlighting how involving NGOs in planning, decision-making, and resource allocation processes, governments can harness the collective strengths and resources for more impactful outcomes for affected populations.
- **How/why NGOs operationalise humanitarian principles:** Depending on the specific topic or context under discussion, it may be relevant to note how NGOs operate in line with the humanitarian principles. Governments may have real concerns about NGOs operating in territory under the control of non-state armed actors and have accused NGOs of being spies or favouring the armed group. Carefully speaking to why NGOs are operating in a non-government controlled area may help build understanding and show that the NGOs are operating within the law e.g. *We have a long history of responding to people with the highest levels of need in the country, including in X locations (highlight government held areas or responses that they welcomed in the past). Some of the highest needs in the country are currently in Y locations and NGOs have scaled up their response in these areas, while continuing to meet needs in X. NGOs need to engage with all actors operating in the area for the sole purpose of facilitating humanitarian response to affected populations and ensuring the safety of our staff and the people we serve.*
- **Humanitarian access –** This can be a sensitive topic, as governments can perceive this to be adversarial. At the same time, access is central to an effective response. If negotiations on access at country level have not achieved results needed and the decision is that access challenges need to be escalated to a global platform, consider focusing primarily on the impact of the constraints on people in need rather than the impact on the NGOs. Where possible, highlight any positive developments, identify practical solutions and the commitment to engage with all authorities and abide by national laws. e.g. *1 million IDPs have not received a food ration in 6 months due to delays in cargo importation and movement restrictions. Four out of five people, including young children are now going to bed hungry. We continue to proactively engage with authorities to speed up the timeliness of the response and remain committed to coordinating closely and addressing any concerns raised. We respectfully ask that a notification system is established between OCHA and the authorities as a matter of urgency and that further investment in customs is made to speed up importations given the urgency and scale of response needed.*



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## Regional Hubs

### Africa

Nairobi, Kenya  
Dakar, Senegal

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Islamabad, Pakistan

### MENA

Amman, Jordan

### Latin America

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