

OCHA's response to the United Kingdom's Multilateral Aid Review

The United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Ms. Valerie Amos, welcomes the publication of the Multilateral Aid Review. The review will contribute to strengthened partnerships with multilateral organizations.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator was pleased to note that the overall results of the MAR for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) were positive and that OCHA was found to be "good value for money". More specifically, she was encouraged that OCHA was recognized for its "pivotal leadership role at the heart of the UN system", and as being "key to delivering an improved and more effective humanitarian response" in line with the United Kingdom (UK)'s development and humanitarian objectives.

While taking note of these positive results, the ERC is fully cognizant that there are areas where OCHA can do better. The areas of concern raised in the MAR are fully aligned with OCHA's own Strategic Framework 2010-2013. The ERC is committed to ensuring the successful implementation of OCHA's Strategic Framework and rigorously monitoring fewer, but better, indicators so that OCHA can be confident it is contributing to improved humanitarian response outcomes at the field level. OCHA also recognizes that it needs to demonstrate more clearly the added value of its humanitarian coordination and advocacy services.

The ERC's top priorities for the short to medium term are: significantly strengthening delivery on the ground (coordination and leadership, accountability, Humanitarian Country Teams, inter-cluster coordination); building a global consensus for OCHA's work along with advocacy on the application of humanitarian principles; and improving human resources management including recruitment issues, the balance between the field and Headquarters; and rigorously monitoring and measuring effectiveness and performance.

OCHA fully recognizes and is actively addressing weaknesses in the area of human resources management. Significant progress has been made over the last eighteen months in the area of staff recruitment, contractual conditions and rapid surge deployments at the onset of major crises. Further progress needs to be made, and to that end a new human resources strategy will be rolled out to address the challenges that are within OCHA's control. The strategy will focus on four pillars: attracting and retaining talented people committed to the values of the organization; developing the capacity of staff members to reach their full potential; leading, motivating and inspiring staff to achieve organizational goals; creating a positive and enabling working environment that motivates staff.

Efforts to improve cost effectiveness are also a priority for OCHA. Since 2009, steps have been taken to bring budgetary growth in line with projected donor income by imposing rigorous budgeting and introducing ongoing budget oversight controls. Budget reductions, aligned with OCHA's Strategic Framework, were made in 2010 to adjust expenditures to projected income. Together with a significant increase in voluntary contributions, this resulted in a balanced budget for 2010, with income exceeding expenditure for the first time in over three years. OCHA believes the increased resources made available by Member States in 2010 are a clear demonstration of donors' recognition of increased financial discipline as well as clearer communication by OCHA on its value-added.

Some of the fundamental issues raised by the MAR are also at the forefront of the agenda of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). The current discussions, led by the ERC, on a new business model for humanitarian assistance are about providing a more predictable and efficient response system which addresses the challenges related to humanitarian leadership and coordination, accountability and inter-cluster coordination, and advocacy and communication. OCHA is confident that these challenges can be tackled in concrete and practical ways. The ERC is also focusing on strengthening information management in emergencies, as well as the quality and consistency of OCHA's support to Humanitarian Coordinators, operational humanitarian partners, and affected governments. Enhanced performance frameworks for OCHA's regional offices and country offices will be introduced, and will be rigorously monitored.

OCHA is firmly committed to continuing to make good progress in these areas, bearing in mind that change takes time and its performance is, to a large extent, dependent on the cooperation of others, including Member States, UN Secretariat departments and IASC organizations. The events of 2010 in Haiti and Pakistan and the associated lessons learned have created a momentum for change and there is a new consensus between OCHA and its partners on the need for that change. This in turn will help to galvanise further progress against OCHA's Strategic Framework and related internal priorities.

It should be noted that some of the standardized criteria applied in the MAR exercise are clearly of less relevance to OCHA as a non-operational, coordinating entity. It is hoped that at the next opportunity to review OCHA's progress, a more nuanced approach can be taken, including for example on the issue of governance and avenues for redress/grievance.

There is one factual error that should be pointed out: all OCHA's costs are 'on-budget'. The Office issues budget adjustments to reflect carefully-calibrated costs in responding to new emergencies arising during the course of a year. These limited increases are frequently partially off-set by reductions to other budget lines at Mid-Year. All changes to the budget are immediately communicated to the donor community.

In conclusion, the MAR results provide a unique opportunity to strengthen the partnership between OCHA and the Department for International Development (DfID) to achieve an ambitious humanitarian agenda. It is encouraging that DfID's priorities for OCHA align closely with the Organization's own strategic objectives. OCHA looks forward to discussing with DfID in the near future on ways to collectively take the findings of the MAR forward.

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