

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

2011 InterAction Forum - Key Note Address
Investing in Common Solutions
“Shifting Landscape - Who Are the Key Actors?”
Washington DC, 10 August 2011

Dear friends and colleagues, I am delighted to have the opportunity to be here with you at this year's InterAction Forum.

It is almost one year since I became the Emergency Relief Coordinator, and the UN's Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs.

With every day I have gained a much clearer sense of the size of the challenges we face – and the essential nature of the partnership between NGOs, the UN and donors that is needed to overcome them. InterAction and its member organizations have been critical and essential partners.

The timing of this Forum could not be more important.

Many of us are working around the clock to get aid to the Horn of Africa.

We face a genuine catastrophe: 12.4 million people in Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia urgently need our help. That is more than every man, woman and child in the cities of New York and Chicago combined.

And it's getting worse. Three weeks ago we declared famine in Somalia, for the first time in two decades. Last week we found the famine had spread to five regions, including the capital, Mogadishu. Over the coming month, we may see all of southern Somalia fall into famine conditions.

Tens of thousands of people have already perished – most of them children. That is already far too many. By the time we go to bed tonight, another 13 children will have died.

I am really grateful for the support received from USAID for this crisis - the US government is the biggest funder for Somalia and the Horn of Africa - and for the recent lifting of restrictions on NGOs seeking to assist famine victims in areas controlled by Al Shabaab. This was a very important step.

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

More than 30 InterAction members are responding to this crisis; and many of you have worked for decades in the region. Your contribution is absolutely critical, as is the continued and flexible support of our donors.

Despite progress, however, we still face serious difficulties in reaching the people we need to help, and getting them what they need.

We have raised more than a billion dollars to pay for essential food, medicines and shelter, but it is not enough. We need another \$1.3 billion.

We need to ramp up our activities in the overcrowded camps in Kenya and Ethiopia; in feeding centres in Mogadishu, and in the north of the country. We are also working hard to get the assurances we need to reach people in southern Somalia, controlled by Al Shabaab. I hope they will listen.

What this recent crisis has demonstrated -and the questions it has posed- are the ones I have faced since my first day in office. Is the scale of our response adequate? Can we do it better and faster?

How do we work in insecure and hostile environments? What is the role of the national government? How best can we work in fragile states? How do we work with non-state actors? How do we make sure that the people in need get the aid? And crucially, how do we make sure that we are accountable for what we do?

As we draw attention to the situation in Somalia, our own work, as humanitarians, is rightly facing increasing scrutiny. And those who fund us want to know that their money is well spent.

People have accused us of doing too little too late.

We reply that we sounded the alarm last year - when our early warning systems alerted us to the impending drought – and that we put in place many life-saving programmes. The situation would have been worse without us. That is true. But is our system really fit for the purpose?

The issues that face us going forward can seem insurmountable - a constant rise in the numbers of people who need our help, the impact of climate change, population growth, environmental degradation, growing insecurity, conflict, the politicization of aid and more and more countries using the “sovereignty card” to exclude or constrain our work.

Somalia, the Horn of Africa, are only the latest in a string of crises in which the humanitarian system is being questioned.

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

The Haiti earthquake. The Pakistan floods. These “extraordinary situations”, mega-crises, are taking place with more frequency, testing our ability to respond as never before. And there is no doubt that the global/national political context in which we do our work is becoming ever more complex: Syria, Libya. Testing our ability to influence. Testing our values and the principles that underpin our work.

And in many places, we have been examined and been found wanting.

So, how are we responding to this challenge? I think there are a number of things we, as humanitarian workers, must do and can do.

We need to be clearer that we are only one part of an increasingly complex picture.

No longer is this a world – if such a world ever existed - where the UN, or traditional western donors and NGO partners, can be expected to save the day. There is only so much we can do alone. Let us not shrink from this reality. We need to be careful in our message - be clearer about what we can and cannot do.

In fact, we are often only a third line of response in any crisis.

The first line is the people in the countries themselves. Governments, civic institutions, ordinary citizens.

Local people will always be the first guard against suffering, no matter how well we support them. We all need to do more to amplify their voices and listen to their concerns. To build their priorities into the heart of all our plans. And make sure we are accountable – for what we do and how we do it. We need to make the partnership real.

The second line is formed by the friends and neighbours of communities and countries in need. Regional organizations are increasingly ready to help. We must recognize this development, and make sure we are helping them to do their job more effectively.

We, the international community, are often the third tier. We need to show where we add value. And be clearer about when we should step in, and when we should let others take the lead.

Our donors and supporters are tired of seeing the same terrible scenes, hearing the same heartfelt appeals, year after year. In the long run, only by helping local and regional organizations to better respond to emergencies can we hope to break the cycle.

We also need to do a lot more to move beyond our comfort zones, and engage a wider range of people to help us do our work.

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

That means new donors, from emerging economies. It means private companies – not just for their money, but their know-how and expertise. Technology experts: mappers and mobile phone technicians.

And it means a wider range of people and institutions with influence over the causes of the crisis we face.

None of this is to detract from the need for all of us to put our own house in order. To respond more effectively to crises, and save more lives.

Even as we acknowledge the shifting landscape, we must admit that we are still not doing a good enough job in working together.

The position of Emergency Relief Coordinator, and my office – OCHA - was established twenty years ago for this reason.

To help build a system in which the sometimes hundreds of agencies working in a crisis make the best use of scarce resources, maximize opportunities, set clearer priorities and avoid duplication, to share information across the system and raise funds to meet those needs.

Is it working?

From what I can see in the Horn of Africa, and many other crises around the world, we have made some progress. We help millions of people every year. Let us not forget that.

We know we are not doing enough but we must also recognize what we have done. We need to question ourselves, but we must also acknowledge the success and how they have come about.

During the past year, I have met and heard from many of you here today, as well as your colleagues in the field.

The message has been clear: we still need all to do much more to transform the way we do our business.

We are listening to what you are saying, and important reforms are already being made.

Together, the main UN agencies involved in humanitarian response with our NGO partners, including InterAction, are working much more closely through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

We are looking at ways to improve leadership in humanitarian responses.

Ways to get the best people into Humanitarian Coordinator roles. To deploy inter-agency teams to support our colleagues in major disasters. To hold country-team members accountable not only for the results of their own programmes, but for a country-wide response.

We are looking at how we recruit and train, and give people on the ground the tools they need.

And we are working to make Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) more strategic in their approach, more focused on real results: gaps identified, needs met, lives saved - and I strongly invite you to nominate your best and brightest to take up Humanitarian Coordinator positions because that leadership at the country level is vital.

Your participation is critical in these endeavours. You provide vision, leadership, ideas, experience, and unique insights that can help shape our strategic response going forward.

I hesitate to name some organizations, but Care, World Vision, Mercy Corps, IRC and Oxfam are just some of the NGOs on Humanitarian Country Teams in the Horn. And of course it is not just the Horn – you are all working in so many places together with your national partners to reach people that we in the UN system sometimes cannot reach. And your feedback is invaluable – for example on the cluster system and the need to improve it.

I am delighted that InterAction, together with other NGO consortia, is taking this on. At OCHA, we hope to see more NGOs co-leading clusters, and putting their mark on the way we organize ourselves. Save the Children, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, and Afghan Aid are some of the NGOs actively involved in co-chairing clusters at the country level today.

And we must do a better job of managing the transition between emergency relief, recovery and development. Too often we either find ourselves staying too long, or packing up and leaving, when we should be handing the torch to development professionals. Helping them understand what has happened, who to they need to talk to. I feel strongly that we can do a better job of this. Let me know how you think we can work together on this.

Before I conclude, wanted to say a word about the principles that underpin our work.

Independence. Impartiality. Neutrality. Humanity. They are under attack every day.

These are not just words. They frame our actions in an ever shifting landscape. They keep us principled. Especially as the numbers and range of individuals and organizations involved in humanitarian work grows.

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

They help ensure that in highly politicized environments we are allowed to do what we do best – help people, regardless of religion, ethnicity, affiliation.

Making the case for principled humanitarian action - to those in positions of influence wherever they may be- is one of my priorities.

Whether negotiating access in the Ituri region of the DRC, or highlighting problems with legislation that restricts or criminalizes legitimate actions in the exercise of humanitarian mandates, we need to explain that we have one objective: to help those in need, irrespective of politics. Through our actions we can stay true to our principles.

Have a great conference.

Thank you.

For further information, please call:

Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 347 244 2106, bunker@un.org;

Mark Turner, OCHA-New York, +1 212 963 4961 turner@un.org

Elisabeth Byrs OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org.

USG speeches and statements are available at www.unocha.org

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.

Celebrating 20 years of coordinated humanitarian action