



The Government of Uganda and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) are distributing take-home food rations to school children in the Karamoja sub-region in north-eastern Uganda to support home-learning while schools remain closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak across the country. Photo: WFP/Hugh Rutherford

Collective Efforts: How Humanitarian Organizations Ensure and Maintain Access to Deliver Aid and Protection Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Author Celina Hübner & Agusmia Putri Haerani



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During this year's Geneva Peace Week (GPW), the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) organized a joint live event in collaboration with the Permanent Missions of France and Germany to the United Nations in Geneva to discuss collective efforts on how humanitarian organizations can ensure access to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The CCHN invited distinguished speakers and experts to exchange their views with members of the CCHN Community of Practice¹, and to discuss the multifaceted challenges of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks, H.E. **Michael Ungern-Sternberg**, Ambassador Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations in Geneva,

underlined the importance of working together to confront the tremendous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. While Germany is the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor, it has become increasingly more difficult to reach populations in need of humanitarian assistance. Travel restrictions and lockdown measures have increased the burden on humanitarian access.

“As the 2nd-largest bilateral humanitarian donor, we have a strong interest in our assistance reaching those most in need. But we are also well aware that this is becoming harder & harder every year & especially during the pandemic. – H.E Ambassador Michael Ungern-Sternberg



“A lesson from the COVID-19 crisis is the resilience of the humanitarian system that was able to find mechanisms for fast-acting & efficient responses to overcome difficulties of access. Yet, it requires huge efforts. – François Gave



is increasingly under pressure due to violations of international humanitarian law. The COVID-19 pandemic has created further challenges, which is why it is crucial to continue the support to humanitarian organizations. Digital and other innovative methods of working have been key to confronting the COVID-19 pandemic jointly.

Additionally, **François Gave**, Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations in Geneva, underlined in his introductory remarks that humanitarian action

¹ To learn more about the CCHN Community of Practice please visit: www.frontline-negotiations.org/communityofpractice

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion was moderated by Hanalia Ferhan, CCHN Project Manager. Starting the discussion, Dr. Rudi Coninx, Senior Policy Adviser to the

Assistant-Director General for Emergency Response at the World Health Organization (WHO), highlighted that over 1 million people have already died and that no one is safe until everyone is safe as the virus knows no borders. That is why it has been crucial to include everyone in the response. Dr. Coninx underlined that this pandemic is about access to basic social services for everyone, especially health services. He moreover acknowledged that in order to gain access we need to talk to everyone, including those who are not our traditional partners.



Nobody is safe until everyone is safe. The virus knows no boundaries, nor should we. We need to work on the triggers of conflict and on the capacitors for health and peace in action. — Dr. Rudi Coninx.



Conflict, poverty, hunger, and a pandemic have made us humanitarians realize more than ever how crucial it is to coordinate amongst each other and unify in an integrated response to achieve the highest sustainable impact.

— Abdulrahman Najeh



respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria through the development of various scenarios. Following an increase in food demand, WFP increased its operational support to partners through staff increase and provision of hygiene items, there was an effort to cooperate more closely with other UN agencies. For example, WFP was helping UNICEF in the distribution of soap or communicated water shortages to UNHCR. According to Abdulrahman, this has created a unique opportunity for the UN to truly work as “one UN” and to have a sustainable impact through its operations.

Abdulrahman Najeh, Head of Field Office with World Food Programme (WFP) in Deir Ezzor, Syria, described how the WFP prepared to



MSF teams have continued working in more than 70 countries during this global health crisis which has pushed some of the world's most advanced and well-resourced healthcare systems to the brink of collapse. — Reshma Adatia



Reshma Adatia, International Operations Coordinator and Head of the Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) Humanitarian Diplomacy Team, highlighted that the

COVID-19 Pandemic has taken us all by surprise, leading to the collapse of entire health systems. During the Ebola pandemic, MSF had learned that it was vital to maintain the provision of preexisting health services during a pandemic. That is why MSF developed alternative ways to continue previous operations while reducing the risk of their staff, for example, through the provision of remote health services. Reshma further underlined that it will be crucial to grant equal access to COVID-19 vaccines once they are available, including marginalized populations



Hunger is a silent killer in this pandemic. This is a pivotal moment for us all, to gear up like never before. As the Nobel Peace Prize Committee recognized this year that food security delivered by WFP and its partners is fundamental to achieving peace —
Peter Scott-Bowden



... pandemic, Afghanistan, a low-income country, is confronted with a spike in violent attacks, leading to protection issues. He emphasized that during the first wave of the pandemic, the Afghans were able to cope somehow, but a second wave would increase the burden significantly, mostly due to the economic hardship. Peter Scott-Bowden also underlined that the pandemic has increased the interdependency between countries, highlighting the need to step-up regional cooperation. He concluded by stressing that the national NGOs have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and that these organizations represented the real heroes of this pandemic.

Peter Scott-Bowden, Director COVID-19 Surge in WFP Afghanistan focused his remarks on the cross-sectoral challenges the pandemic has created. In the midst of the

Digital Content Collaboration

Apart from the joint event, CCHN also contributed to the GPW 2020 Digital Series, entitled ‘Voices from the Field: Coordinating & Securing Access in Eastern and Southern Africa during COVID-19’², under *A New Vision for Peacemaking* theme. We interviewed a community member, Benedetta de Alessi, who is the Access Focal Point at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa (ROSEA), based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Benedetta de Alessi mentioned three main challenges to access the vulnerable populations and for them to get access to the aid and protection amidst the current pandemic, in some of the 25 countries of her current operational region.

² The video is available on www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBuLyMKIC-I

These include the movement restrictions due to lockdown, curfew and migration measures, the raise of Gender Based Violence (GBV) cases, and access to basic needs and protection for people affected by conflicts. While the main dilemma has been the inability of the public system to adapt and to provide direct funding to support national organizations which have more access to people on the ground.

In terms of collective efforts, Benedetta de Alessi mentioned OCHA's collective efforts, specifically in these African regions, such as joint standard operating procedure (SOP) of staff movement, or by working with government to ease restrictions on humanitarian work. OCHA has been in the position to facilitate and bring people together to overcome coordination issues, especially with governments, related to COVID-19 imposed restrictions.

Benedetta de Alessi explained a case where she could use the CCHN negotiation tools³, learned during a Peer Workshop on Humanitarian Negotiation. They were practical to use when it comes to facilitate the discussion between governments, people and non-state armed groups, for example, by analyzing and defining the positions of the counterpart in order to reach a joint position.

Audience Engagement

Before ending the live session, we launched live polls which were answered by nearly half of the attendees. These poll questions were intended to gain a better understanding of the collective anticipation and opinion on the topic.

1. Based on your opinion or experience, which one is the main challenge for humanitarian organizations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?



A. Access B. Public Health C. Budget D. Coordination

2. For next year, what is your view in regard to the development of humanitarian responses to the COVID-19 pandemic?






A. Optimistic B. Undecided C. Pesimistic





³ The negotiation tools (www.frontline-negotiations.org/cchn-negotiation-tools) featured in the CCHN Field Manual (www.frontline-negotiations.org/cchn-field-manual) are structured around the Naivasha Grid, which highlights the specific roles and responsibilities of the frontline negotiator, the support team and the mandator.

CONTACT

For all media enquiries,
please contact:

Agusmia Putri Haerani
CCHN Communication Officer
mhaerani@frontline-negotiations.org

 Domaine "La Pastorale"
106 Route de Ferney 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
 info@frontline-negotiation.org
 www.frontline-negotiation.org

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