

The United Nations for Humanitarians

Brief report training – 16/03/2021

KUNO presented the online training ‘The United Nations for Humanitarians’ on the many different roles of UN agencies in relation to humanitarian action.

This training was provided by:

- Evelien Borgman, Academy Fellow at Clingendael Institute, humanitarian specialist in United Nations decision-making;
- Peter Muller from the UN OCHA Disaster Assessment and Coordination team.

Part 1 - Evelien Borgman: General introduction to UN

First Evelien Borgman touched upon the six principal organs of the UN (the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat) and their functions. Besides these six core organs, the categorization of other UN agencies is very complex. This is because the UN does not have a clear starting point, but rather developed over time. When and why UN agencies came into existence, had an impact on their organisational structure. Many UN agencies that were founded later on, were founded with a temporary mandate. Later, insights came that the challenges would keep on existing and the mandate had to be extended. That mainly explains why organisations were organised differently.

These organizational structures have political implications, implicates funding structures and to whom the agency reports. This means that the mandate of the agencies only matters to some extent: in practice the most important element is whether an agency is part of the UN organisation or not. The IOM and WTO are examples of agencies that are not part of the UN organisation. However, on the field level, informal relations between UN agencies are of more importance than the formal structures.

The main challenges of the United Nations as a whole is to stay connected to all the relevant players in the field. The Covid-pandemic shows how dependent the UN is on local organisations, and the need to push the localization agenda even more. This is a focus for the coming years.

Part 2 - Peter Muller: The coordinating role of the United Nations during disasters

The mandate of UN OCHA is “We help humanitarians save the lives of people caught up in crisis”. The focus of this agency is coordination of the many humanitarian players in the field by making coordination more predictable and structured. UN OCHA coordinates at three different levels:

- Global level: Inter-agency standing committee brings together UN agencies, NGOs and humanitarian organisations to coordinate emergencies.
- Country level: Structures are reproduced in cooperation with national partners, international partners and the affected people.

- Cluster level – the cluster system: Dividing organisations in sectoral groups helps to coordinate approach (health, logistics, WASH, shelter, nutrition, education etc.), this system aims to strengthen humanitarian assistance.

These clusters work with the humanitarian programme cycle. NGOs in the Netherlands can connect to these humanitarian project cycles. In protracted crises, the cycle is initiated at the country level, thus the country office should be contacted. In an emergency crisis, the response is coordinated quickly through meetings with organisations active on the ground, thus these are the entry points for contact.

To keep the independence of OCHA at value, informal soft skills are in place again. By keeping a focus on the needs of the affected people, OCHA aims to remain independent. Furthermore, by emphasizing the strengthening of local capacities to local authorities, the value of humanitarian intervention comes to the fore.

Part 3 - The UN and Political agenda setting

In Break Out Groups participants explored topics where the UN could play a relevant role for humanitarian political agenda setting. Issues and questions raised were:

- Locals actors are seen as implementing the ideas from the brains in the north: we need a shift in this thinking
- Covid shows the importance of local actors
- Counter Terror legislation: NGOs have a hard time getting work done because they can be criminalized. How to push back? Negotiations are taking place, a new resolution will probably adopted Summer 2021, could be an advocacy priority but providing input to UN seems hard
- Nexus: the root causes of humanitarian (protracted) crises have to be connected to long term development – hum intervention needs to contribute to long term intervention
- How to advocate for political change in times of Covid with an office only in the Netherlands? No physical presence in Brussels, Geneva, NY...
- Advocacy at the national level: ICVA
- Nexus
- Data can help us predict crises.