

Key Takeaways

- The private sector is a critical stakeholder in humanitarian response. While businesses can be impacted by disasters, they are often also among the first responders in any given context.
- Governments and national actors have the primary responsibility for responding disasters. When international support is requested, coordination is critical to the effectiveness of humanitarian response. It is therefore important for the private sector to also understand how the humanitarian system works.
- Where possible, private sector engagement should be conducted through private sector *networks* with humanitarian response mechanisms rather than through *individual companies*. For example, the OCHA/UNDP Connecting Business initiative (CBI)'s private sector Member Networks are integrated into local response mechanisms, and one network is an observer on its local Humanitarian Country Team.

Introduction

A humanitarian emergency is generally defined as a large-scale “event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community”. The elements of a humanitarian emergency are (1) a proximate cause/event, and (2) a vulnerable population that is (3) in need of an urgent life-saving response.

Humanitarian emergencies can have a wide range of causes – from earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis to pandemics, wars, and industrial accidents – but unless there is an urgent need to provide help to a vulnerable population, such an event is not classified as a humanitarian emergency.

The scale and complexity of humanitarian emergencies are exceeding traditional response capacities. According to the [Global Humanitarian Overview 2022](#), 274 million people – or 1 in 29 people worldwide – will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2022. All actors – governments, the United Nations (UN), international and local humanitarian organizations, civil society, and the private sector – must be mobilized to support people in need. By working together in a coordinated way, we can significantly improve the scale and overall quality of humanitarian response.

Natural hazards and conflicts can have a significant impact on the private sector, whether they are large multinational companies or local micro, small or medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Crises can disrupt normal business activities, cause physical damage to premises, interrupt supply chains and cause harm to employees. As businesses are key members of the communities in which they operate, they are often among the first responders after a crisis and play an instrumental role in a localized response. They also possess knowledge, skills and resources which can support humanitarian response and improve the overall effectiveness of aid delivery.

The aim of this Business Brief is to provide the private sector with an overview of the international humanitarian system. The document is by no means a comprehensive review of all the existing mechanisms but aims to focus on the most relevant elements for companies, highlighting potential entry points for their engagement.

Humanitarian actors and principles

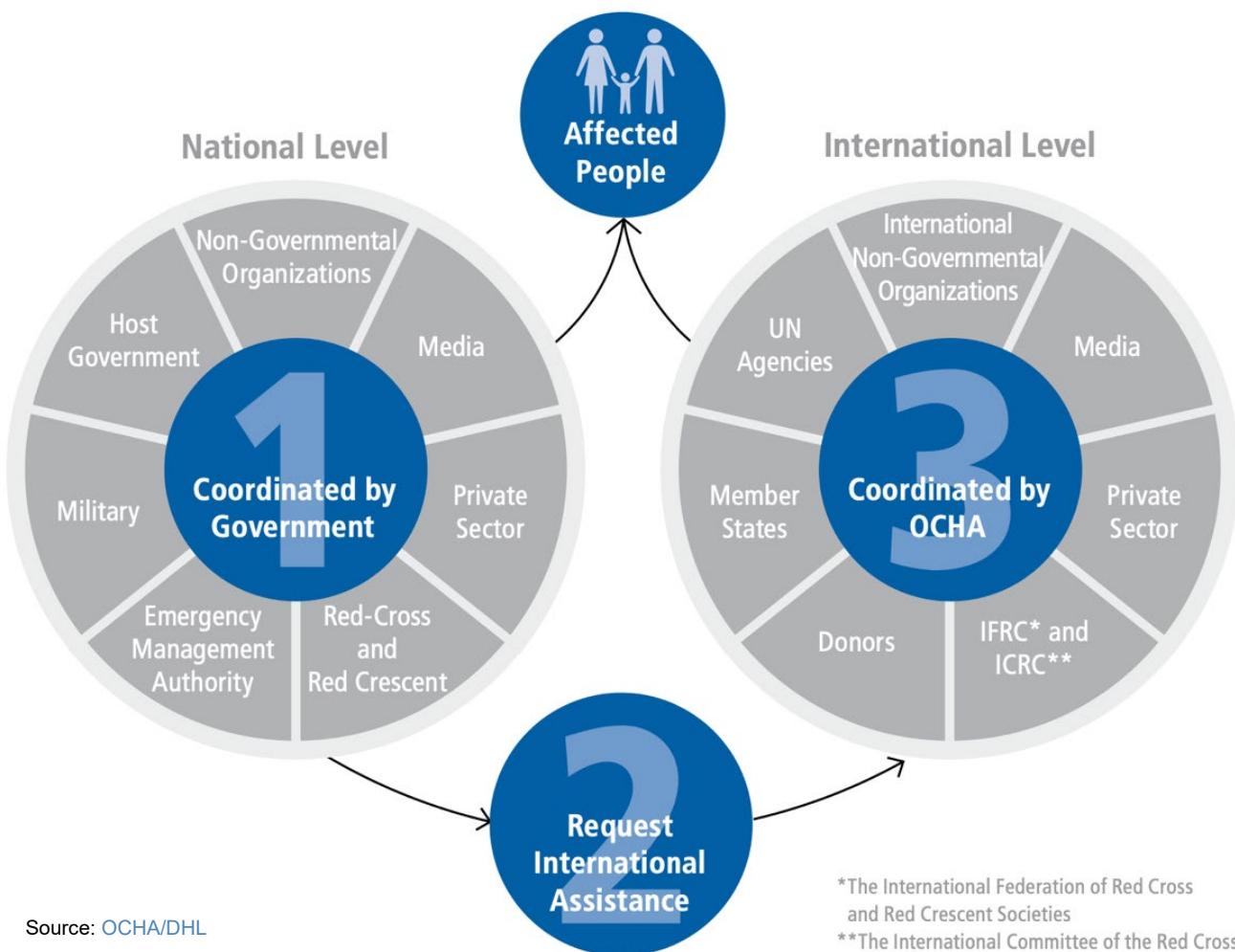
When a humanitarian emergency takes place, the people and communities who are directly affected by crises, including the local private sector, are often among the first to respond. Affected people and organizations, including businesses, possess the knowledge, skills and resources which can support the humanitarian response and improve the overall effectiveness of aid delivery.

When requested by national governments, the international humanitarian community is also mobilized to support the response. The international humanitarian system is made up of a wide range of organizations, agencies and inter-agency networks working together to mobilize and distribute international humanitarian assistance to the places and people in need. These organizations include but are not limited to UN agencies, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent entities (ICRC), international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and increasingly the private sector as well.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is the part of the United Nations responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure that assistance can be delivered in a cohesive and effective manner.

The actions of organizations responding to a humanitarian emergency must be guided by the four [humanitarian principles](#): humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These principles provide the foundation for humanitarian action and are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected people. Promoting and ensuring compliance with the principles are essential elements of effective humanitarian coordination.

The figure below provides an overview of the different national and international actors and demonstrates how external aid is triggered.



Humanitarian coordination architecture

Governments and national actors have the primary responsibility for initiating, organizing, coordinating, and implementing humanitarian assistance within their territory. If international support is requested, effective coordination at the global, regional, and national levels should underpin all elements of humanitarian response. Such coordination helps in identifying needs, addressing gaps, clarifying roles and responsibilities among actors, expanding the scope and impact of interventions, and reducing duplication.

Global-level mechanisms

The **Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)**, currently [Martin Griffiths](#), is the most senior UN official working on humanitarian affairs and reports directly to the UN Secretary-General. S/he is responsible for the oversight of all emergencies requiring international humanitarian assistance, chairs the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and as needed and appoints Humanitarian Coordinators to countries.

The **Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)** is composed of the heads of UN operational agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, etc.) and a number of standing invitees (ICRC, IFRC, IOM, etc.) and is chaired by the ERC. The platform aims to improve the effectiveness of the humanitarian system by developing humanitarian policies, dividing responsibilities for humanitarian assistance, identifying, and addressing gaps in response, and advocating for effective application of humanitarian principles.

Country-level mechanisms

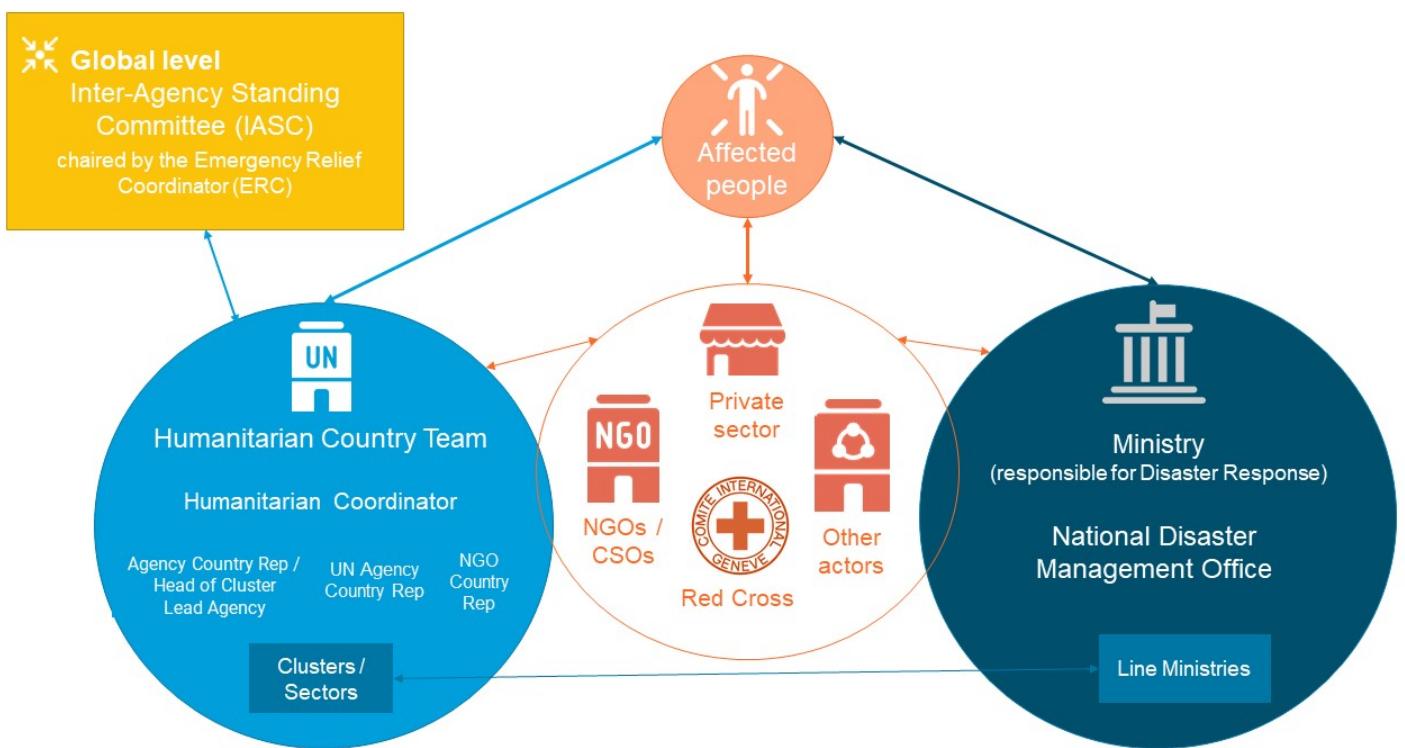
The **UN Resident Coordinator (UN RC)** coordinates all UN operational activities in a country and heads the UN Country Team (UNCT). S/he is the Government's first point of contact with the United Nations.

The **Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)** is appointed by the ERC in consultation with the IASC and is responsible for overseeing humanitarian response and coordination among relevant humanitarian organizations. The HC heads the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and is the Government's first point of contact on disaster response. The ERC may choose to designate the UN RC as the HC.

The **Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)** is the in-country decision-making forum composed of operationally relevant humanitarian organizations (both UN and non-UN) and focuses on providing common strategic and policy guidance on issues related to humanitarian action in the country. Some HCTs have invited private sector representatives, as is the case in the Philippines, where the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation, an alliance of private sector organizations, has an observer seat.

Clusters are groups of humanitarian organizations that focus on the main sectors of humanitarian action such as WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), nutrition, health, and logistics. Each cluster is managed by a **Cluster Lead Agency**. Clusters should be a temporary solution to coordinate international emergency response until the humanitarian emergency phase ends and national, development-oriented coordination mechanisms can be resumed or established. Clear procedures and criteria for (de-)activating clusters exist and the decision will be made between the RC/HC and the HCT in consultation with the Government, ERC and the IASC. Furthermore, when two or more clusters have been activated, the RC and HCT establish an Inter-Cluster or Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ICCG/ISCG) that brings together all the active clusters to collaborate on the operational response.

Private sector engagement is sometimes coordinated through structures such as OCHA/UNDP [Connecting Business initiative \(CBI\)](#) Member Networks, [UN Global Compact](#) Local Networks, Chambers of Commerce, business associations or other collective action platforms. In some countries, private sector networks are invited to UN Country Team meetings, hold an observer seat on the Humanitarian Country Team and/or liaise directly with various clusters.

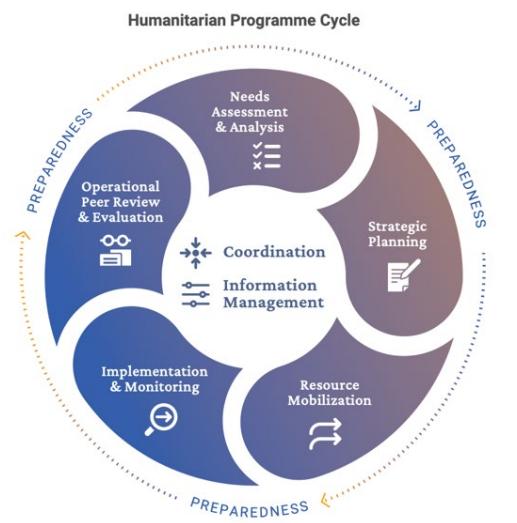


Humanitarian Programme Cycle

The Humanitarian Programme Cycle explains how different actors can come together to prepare for, manage, deliver, and monitor collective humanitarian response. It consists of five consecutive steps, each relying on emergency preparedness, coordination, and information management:

1. Needs Assessment & Analysis
2. Strategic Response Analysis and Planning
3. Resource Mobilization
4. Implementation & Monitoring
5. Operational Peer Review & Evaluation

For a comprehensive overview of the different steps, please refer to the [HumanitarianResponse.info](#), and the [Humanitarian Programme Cycle](#).



While humanitarian organizations lead the implementation of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle, the private sector can offer support, for example by sharing data, participating in assessments, providing financial or in-kind resources, deploying experts and using their voice to advocate for additional support. The private sector can also make use of the information provided in the various outputs of each stage, including [Flash Appeals](#), [Humanitarian Needs Overview \(HNOs\)](#) and [Humanitarian Response Plans \(HRPs\)](#), to inform their own programming. Contributions to the HRPs and/or Flash Appeals are recorded and tracked by the [Financial Tracking Service \(FTS\)](#).

Some helpful information management tools include:

- [HumanitarianResponse.info](#), a platform that connects responders and disseminates operational information to support strategic decision-making listed by country.
- [Humanitarian InSight](#), an overview of humanitarian needs and requirements by location.
- [INFORM](#), a multi-stakeholder forum for developing shared, quantitative analysis relevant to humanitarian crises.

- [Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System \(GDACS\)](#), a platform that provides real-time access to web-based disaster information systems and related coordination tools, such as the [Virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre \(VOSOCC\)](#).
- [Humanitarian Data Exchange \(HDX\)](#), an open platform for sharing data across crises and organizations.

Key concepts and legal instruments

While the operating principles of the private sector may be different from those of humanitarian organizations, it is important that businesses who engage in humanitarian action understand the framework that grounds humanitarian work.

[Accountability to Affected Populations \(AAP\)](#): Affected people must be at the centre of any humanitarian response, both for their increased engagement and empowerment in decision-making to address their specific needs, and to ensure that international response remains accountable to them. In particular, people in need of humanitarian assistance must be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse and have access to channels to report it and have it addressed.

[Do No Harm](#): A tool for applying conflict sensitivity, recognizing that aid – including humanitarian assistance – has the potential to either support peace or conflict. It calls on organizations to consider the unintended consequences of their programs and take action to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts on peace.

[International Humanitarian Law \(IHL\)](#): A set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict. IHL is binding on both state and non-state actors, regulating the methods and means of armed conflict and granting protection where relevant to the personnel and facilities of the private sector.

[International Human Rights Law](#): Common instruments that lay down the responsibilities of states to *protect* against human rights abuse. Businesses have the responsibility to respect human rights.

[Humanitarian Principles](#): The four principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence serve as the foundation for all humanitarian action. Compliance with the principles is critical to gaining acceptance by all relevant actors on the ground and thus helping to ensure access to affected populations and the safety of humanitarian personnel and beneficiaries.

[Protection of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\)](#): PSEA enables protection of communities, affected by a disaster or a conflict, from sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). PSEA is a responsibility of all actors and workers engaged in disaster management, to enable their added value and positive contribution towards the populations they serve.

[The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(CHS\)](#): Formerly known as the Sphere standard, this is a set of common principles and minimum standards that provide a reference tool for organizations to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

Private sector engagement in disaster management and response is a win-win proposition, benefitting both businesses and the communities and individuals they serve. We hope to see more private sector entities contributing to national disaster management frameworks and mechanisms and engaging with the international humanitarian system, particularly through the [Connecting Business initiative](#) and other collective action platforms.

For more information and to learn about country-specific coordination mechanisms, contact OCHA's Private Sector Engagement Advisor at ocha-ers-ps@un.org. To learn more about the Connecting Business initiative, contact connectingbusiness@un.org.