Executive Summary

General

- Humanitarian Information Centres are having a positive impact on their operating environment. They are widely used and there are few agencies that are not familiar with their products. If all they manage to do is provide some basic common data (such as standard village lists) there is value in this. The potential is far greater however.

- There is a contested vision among stakeholders with regard to the role of HICs despite terms of reference which are currently being considered by the IASC for endorsement. Some see the HIC as solely an instrument for supporting coordination, whereas others view it as an agent for promulgating information management practices and standards. Such perceptions raise differing expectations and can cause confusion regarding the purpose of the HIC, both among users and staff.

- Despite much activity in the area of data collection, the humanitarian community is not harnessing the full potential of modern information management capacity. Agencies, donors and OCHA must share the blame – collection is often amateurish, the competitive environment often acts against sharing and there is not consistent leadership. The humanitarian field urgently needs to agree and adopt a framework for assessments and for monitoring implementation to move forward in this area.

- The HIC's contribution to the creation of a common information management framework for the humanitarian community can be meaningful only when organisations subscribe to a common approach and devote the necessary resources to support it. Otherwise, the results of the HIC effort in this regard, no matter how good, are diffuse and fleeting.

How an HIC performs at the onset of a crisis

- HICs have the most proven value at the beginning of large, multi-actor responses to complex emergencies. Their impact is related to their speed of deployment.

- The inputs provided so far from DFID and OFDA have been invaluable. This support should be continued and expanded to ensure success.

- HICs main proven value is in supporting coordination and supplying some basic common data. Despite this the relationship with OCHA in the field has often been difficult. This needs to be overcome for them to be fully effective.

- HICs have not been able to provide a quick analysis of the 'needs and gaps' at the beginning of a response, despite this being widely desired. More thought needs to be given to how HIC and OCHA can work together on this critical aspect of humanitarian information.

- HICs staff are known for their hard work and technical competence, although there have been problems with finding qualified staff in the early stages of deployment. Having the right person as the HIC manager is crucial to the success of the HIC's operation.

The HIC role in supporting decision-making.

- The role of an HIC changes after the initial, often chaotic response period. Its added value changes from a coordination function, to one that supports decision-making although its role as a repository of certain standard data remains constant.

- The full potential of the HIC in the area of supporting decision-making has rarely been achieved. Information Management projects have their best success when they are discreet projects meeting a clear demand. Collecting and combining many types of information provides a repository but does not necessarily achieve the next step of informing decision-makers.

The role of analysis also needs further consideration.

- There is a tendency in the evolution of the HIC to switch its focus to the information management services at the expense of maintaining its coordination/orientation products up-to-date.

- The HIC needs strategic direction to help it prioritise in accordance with the information needs of the wider humanitarian community. Some projects carried out by HICs had value in their own right, but seemed to fit only tangentially with the HIC mandate.

- The HIC has been effective in eliciting the cooperation of other agencies, particularly for information-sharing activities. Much of this is due to its customer service approach and its willingness to perform information management tasks for individual agencies. However, the HIC has to balance carefully the need to make itself useful with the danger of becoming just a "data processing shop" for the humanitarian community.

How an HIC transitions

- HICs typically build up large repositories of information and some valuable datasets over their lifetime. Some of this information is useful to recovery actors, government and later, development actors.

- An HIC can play a significant role in the recovery phase. A good example of this is its role in monitoring the progress of the national recovery strategy in Sierra Leone. Often transition strategies miss this distinction, treating the transition as one from relief to development, rather then relief to recovery.

- A constraint to making this transition is that the architecture for supporting coordination in the recovery phase is less clear than that in the emergency phase. The current UNDG - ECHA working group on transition could consider how the HIC capacity might be best used in recovery and institutional arrangements for handing over.