

Purpose and parameters of the study

17. This study considers the United Nations' (UN) experience with strategic humanitarian coordination in the Great Lakes Region from September 1996 to August 1997. It has two analytical objectives: to identify lessons from UN arrangements for strategic humanitarian activities, and to provide a series of recommendations for future action. Although termed a 'lessons learned' study, this report in fact can only identify lessons; learning them requires action on the part of relevant actors within the system. While drawing clear lessons and conclusions, the study team recognizes that there are no easy answers to the problems identified by its analysis. The issues explored are complex, the challenges enormous.

18. The study was commissioned by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), a unique body within the UN system that comprises all UN humanitarian agencies but also includes the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Representatives of non-governmental humanitarian organizations and the Red Cross movement sit as standing invitees. The report is written principally for the IASC and its member agencies, although the report touches on issues of concern to some other elements of the UN system, including Secretariat departments not represented on the IASC, and member states. From an organizational perspective, the study was supported by the former Department of Humanitarian Affairs. Funding was provided by Sida, DANIDA, DfID (UK), and OXFAM/UK & Ireland. Although commissioned by the IASC, the report is entirely independent, and the views expressed here are in no way intended to reflect the views of any element of the UN system.

19. The topic itself was an initial challenge for the study team in meeting their objectives. Only recently has the IASC attempted to delineate elements of humanitarian coordination as either 'operational' or 'strategic'. Indeed, the IASC has not defined strategic coordination, but rather has instead listed functions that describe what it considers to be the composite elements
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of two related tasks, strategic and operational coordination. The composite functions of strategic coordination, according to the IASC, include:

- setting the overall direction and goals of the UN humanitarian programme;
- allocating tasks and responsibilities within that programme and ensuring that they are reflected in a strategic plan;
- advocacy for humanitarian principles;
- negotiating access to affected populations;
- ensuring correspondence between resources mobilized and established priorities;
- monitoring and evaluating the overall implementation of the programme; and,
- liaising with military and political actors of the international community, including those of the UN.

20. Two important tasks for the study team were to make an assessment of whether the IASC's list of strategic coordination functions accurately captured what is in fact needed, and to map this set of neatly defined functions onto the necessarily more complex reality of UN operations. These tasks were more easily accomplished at the headquarters and regional levels than in the field, where most were saw little value in the analytical division. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the intended nature of the division between strategic and operational coordination had been poorly communicated to the field; many of those interviewed were unaware that a distinction had been made by the IASC. In short, the topic of investigation was ill-defined and unfamiliar.

21. The political composition of the region in question is also debated and in flux. Traditionally, the term 'the Great Lakes Region' denoted an ethnographically distinct

region of Africa also known as the 'lacustrine' region: Rwanda, Burundi, south-western Uganda, north-western Tanzania, and eastern Zaire) The term has been used institutionally by the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries, a body comprising only Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire. In more recent political discourse, the term has come to connote a rough constellation of countries that border Rwanda and Burundi and whose interests to a greater or lesser extent are impacted on by political developments in those two countries. Added complication comes from the fact that Rwanda and Burundi are grouped bureaucratically by a major donor agency as part of the 'Greater Horn of Africa', a grouping that has no historical precedent but does have some important political linkages. For the purposes of the study, the study team focused on the three countries to which humanitarian coordinators were appointed by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), namely Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The study team also considered events in Tanzania and related political developments in the wider sub-region.

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