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WHO Support Mission
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Ebola Outbreak:

In early August 2014 the WHO declared that the Ebola Outbreak was a public health emergency of international concern. This announcement precipitated a number of response activities within WHO and the wider UN System. WHO released the Ebola Response Roadmap which defined the framework of the response and in September worked with UN partners to create the “Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak Overview of Needs and Requirements”. This document laid out the anticipated impact of the outbreak on affected communities and the needs for response. On 18th September the SG announced the creation of the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) to assist in the response by implementing the strategic objectives outlined in the Outbreak Overview document.

Purpose:

To support WHO in establishing flows of information to inform the response activities within WHO and the broader emergency response community.

Deployment:

I was embedded with WHO HQ in Geneva on 23 Sep. 2014 and completed that deployment 5 Dec. 2014.

Operational Situation:

WHO was in the midst of scaling up the Ebola Response team with staff being pulled from across the organization when I arrived. I was embedded with the information team. Each morning there was a meeting where various departments would report on their areas of responsibility. It was clear that detailed information about the health situation in the affected countries was lacking. The countries had weak surveillance systems that were further weakened by the outbreak. There was a lack of clarity about ongoing interventions and organizations involved outside of WHO. The situation was then further complicated with the establishment of the UNMEER operations. Outgoing information was now split between commitments to UNMEER and the wider response community.

My initial priorities:

- Find what data was available within WHO and lobby for its dissemination to emergency responders
- Learn what gaps existed in non-health data
- Identify actors working on data
- Facilitate the acquisition and cleaning of critical datasets
- Share humanitarian response information with WHO

Key information partners:

- Information/Reporting Team
- Lead GIS Officer
- ESRI Consultants
- McKinsey Consultants
- OCHA Regional Office for West and Central Africa (ROWCA)
- UNMEER Chief Information Manager
- Digital Humanitarian Network

The early parts of the deployment were spent tracking down responsible parties in WHO with various data that would be needed for external actors. The next key activity was to track the multiple efforts being undertaken by the broader community and join those with needs and resources in WHO. As the response progressed data flows were established and shared. WHO developed new systems for reporting and data sharing. Then my primary role was to put various groups in touch with each other to address specific information needs in and out of the organization.

Challenges:

- WHO does not have a culture of information sharing within the organization
- WHO has a legal responsibility to protect patient data adding to reluctance to share
- Lack of awareness of emergency response mechanisms (non-health).
- The creation of UNMEER led to confusion about operational roles and information needs
- Significant negative media attention added pressure on information sharing
- Changing internal structures, functions, and roles made it hard know where to get clearance
- Changing information systems and leadership on them
- Large influx of new staff/consultants in WHO

Achievements:

- Informing WHO of external dataflows
- Coordinating to release datasets on cases, facilities, labs for response planning.
- Supporting UNMEER with data and Liaising with WHO resources at HQ.
- Supporting external actors/volunteers with data needs and tasking.
- Helping WHO set up systems to work with UNMEER data collection
- Setting up predictable feeds to HDX
- Supporting UNMEER with data and Liaising with WHO resources at HQ.
- Supporting external actors/volunteers with data needs and tasking.
- Supporting IM OCHA and UNMEER informed on WHO initiatives.
- Liaising with WHO and OCHA preparedness.
- Supporting UNDAC team deployed for WHO.

Recommendations:

Reinforce the health cluster pool of coordinators.

Establish meeting discipline, limit participation to sector leads, capture gaps and actions.

Establish appropriate internal communication list management.

Leverage the GIS knowledge across the organization. Create an organization wide agreed baseline dataset that is available to all. Set up an internal GIS working group with regular meetings.

Invest in information systems, train on them, and stick with them.

Run simulations exercises to test readiness and internal communication mechanisms.