Dozens of UN agencies participate in some form of humanitarian assistance each year. And in those emergencies that the UN responds to, there are a handful of dominating agencies that play essential roles in managing international emergency response efforts. Two of them, UNHCR and WFP, are important to NGOs because they pass large sums of resources on to NGOs. Others, such as WHO and OCHA are important for coordinating activities and giving NGOs key technical guidance.

Below are brief profiles of each of the larger UN agencies most often encountered in emergency settings.

### United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees grew, in 1951, out of the International Refugee Organization (IRO), which the General Assembly had established in 1946. Over the decades its scope of activities grew, from an original focus on legal support to European asylum-seekers, to a full-service aid agency working in every part of the world, wherever there are refugees.

Whereas UNHCR grew into a manager of large relief programs in the 1980s, in the 1990s, it faced the responsibility of negotiating and planning mass return. It helped to arrange the repatriation of some ten million refugees during the 1990s. UNHCR works largely through its NGO partners, approximately 300 of them.

### United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

Of all the UN agencies, UNICEF behaves the most like an NGO. If it were not in fact a UN body, it would be listed in this publication as if it were a large, ubiquitous humanitarian NGO. It has an advantage over other UN agencies in being present in virtually every emergency affected area; unlike UNHCR, its work precedes emergencies and comes after emergencies and unlike WFP it does not only work in areas of food shortages. More than any other UN body, it is operational, working close to the ground mobilizing health, hygiene, nutrition and education for women and, through women, children.

For UNICEF, emergencies take up a small portion of its portfolio, roughly 10 percent, and because UNICEF has such a wide range of technical capabilities, it responds to displaced population (DP) needs with programs that are quite different from one crisis to the next. Sometimes it focuses on food security—a major element of its work in southern Sudan, for example. In Kosovo, it led the humanitarian community in providing education and warnings about landmine hazards. In northern Kenya, it drilled and maintained wells to provide water to Somali refugees. In Zaire, it managed centers for abandoned or “unaccompanied” Rwandan refugee children. Increasingly, UNICEF has tried to systematize the rapid re-establishment of education as an essential emergency service, and bring more resources to the recovery of children, including remedial services for psychosocial trauma.
In refugee crises, UNICEF often works under UNHCR’s coordination, helping out in a particular sector, shoulder to shoulder with NGOs. In other crises, it can sometimes play more of a lead role, as in southern Sudan, where UNICEF manages the UN umbrella aid effort for internally displaced and famine victims known formally as Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS).

UNICEF was created by the UN General Assembly (government representatives) in 1946 to focus both on the needs of children and their mothers. Like other specialized agencies, it does not receive a budget from the UN Secretariat, but derives its income from voluntary contributions from governments. Just as the ICRC is guided by the Geneva Conventions, UNICEF is guided by the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), which entered into force in September 1990.

One of the oldest and best known of all annual reports is UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children, which NGOs look to as a source of data about immunization coverage, malnutrition and other health trends in developing countries. UNICEF’s 8,000 staff also promote the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), The Education for All (EFA) principles, research on drug use and new vaccines, such as the Children’s Vaccine Initiative, and is increasingly involved in human rights promotion.

**World Food Program (WFP)**

The World Food Program began as an experiment, promoted by the Kennedy administration, and working initially under the Food and Agriculture Organization, another UN agency. But after the 1974 World Food Summit, donors committed to the WFP idea more fully, and the program grew throughout the 1960s. WFP has always received significant food donations from the U.S. government (as appropriated under Title II of the Food for Peace account of Public Law 480).

For most of its history, WFP staff saw it as primarily a development agency, using food to support economic challenges of developing countries. In the 1990s, however, WFP was pulled into more and more responses to disasters, conflicts and protracted refugee operations, where refugees needed food in large volumes year after year. Today, the larger share of WFP’s food budget goes to humanitarian crises.

Headquartered in Rome, WFP tracks the shipments of international donations of food aid, and in some cases buys local foods with cash given to it. In almost all cases, it hands food over to counterpart organizations, such as international NGOs, or local groups such as the Red Cross for distribution.

**World Health Organization (WHO)**

The World Health Organization works by supporting other agencies with the best technical information available. It staffs world medical experts who publish and disseminate guidelines and epidemiologic analyses about crises. There are several parts of WHO that are relevant in emergencies, including the Emergency and Humanitarian Assistance (EHA) division, the nutrition division, which looks as part of its work at malnutrition in refugee camps, and the Emerging Infections Division, which works with

---

EHA to find ways to ensure surveillance of explosive and growing epidemic diseases that often occur in failed states and conflict zones.

**UN Office for the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)**

OCHA is an office of the UN Secretariat, not a stand-alone operational agency. It is the mechanism by which the UN secretary-general and UN teams can ensure that someone is monitoring all emergencies, from wars to refugee flight to natural disasters.

The buck stops here.

OCHA was created in the aftermath of the poor UN response after the Iraq/Gulf war of 1991—when millions of refugees sought assistance north to Turkey and east to Iran. Originally it was called the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA). The feeling of governments in 1992 was that no one point in the UN had the responsibility to watch over all EPs, that there was no place where the buck stopped. OCHA is that place now, but lacks much capability on its own; it accomplishes its work primarily by getting resources for other UN agencies to act.

**Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee (IASC)**

OCHA convenes and chairs a forum in which each of the independent UN agencies meet to determine who is doing what and what gaps need to be addressed, collectively or by different agencies with a lead opportunity. The IASC meets regularly, not only during large crises, in New York and Geneva, and allows NGOs to interface with representatives from WHO, WFP, UNHCR, and other key agencies, including the ICRC. NGOs tend to be represented at IASC meetings through their NGO-association representatives, from InterAction, Voice and the NGO Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response.

Less well known is the ECHA, the Executive Committee for Humanitarian Affairs within the UN Secretariat, which OCHA also chairs, of senior experts within the UN Secretariat departments in New York. Similarly, another group meets regularly in Geneva and New York among the representatives of the various embassies to the UN, that is, among government officials interested in sharing information about humanitarian aid: the Humanitarian Liaison Group.

**United Nations Development Program (UNDP)**

In most countries, UNDP has the responsibility to mange the joint UN office for all aid, and to make sense of the work of other UN agencies. Often, OCHA will colocate within UNDP’s office. The official resident representative for the UN in most countries is the head of the UNDP office there.

Originally, UNDP’s orientation in emergencies was to serve as the lead agency for natural disaster prevention and reconstruction. Increasingly, UNDP is trying to also become a leader in preventing and reconstructing civil society and governance, putting human rights and democracy at the top of its priorities for assistance. UNDP attempts to track all manner of human development, human security,
income disparities, access to water, vaccines, enterprise training, education, and intellectual property rights. UNDP is based in New York and works closely with the UN Secretariat.

**United Nations Joint Logistics Center (UNJLC)**

The United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC) was born out of the humanitarian response to the 1996 Eastern Zaire crisis, which demanded intensified coordination and pooling of logistics assets among UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF. UNJLC was institutionalized in March 2002 and housed in Rome; it has had large scale humanitarian operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Sudan, Uganda, Indian Ocean Tsunami Response, Pakistan Earthquake Response, Bangladesh floods response, Lebanon, and DRC. Staff members in UNJLC are seconded from WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, as well as direct hire personnel. UNJLC facilitates and supports the coordination of logistics capabilities among cooperating humanitarian agencies, and complements and supports the global and field Logistics Clusters, using Logistics Information Management, mapping, customs, commodity tracking tools, and services.

**Myths about Humanitarian UN Agencies**

**Myth 1. UN secretary-general manages all UN agencies.**

The secretary-general of the UN has direct management control over the UN Secretariat offices in New York and Geneva but limited practical authority over the various UN agencies, such as UNHCR and WFP, which have their own directors and supervisory boards made up of representatives of governments, including the United States. Of the UN groups mentioned here, only OCHA falls under the direct authority and management of the secretary-general.

In each new large emergency, the secretary-general does make an important decision to designate one UN entity as the lead humanitarian agency for that crisis. The default, if no special responsibility is assigned, is UNDP, headquartered in New York, which is supposed to maintain the general UN representation in each country and also have responsibility for working with each government to provide disaster preparedness.

**Myth 2. UN Engagement in emergencies is primarily via peacekeeping troops.**

Much attention is given to those situations in which armed UN peacekeeping troops deploy to a zone of conflict. Most UN forces, however, work in areas where there is no active conflict; their purpose, after all, being to prevent the possibility of conflict. In contrast, UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, and OCHA are involved in many hundreds of live, active humanitarian emergencies every year, the majority of which do not involve peacekeeping.

**Myth 3. UN deployment in crises defies or circumvents U.S. interests.**

The U.S. government gets its way in a large proportion of UN deliberations about how and where UN capabilities will be put to use. In those circumstances where the United States wants a large UN deployment, there usually will be. In most refugee crises and natural disasters, the United States wants UN involvement, and criticizes the UN when it is slow off the mark.

In fact, most of the work of UNHCR and WFP in providing aid to refugee communities, aid that grew quickly in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, was aid for people fleeing countries that were either communist or at war with communists, and the United States wanted the aid as a symbol of opposition to the Soviet Union’s influence, to call attention to the failures and human rights abuses that came with Soviet involvement. Since the early 1990s, after Russia abandoned communism, U.S. and European donors to the UN redirected the same UN agencies to now contain refugee flows, for example, to assist displaced populations inside Bosnia and Kosovo and prevent large numbers of people from trying to flee to other developed countries.

**Myth 4. UN involvement in emergencies bails out autocratic states.**
Many Americans complain that humanitarian aid creates the preconditions for future emergencies, by helping dictators or by bailing out incompetent and corrupt governments, who then create ever-worsening conditions for their own people. In some instances this is true, and aid has the unintended effect of stabilizing countries that might benefit from civil resistance. But it’s also true in as many instances that humanitarian aid brings embarrassment to governments who looked weak in the light that assistance from other countries was needed.

Very little humanitarian aid (disaster relief, food aid, health care) from the United States is delivered by the governments of the affected country; most passes through NGOs and the Red Cross. That’s true of aid the UN manages also: UNHCR works largely through NGOs, not governments.

**Myth 5. UN aid to crisis areas fosters long-term dependency.**
Humanitarian aid can sometimes support EPs in the same refugee camp for years or even decades. Some refugees stayed for 10 years in large camps in Malawi, Honduras, and Thailand. Refugees from Burma, Tibet, and Afghanistan have stayed for more than 20 years in some cases. But humanitarian aid does not tend to include such great incentives that it discourages anyone from entrepreneurial efforts. In most cases, refugees become self-reliant.

**Myth 6. UNHCR gives assistance directly to refugees.**
Like many agencies, UNHCR takes credit for all the activities it funds or that occur under its aegis. But, except for legal services, UNHCR delegates most assistance delivery to partner groups; it devolves actual direct contact with refugees to NGOs.