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Flash Environmental Assessment Tool

Purpose

This document provides an overview of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit's (Joint Environment Unit) progress in developing a new tool to identify the acute environmental impacts from disasters.

Background

Major natural disasters can have acute, negative environmental impacts that threaten human life and welfare. These so-called *secondary impacts* may include damage to industrial facilities such as chemical plants, acute waste management problems, erosion and landslide risks and localized threats from the displacement of small quantities of dangerous goods such as pesticides. One specific illustration of secondary impacts resulting from a natural disaster is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. On 17 January 2002, the Mt. Nyiragongo volcano erupted and caused a major humanitarian emergency in the city of Goma. Four days later, lava flows set alight a petrol station. Fifty people, who had survived the initial volcano eruption, were killed by the petrol station explosion.

Major disasters may also result in environmental issues that are not life-threatening and therefore less urgent, but which are nonetheless important and require attention in the early recovery process – for example, damage to ecosystems.

One vital component of effective humanitarian response in any humanitarian catastrophe is therefore ensuring that serious environmental risks to human life and welfare are promptly

identified, and steps taken to reduce them. A sound methodology or tool to assess the environmental issues and impacts is vital in this respect. Several very good Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA) methodologies are available. However, no methodology exists for the period immediately following a disaster. The lack of an appropriate tool for this period was recognised during the 6th meeting of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies (AGEE) in June 2005, following an independent assessment of lessons from the response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami-Earthquake disaster.

Accordingly, the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) was contracted by the Joint Environment Unit to develop a Flash Environmental Assessment Tool (FEAT)¹. This tool will be used in the field immediately following natural disasters to assist in the identification of acute and/or life-threatening environmental impacts arising from the disaster. The Crisis Management unit of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Regional Development and the Environment (VROM-CM) is also a key partner in this initiative.

RIVM produced an initial proposed FEAT design that was discussed with key stakeholders² at an April 2006 consultation workshop. Feedback was sought from UN agencies, NGOs and independent experts on the proposed criteria and initial proposed design. RIVM used this feedback for further development of the tool and an initial FEAT prototype.

Design overview

The primary focus of the FEAT is on the identification of acute risks related to industrial infrastructure and natural systems. As a secondary consideration, the FEAT will also help to identify medium to longer-term issues, given that many of these may be evident, and should be identified, at the earliest stages following a disaster.

The intended users of FEAT include members of United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) emergency response teams and disaster management and/or environmental generalists who are familiar with field assessments, but who may have no specific background in assessing environmental emergencies *per se*. Users will be provided with basic training in the use of the FEAT and should be familiar with it before its use in disaster situations.

The FEAT will be organized in modules that move from the general to the specific. The first module, for example, will provide a cursory overview of the most probable serious risks in a disaster affected area (the so-called 'big and obvious' problems), and the last module will allow for an 'object assessment' of specific locations or facilities.

¹ Provisional name, subject to change.

² Participants included CARE International, International Atomic Energy Association, International Federation of the Red Cross, International Association for Impact Assessment, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Swiss Agency for Development and Humanitarian Aid, UNEP, UNHCR, UNICEF, and World Health Organization.

Current status

RIVM is currently developing a prototype of the FEAT. An additional consultation on the prototype took place in Geneva in May, 2007 and resulted in the latest design that is presented to AGEE participants. Following the AGEE, the FEAT will be field-tested in at least two major emergencies, and finalised by RIVM based on the results. The FEAT should be complete by the end of 2007, shared with all interested parties, and be used in the field and in upcoming training sessions for emergency managers.

Implications for the AGEE

The FEAT will be presented at the AGEE 7. Feedback to RIVM would be welcome.