

**Minutes, Steering Committee Meeting,
Health and Nutrition Tracking Service (HNTS)**

15 October 2009, WHO - Geneva

Attendants

Chair:

UNHCR

Paul Spiegel, Co-chair HNTS SC
Chief, Public Health and HIV Section, DOS

Steering Committee Members:

DFID

Scott Gardiner, Humanitarian Adviser
Richard Martini

ECHO

Matthew Sayer

SIDA

Frederik Frisell

FAO

Brian Thompson,
Senior Officer, Nutrition Programmes Service

ACF

Rebecca Brown, Nutrition Adviser

EPICENTRE

Rebecca Grais, Operational Research Director

IRC

Alessandro Colombo

Global Health Cluster (GHC)

Eric Laroche

Assistant Director General,
Health Action in Crises, WHO

OCHA

Niels Scott (partial attendance)

Chief, Disaster and Vulnerability Policy Section

UNICEF

Robin Nandy,

Senior Health Adviser - Emergencies, Health Section

WHO

Dominique Legros

Coordinator,

Disease Control in Humanitarian Emergencies

HNTS Technical Secretariat:

Pierre Salignon, interim project director

Xavier de Radiguès, health epidemiologist

Claudine Prudhon, nutrition epidemiologist

Chiara Gerardi, administrative assistant

Absents:

WFP

Martin Bloem, Chief, Nutrition and HIV/AIDS Policy

Save the Children

A. Rees

Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC)

TBN

Introduction

The meeting was chaired by Paul Spiegel, UNHCR, and Eric Laroche, ADG HAC/WHO, representing the IASC Global Health Cluster (GHC). The IASC Global Nutrition Cluster Coordinator (GNC), which is meant to be one of the HNTS co-chairs, is not yet recruited.

The objective of the meeting was to review the HNTS activities and current status and reach a consensus on ways forward.

The HNTS Director provided a comprehensive review of the status of the HNTS, its goals, functions, operational and normative activities, technical reviews, development of tools and software (including for example software for the Global Cluster's Initial Rapid Assessment IRA tool), governance issues and financial situation (see presentation posted on HNTS webpage, WHO web).

The audience welcomed the presentation and congratulated the Secretariat's team and its current interim project director, Pierre Salignon, for the work done over the reporting period since the last SC meeting in January 2009. A huge work was done and today HNTS is an expanding project and different than what it was one year ago

Functions and Activities

Functions

Eric Laroche pointed out that there is a need of building trust among partners and consolidate funding to ensure a future to the HNTS. He appreciated how Pierre's direction traced a way of acting for the project. There is a real need of impartial and neutral data gathering and HNTS has an important role to play.

The SC members agreed that with regards to the goals of HNTS, the independence, impartiality, scientific credibility and transparency of the data collected, analysed, interpreted and reported on, was paramount and should be emphasized, in order to avoid inaccuracy of information and/or its political manipulation.

The SC members confirmed what was endorsed during the last SC meeting in January 2009. *"The HNTS SC agreed that the HNTS shall have a strong normative and global function, with a strong emphasis on operations and tracking activities at country level".*

DFID said that indicators of health and nutrition are used by donors to identify areas in greatest need and to track assistance over time; it is important to have an independent source of expertise and to promote good methods and practices and they recognized HNTS can be an authoritative centre of expertise in this field. This should also translate in support to GNC and GHC. The same methodology could be applied to other clusters to improve information on humanitarian crises. DFID also emphasized the importance of taking information from the field, understanding it and bringing it at high level to inform allocation of funding.

The HNTS Chair stated that HNTS should be involved in all types of crises, even those not targeted by the Cluster approach.

ACF said that it is important that HNTS has a validation role and bring findings at high level meetings. Also HNTS could play a role in reviewing new methodologies developed by NGOs, and assessing them for methodological rigor.

According to FAO, while not neglecting opportunities to work at the field level, greater attention needs to be given to the global level as the danger of being too close to either party at country level could endanger the impartiality and therefore the credibility of the HNTS. Consequently the general field priorities for the future as stated were considered to be too broad and there is a need for greater focus.

UNICEF observed that field presence was pertinent. However they supported FAO's position saying that long terms field presence could affect the independence of the HNTS and it would be subject to local pressures and political influences. Therefore all field level engagement should be time bound with a clear exit strategy. The role of the HNTS is not to take on the responsibilities of the clusters in tracking the humanitarian situation but focus on support and capacity building.

In terms of the balance between operational and global, ECHO argued that both were needed, emphasizing the importance of need assessments in order to improve the quality of emergency response including food aid delivery. Mention was made of the chronic poor nutritional situation in for example Ethiopia for which large amounts of food aid had been provided over the years but with apparent little sustained impact. HNTS could also play a role in analysing information in the countries affected by the current crisis in Eastern Africa.

The HNTS Interim Director pointed out that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was chosen because it is a chronic crisis, and a good place to start working and be confronted to field realities and needs when speaking about data collection and analysis. He emphasized the essential link between the field reality experience and field work on one hand, and the normative aspects on the other hand: operational and normative functions are strictly connected. Although the Steering Committee should put limits and have a "warning function" to avoid going too far away from the objectives, disconnecting the two functions would be a mistake.

IRC suggested having a roster of experts available to be deployed in countries in humanitarian emergencies upon request for short periods, as an alternative or in addition to having a fixed position in Goma.

ECHO and DFID also suggested that a staff could be based at regional level to support several countries and be deployed at country level when needed. The Interim Project Director warned about the potential loss of contact with field realities.

The HNTS interim project director suggested that HNTS could also have a role of public alert (ex. of Sri Lanka case study). Otherwise there is the risk that HNTS becomes only another technical body instead of a real independent inter-agency initiative.

Activities

All decisions endorsed by the SC members in January 2009 were implemented, sometimes with some constraints. But globally, all actions required were developed in accordance with the general objectives endorsed by the SC.

The HNTS team used a lot their previous non-governmental organizations' (NGO) experience to open doors and build up field cooperation and partnership in the global humanitarian community.

DFID recommended HNTS to setup and revise Workplans twice a year and to organize more of technical meetings.

IRC welcomed the idea of promoting a public symposium in 2010 to present and share field experience from relief organizations and local authorities about data consolidation and interpretation, areas of innovation, etc; donors should attend and support this proposal.

HNTS activities should be seen as complementary to other existing projects and providing capability to fill gaps.

The GHC recommended that HNTS should attend IASC meetings regularly. The IASC should support future HNTS developments.

In the peer review of mortality surveys in DRC, the ERG failed to come to an agreement or common position on the validity of the surveys. It was recognized that it was a very sensitive subject. It would be important in the future that the ERG is able to reach a consensus and this should be conveyed to the ERG members. The Interim Project Director said that the peer review process is not yet finished. The next ERG meeting, which is supposed to take place in 2010, should be an opportunity to discuss the recommendations of this work. A specific workshop with demographers and epidemiologists could also be organized by the HNTS in the future. There is also a need to form a working group on demographic and epidemiologic methodological issues for estimation of mortality rates.

The review of trends in mortality and malnutrition in Darfur commissioned by the HNTS should be finalized by the end of the month and will be sent out largely.

Governance and finance

Governance

Hosting by WHO is somehow not appreciated as a possible threat to neutrality and having impact on the external perception of the project. The Chair remarked that frustration arisen by being hosted by WHO is mainly linked to the administrative side (ex. length of recruitment process). No issues about independency have been experienced so far. The Interim Project Director said the HNTS project could have been an independent structure from the beginning; it could have been better in term of credibility. However, being hosted in WHO, was important and useful during the last year to develop partnerships within the UN system and also outside.

The Interim Project Director recognized that a strong initiative has been left to the HNTS Director which was good and should continue.

Steering Committee

Reference to Steering Committee terms of reference was made.

The Steering Committee currently consists of fourteen members - two cluster leads (health and nutrition cluster representatives as co-chairpersons), six UN Agencies (FAO, OCHA, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP and WHO); two donors (such as ECHO and SIDA) and four NGOs (ACF, Epicentre, IRC and Save the Children). A rotation is possible, but no expansion is recommended. Other participants (NGOs and Donors) could attend as observers only. The current Chair would like to step down upon the arrival of the new HNTS Director.

UNICEF observed that continuity of individuals representing agencies in the SC is important to avoid turn over issues.

The Interim Project Director said that an active participation of the Steering Committee members to inform the HNTS Technical Secretariat about critical situations would be welcome.

ACF said that NGOs sometimes feel to be in between the Steering Committee and the Expert Reference Group (ERG) and that they would be interested in being more involved in technical meetings/specific projects.

The Interim Project Director confirmed that the NGOs are the main partners who clearly pointed out what they were expecting from HNTS. That is the reason why HNTS was able to develop specific and concrete field projects about data collection and analysis.

Epicentre acknowledged that a broad work has been done during the last year, but observed that it is quite difficult to know how to carry out work in such a big group of people with different interests.

It was agreed that an active sub-group of the SC, preferably based in Geneva and including Eric Laroche representing the Global Health Cluster, a representative from the Global Nutrition Cluster, OCHA as the office coordinating humanitarian assistance, and possibly another UN agency would work closely with the Secretariat.

Expert Reference Group

The Expert Reference Group (ERG) provides expert opinion on methodologies and independent technical advice to the Secretariat for specific method development and validation. First ERG meeting held last February was providing good contact and cooperation among the members.

The composition could be enlarged to experts outside the western world in order to be more open and innovative. Depending on the contexts involved, specific speakers could be invited. The ERG could also be expanded to members with an operational background. Pierre would be interested in taking part of the ERG after leaving the Interim direction.

Technical Secretariat

The newly appointed HNTS Director, Peter Morris, is expected to take up his post in January 2010 with a 2 year contract. At the moment this assignment is not covered by funding and according to WHO human resources rules it should be funded for at least 1 year and a half. Due to previous engagements Peter Morris was not able to participate in this meeting.

The Director is accountable to the Steering Committee and is supported by a Technical Secretariat consisting of two technical experts, one in nutrition epidemiology and the other in health epidemiology. This small Technical Secretariat structure (4 people, including the Director and the Administrative Assistant) should be maintained to provide an accurate work. A field position is also currently financed. In the document HNTS Priorities 2009-2011, 3 scenarios are proposed, according to available funding level.

Finance

The current level of funding of the project is low, especially for the staff of the Technical Secretariat (only funded towards the end of February 2010).

The project annual running cost is around 2 million USD (staff and activities), which is not expensive compared to the possible reachable achievements.

ECHO confirmed that it had contributed €4.3 million to WHO for 2009-10 as part of its support Capacity Building funding for WHO, out of which €360 000 had been specifically included for the HNTS for the two years, as requested by WHO. ECHO believed that HNTS should be better linked with the Health and Nutrition Clusters, including for fund raising - ECHO was concerned that WHO in particular, as HNTS host and Health Cluster lead, had not been sufficiently active in this regard. WHO responded by saying they had provided an additional sum of US\$ 200 000 to the HNTS but that without additional financial support from other sources, the future of the HNTS was at risk. WHO/HAC will investigate the possibility to swap additional ECHO funds from other projects to HNTS.

The other two donors present at the meeting were unable at this time to make any firm pledges to provide additional support. DFID stated that they have been very much committed to HNTS since the beginning, but now they have a more limited capability. SIDA confirmed that their possible level of commitment will still be low, due to their limited capability.

CIDA is not ready to provide funding in this moment.

Other donors including USAID, OFDA and Spain (they are championing food and nutrition security programs) will be approached.

The Chair requested all members to fulfill their expected duty to “encourage future funding for the HNTS”.

FAO pointed out that they are a specialized agency and not a funding agency but had been supportive of this initiative since its beginning and would continue. Consideration would be given to including a specific budget line in future food and nutrition security information projects that it was preparing for donor support.

UNICEF is not in a position to commit funds at the moment. Some money was put in the past from the Global Nutrition Cluster and could be envisaged in the future, depending on the level of funding of the Global Nutrition Cluster.

UNHCR could possibly consider to contribute with a small amount (about USD 50 000) and could also envisaged sharing of human resources in the field for data collection.

WHO proposed that more consideration could be given to seeking financial support from the country level Health and Nutrition Clusters in return for technical assistance to be provided by the HNTS to the Cluster Coordinators on their request. It was agreed that this connection had not been fully utilized in the past and should be in future to attract additional funds. The HNTS co-chairs, as the IASC Global Health and Nutrition Cluster representatives, are the links between the strategic approach for the HNTS as guided by the Steering Committee and the requests for technical advice from the country clusters.

The HNTS Interim Project Director commented that having non earmarked funds will be more manageable in terms of handling of funding and relevant reporting. Anyhow not enough funding would lead to a drastic cut of the structure, which could not work as a smaller entity. Economic crises could have had an impact on donors' availability to invest. But the project is not expensive and should be supported in the future.

Next Steering Committee and Expert Reference Group Meetings

The next SC meeting will probably take place in about 6 months time, March/April 2010, back to back with the next meeting of the ERG. Dates to be defined upon the arrival of the new HNTS Director.

Conclusion

The SC thanked the HNTS team and his interim project director for the work of this last year and their dynamism allowing the HNTS project to develop in the future.

Further information on the HNTS Strategic and Managerial Framework can be accessed on the WHO housed website:

<http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/hnts/Intro/en/index.html>