



## Online Consultation Report: West and Central Africa

*This report summarizes the online comments and contributions received as part of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) preliminary Online Consultations for West and Central Africa which took place from 5 May – 13 June 2014. This report is posted online at [www.whsummit.org](http://www.whsummit.org) and was presented at the first WHS regional meeting in Côte d'Ivoire on 19-20 June 2014, where the recommendations were discussed.*

The online, moderated<sup>1</sup> discussions provided an open, public forum to discuss questions around the [four themes](#) of the WHS in addition to providing a space for additional ideas. Participation in the forum was open to anyone who registered, from any origin or location. The majority of participants were from countries in West and Central Africa, however contributions were received from Switzerland, Sweden, the UK and the United States of America.

A total of nine questions were discussed, with lively debate around the four themes of the World Humanitarian Summit, in addition to two questions that dealt with cross-cutting issues and broader, general recommendations. The discussion questions were developed by the WHS Secretariat in consultation with the Discussion Chair, the Moderators and the WHS Regional Steering Group.

The online consultations were publicized through a number of channels including humanitarian and development media and networks such as ReliefWeb, IRIN, United Nations (UN) agencies and NGOs, through UN Member States, social media, and via emails to various humanitarian groups such as the Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) network, who provided support for the online consultations.

The discussion forum was visited by about 1500 people. Within the region, the top viewers were from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. Participants from 11 countries in the region posted comments in both French and English. Contributions were received from individuals from international NGOs, regional institutions, community-based organizations, research organizations, donor organizations and independent consultants.

### Key Recommendations

1. Improve **coordination and increase cooperation** with local governments and NGOs.
2. Increase **understanding of cultures and practices** of affected communities by external humanitarian actors and **adapt interventions** to the specific context.
3. Increase investment in local and regional humanitarian **capacity** (governments, communities, CSOs, traditional leaders and national NGOs) and **map** these local actors in the region.
4. Increase collaboration between countries in the region to **manage and mitigate risks** associated with **climate change and environmental degradation**.
5. Increase investment to address **root causes of conflict and disaster**, thereby increasing focus on DRR and resilience.

---

<sup>1</sup> The discussions took place at: [www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs\\_WC\\_Africa](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_WC_Africa) and were chaired by Mr. Paul Empole, First Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the UN and moderated by Mr. Ibrahima Diane, a journalist from Guinea and Head of BBC Afrique, and Mr. Gima Forje, an experienced humanitarian worker from Cameroon with a Master's degree from Tufts University in the United States. See their full profiles below.

## Discussion Questions

The first stage of the discussions revolved around six initial questions related to the four themes. Three supplementary questions on three of the themes were added during part two of the discussions.

### 1. Humanitarian Effectiveness:

- What is most critical to ensure that humanitarian action is meeting humanitarian needs in West and Central Africa?

### 2. Reducing Vulnerability and Managing Risk:

- How can we make the international community focus more on reducing vulnerability and managing risk in the region?
- How can humanitarian and development risk analysis and planning processes be aligned strategically in the region?

### 3. Transformation through Innovation:

- What aspects of humanitarian action would most benefit from innovative approaches in the region?
- How can we encourage innovations based on the needs of the people affected in the region? Have you encountered any barriers to innovation in the humanitarian system?

### 4. Serving the needs of people in conflict:

- What should humanitarian actors do differently to better meet the needs of people in conflict situations in the region?
- How can the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action best be maintained in conflict situations in the region?

### Cross-cutting and other issues:

- What are the most vital overarching or cross-cutting issues that should be included in these discussions?
- What should the humanitarian landscape look like in the region 20 years from now?

## Summary of the Discussions

As summarized in the following pages, the contributions were rich in diversity – highlighting different considerations and viewpoints. For instance, opinion is divided as to whether humanitarian action should be extended into long-term development. However, there is emerging consensus around a number of issues including the need for local ‘ownership’ of preparedness and response and thus the need for greater capacity building in the region.

Participants in the forum generally agreed that people in West and Central Africa will confront many systemic and broad challenges, mainly due to the following contextual issues:

- Climate change;
- Access to natural resources and energy;
- Extreme poverty;
- Poor infrastructure;
- Poor governance and corruption;
- Inappropriate or inadequate national and regional policies;
- Insecurity, armed conflict and the rise of extremism.

In addition to these risks, participants highlighted a number of ongoing challenges faced by the humanitarian sector including: poor coordination, low levels of cultural understanding, lack of access to affected populations, and disparities in response.

## Additional Recommendations

A summary of additional recommendations suggested by the discussion participants include:

1. Multi-year humanitarian financing options are more appropriate in chronic and protracted crises.
2. Support innovations in agriculture to help the region avoid recurrent food crises.
3. Develop common standards of effectiveness.
4. Increase understanding among International NGOs of disparities between services they provide and what local institutions and governments are able to provide, to avoid creating tensions and problems.
5. Increase understanding of and acknowledge the politicization of humanitarian aid in order to address it properly, especially in conflict situations.
6. Support national governments to develop robust contingency plans involving local and national civil society organizations.
7. Include capacity building of local communities as part of all humanitarian interventions and involve local communities in the design of all responses.
8. Humanitarian actors should be neutral and impartial, and humanitarian assistance allocated only on the needs basis.
9. Reduce donor restrictions on cash-based interventions, where appropriate.

## Summary of Discussions by Theme

This section provides summaries of the discussions around each of the four themes. An additional section summarizes cross-cutting and other broader issues.

### Theme 1: Humanitarian Effectiveness

#### ***What is most critical to ensure that humanitarian action is meeting humanitarian needs in West and Central Africa?***

This theme received the most comments (49) and there was broad consensus from discussion participants regarding the need to transfer humanitarian response to local, national and regional actors. Another strong debate revolved around the relationship between politics and humanitarian action. While some called for the elimination of the politicization of aid, others acknowledged that politics and aid are inextricably linked and this needs to be better acknowledged and addressed.

The discussions also underscored the importance of humanitarian actors working according to established principles for humanitarian effectiveness such as those adopted by the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Sphere Hand Book.

*“Reduce the bureaucracies involved in developing agreements with UN agencies. Strengthen the mechanism for partnerships and funding of actors closest to disaster frontlines. This is more cost effective than importing outside expertise!”*

*- Peter Akanimoh Nigeria*

The need for **improvements in coordination** was central in the discussions. Participants identified a number of pitfalls associated with poor coordination such as: duplication of activities, waste, and failure to effectively reach those in need. For instance, it was noted that 1400 CAR refugees in Cameroon spent two months without food rations due to poor coordination. The situation was further compounded by lack of access to remote areas.

Beyond coordination amongst agencies, there is equally a need to coordinate how information is circulated to communities in need of humanitarian action. It was stated that there is a disconnect between international NGOs, local NGOs and communities. There is clearly a need for humanitarians to improve how they work with governments, civil society, NGOs, traditional leaders and local populations. Forum participants noted the increasing added value of using technologies such as mobile phones to reach and educate communities. One participant noted the limited ability to anticipate disaster in the regions, while another emphasized the need to develop a database of experts that can be deployed in periods of disasters.

Contributors emphasized that the essence of humanitarian action should be people-centred and many pointed to the need for humanitarian action to provide communities with the skills to sustain intervention after they leave. The discussions indicated that psycho-social and cultural considerations may easily be overlooked in the planning and execution of humanitarian action. This consideration is critical to building a people-centred approach that reduces psychological dependency on aid.

Security and safety remains a major challenge in West and Central Africa. This has the potential to continue to limit the effectiveness of humanitarian action. Therefore, partnership among the countries of the region and between the two regions on security is central to creating a safe environment for humanitarian action.

One commenter noted that there is insufficient preparation for humanitarian action in West and Central Africa due to lack of necessary information for an effective response. Hence, there is a need for states to develop contingency plans to meet potential humanitarian crisis. Others recommended that more local actors and civil society organizations should be involved in planning humanitarian actions.

Participants noted that many humanitarian actions are inherently political and this can often contribute to increased problems on the ground. For example, when humanitarian players request a peacekeeping operation to be sent to a certain country, this is seen as a political stance by various players on the ground. When an organization publicly denounces the behaviour of one or several parties to the conflict, this is also seen as political action. One contributor commented that the connection between humanitarian action and politics is inevitable in conflict situations and people, organizations, donors/ and or countries that are involved in aid, politics and military activities should work together towards one goal of global peace, security, and development. This connection was actually supported by a cited quote from ICRC president stating that, "Une action humanitaire independante et neutre ne peut exister que parce qu'elle beneficie d'un soutien politique" (a humanitarian action that is independent and neutral can only exist because it enjoys political support).

## Theme 2: Managing Risk and Reducing Vulnerability

***How can we make the international community focus more on reducing vulnerability and managing risk in West and Central Africa?***

***How can humanitarian and development risk analysis and planning processes be aligned strategically in the region?***

Overall, commentators on this theme agreed that there is limited capacity in both West and Central Africa to anticipate and mitigate risks arising from the current vulnerability of the regions. Participants noted the impact of climate change and poor environmental practices on the long term development of the regions. There is consensus on the need for adaptation strategies that are integrated into relevant structures in order to mitigate the long term impact of climate change. One commenter argued for the adoption of common strategies across the regions aimed at preventing and reducing environmental degradation such as deforestation, inadequate waste management, and overgrazing, which have humanitarian impacts.

Introducing a harmonized approach to reducing vulnerability would require strong commitment from governments. A commenter observed that governments in the region lack the capacity and resources to deal with issues such as deforestation, provision of alternative sources of energy for cooking and waste management. It was recommended that governments should adopt appropriate structures to support prevention. It is also noted that these are some of the areas where the international community can build the capacity of governments and assist them in developing sustainable policies to reduce risk and vulnerability. Further, and as noted by a few commenters, poverty is a major contributor to vulnerability; hence, the international community should support research on reducing risk and vulnerability in the region. Many also suggested that for long term solutions, stakeholders including the government, civil society organizations and humanitarian actors should focus more on creating economic opportunities by embracing non-traditional humanitarian actors such as the private sector.

*“In order to ensure a smooth transition and sustainable action, relief organizations should collaborate with host governments and/or other local structures in developing and implementing exit strategies”*

*- Mohammed, Sierra Leone*

Another commenter cited the need for proper legal regulatory frameworks to manage risk, while another called for the need for better shared regional data.

Again, there was a call to ensure inclusion of civil society and community practitioners into the local and national platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and develop a mechanism to enable these local actors to actively participate.

A commenter from a major governmental donor highlighted the fact that his country has provided support to the Africa Risk Capacity programme through the African Union to establish country-owned drought insurance mechanisms to provide early assistance in times of drought and harvest failures.

### Theme 3: Transformation through Innovation

***What aspects of humanitarian action would most benefit from innovative approaches in West and Central Africa?***

***How can we encourage innovations based on the needs of the people affected in the region and have you encountered any barriers to innovation in the humanitarian system?***

The definition of innovation was discussed and expanded beyond simply technology, to include any solution that provides a new way of addressing a problem.

One commenter noted the need for local and regional knowledge to be taken into consideration in determining the needs for innovation, suggesting that such an approach will promote solidarity between all stakeholders in working together in the future.

Some suggested using models that work in other places. An example would be programmes such as the Citizens Emergency Response Teams, implemented in the United States. A local volunteer in Ghana launched its country's first programme of this type; providing training and equipment to the public so that they can help each other during disasters will increase resilience and field capacity for disaster response.

Most countries in the region are dependent on agriculture and as two contributors noted, it is critical for agriculture to benefit from innovative approaches that would enable the regions to feed their people and avoid recurrent food crises. This argument is reinforced by another commenter who points to the need for innovation across the entire spectrum of agribusiness and the advantage of investing in solar energy.

The discussion noted that innovation without a corresponding atmosphere that promotes transparency and accountability will not necessarily improve humanitarian assistance in West and Central Africa. Philip from Sierra Leone stressed the importance of using technology and innovation to support broad participation in all sectors of production as a step towards inclusive growth that would absorb the youth and foster social cohesion.

A contributor from the a major governmental donor offered that the World Food Programme (WFP) and NGOs have established strong cash transfer mechanisms across the Sahel, delivering a more effective food security response. As such, when transfers are required to meet food security needs, a 'cash first' approach could be taken where it is assumed that markets are functioning unless it is proven otherwise.

*"It is important for external humanitarian actors to have a deep understanding of the cultures and practices of the affected communities before engaging."*

*- Jimm, Ghana*

The contributor also noted that good progress has been made on cash/vouchers in the DRC (particularly increased use of voucher fairs), but moving towards a more coordinated and multi-sectoral approach is particularly important; cash is not a sector, it is the means for delivering assistance and can be used in lieu of food, Non-Food Items (NFIs), education, etc. One barrier to innovation which has sometimes been seen is that agencies are still limited by some donor restrictions that encourage in-kind support.

#### Theme 4: Serving the Needs of People in Conflict

***What should humanitarian actors do differently to better meet the needs of people in conflict situations in West and Central Africa?***

***How can the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action best be maintained in conflict situations in the region?***

It was noted that humanitarian needs will likely grow as a result of regional conflicts. Protecting civilians in conflict remains a significant humanitarian challenge. The forum did not reach consensus on the effectiveness of regional early warning systems in helping humanitarians better meet the needs of people in conflict areas.

One person stated that the replication of projects from one country to another without proper adaptation to contextual realities is not the best approach to serve communities and people in conflict or complex emergencies.

Another person urged humanitarians to act differently by examining and addressing not just the symptoms but the root causes of conflict in the region.

One person suggested that practical measures – such as corridors, safe zones, pauses– all have chequered histories and no longer gain widespread support. There remains readiness for new international response, such as the deployments of French and UN forces to Mali and CAR. However, there is a need to rebuild international consensus on the protection of civilians and the value of neutral and impartial humanitarian action.

Participants also highlighted the need to continue monitoring the impact of integrated UN missions with more aggressive mandates (as currently in the DRC and Mali) on perceptions of the UN, on humanitarian neutrality and on humanitarian access. DPKO/UNSC should be aware of these risks and work actively to mitigate them.

### Cross-Cutting and Other Issues

***What are the most vital overarching or cross-cutting issues that should be included in these discussions?***

***What should the humanitarian landscape look like in West and Central Africa 20 years from now?***

As in the other discussion forums, participants highlighted the importance of greater coordination, the need for a multi-sectoral approach, local and regional ‘ownership’ of the response and the need for prevention measures to address current and future risks faced by the region. Other contributors highlighted issues of poor governance that pose a major challenge. One person said that one of the key cross-cutting issues is one of policy and institutional architecture for effective response. His view was shared by a contributor who said that the AU, Regional Economic Communities and many nations have excellent frameworks in place. However, many questioned the effectiveness of these continental, regional and national institutions and frameworks.

Contributors highlighted that many West and Central African countries rank low in gender rankings, therefore gender issues need to be discussed at state, institutional and community levels. All contributors also agreed on the importance of the role of civil society in the prevention and response to humanitarian crises. The contributor from the AU said that the World Humanitarian Summit process has recognized the growing role of civil society, now and in the future, adding that there is a need to undertake a mapping of civil society organizations, but also go further to develop, strengthen and institute operational mechanisms.

A contributor from a major humanitarian donor country suggested that multi-year humanitarian financing is needed especially in areas of protracted or chronic crises.

## Participation

The table to the right summarizes the number of active participants and comments for each of the themes. It should be noted that there was some overlap between themes in the different discussions.

Theme	Comments
Humanitarian Effectiveness	49
Managing Risk and Reducing Vulnerability	29
Transformation through Innovation	24
Serving Needs of People in Conflict	40
Cross-Cutting	24
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>166</b>

## About the Moderation Team

The moderation team consisted of a Discussion Chair and two Moderators. The Chair provided overall strategy and guidance for the discussions. The Moderators provided daily monitoring and facilitation. All are from the region and fluent in English and French.

### Discussion Chair: Mr. Paul Empole



Mr. Empole has been First Counsellor of the Permanent Mission of the Democratic Republic of Congo to the United Nations since 2010. Mr. Empole has served as Rapporteur of the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly, and attended several UN and international agency trainings and workshops in several areas, notably in humanitarian affairs. Mr. Empole holds a Master's degree in Arts and a Bachelor's degree in Education, has frequently been a member of the DRC's delegation internationally and participated in several multilateral negotiations.

### Discussion Moderators: Mr. Ibrahima Diane and Mr. Gima Forje



Mr. Diane is a communications professional from Guinea, currently Head of BBC Afrique. In addition to his work with the BBC, he has five years' experience with UNHCR in Guinea. He is currently based in the UK.



Mr. Forje is from Cameroon and has substantive regional experience, including with the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF), working with CSOs in 16 West African Countries. Most recently, he worked as Grants Officer with TY Danjuma Foundation in Nigeria. Mr. Forje recently completed his Master's in Humanitarian Action from Tufts University in the United States.

**Comments on this report are welcomed. Please post online at: [www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs\\_WC\\_Africa](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_WC_Africa) or email to: [wcafrica@whsummit.org](mailto:wcafrica@whsummit.org)**

*Disclaimer: the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this discussion summary report are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the World Humanitarian Summit, UNOCHA, the United Nations or the participants' organizations.*