

Lessons learned study of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER)

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Background and context

Unique to the Ebola crisis was the establishment of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), the first-ever UN emergency health mission. Established on 19 September 2014 after the adoption of General Assembly resolution 69/1 and in response to a joint request from the Presidents of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone for the UN to lead coordination of the international response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, UNMEER was established – with the first personnel deployed within 10 days – as a temporary measure. UNMEER was mandated to harness the capabilities and competencies of all the relevant UN actors under a singular operational crisis management system to reinforce unity of purpose, effective ground-level leadership and operational direction to ensure a rapid, effective, efficient and coherent response to the Ebola crisis. By its design, UNMEER combines the technical expertise of the World Health Organization (WHO) with the operational capabilities of other UN agencies, funds and programmes. UNMEER was designed to support the international response effort with a view towards reinforcing the national plans developed by the affected countries themselves.

Accordingly, UNMEER worked with host governments, the UN system and other national and international stakeholders to facilitate, under the technical expertise and leadership of WHO, putting in place the lines of action essential to stopping and treating the outbreak, including case management, case finding, safe and dignified burial practices and social mobilization, as well as related enabling activities such as logistics, personnel and volunteers, training, cash payments and information management. Through these means, UNMEER was allocated an important role in galvanizing UN system action given its immediate access to funds and resources through assessed contributions, while UN agencies, funds and programmes scaled up to the level of resources required by the crisis.

In his identical letters to the Presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council on 17 September 2014 indicating his intention to establish the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), the Secretary-General informed that the Mission would exist only as long as necessary to stem the crisis. He further stated that, “When Ebola virus disease no longer poses a grave threat to the people of the infected countries the Mission will have achieved its objective and will be disbanded.” UNMEER was therefore conceptualized as a “temporary and short-term entity to galvanize the United Nations system, align all response partners on the ground, provide the logistics backbone to scale up the response and identify gaps and redirect resources until Ebola no longer posed a grave threat to the region and there were sufficient existing national and international capacities to contain the situation.”

As a temporary entity, UNMEER was not created to replace or supplant any operational actor on the ground. With many UN operational actors active in the affected countries since the onset of the outbreak in early 2014, the establishment of UNMEER was intended to respond to the growing severity of the emergency by, inter alia, building on and enhancing their efforts through providing not unitary command and control, but a crisis management system, under the technical guidance of WHO, to support the UN in coming together to exploit synergies and scale up efforts through a singular and unified response. At the Operational Conference for scaling up the UN system approach to the Ebola response held in Accra, Ghana from 15-18 October, it was agreed that the UN system's response through UNMEER would be guided by seven shared principles: centrality of national ownership; national specificity; clarity with national governments about the UN's role; complementarity in the work of the UN system; a singular UN approach to Ebola based on the four clearly defined lines of action; strong commitment to working with others on prevention and preparedness; and the centrality of a regional approach.

From the outset, the Secretary-General's vision of UNMEER was for this new mission to remain agile and nimble, evolving as rapidly as necessary to keep up with the unfolding evolution of the outbreak. UNMEER sought to ensure a tailored approach to match national circumstances, and to continuously build on improved information-gathering and analysis systems in the field, including through rapidly and proactively adjusting the Mission's operational posture and footprint to respond to the evolution of the virus, its transmission and impact. This approach required the Mission to be highly flexible and agile, adjusting the UN system's response to ensure the most effective, efficient and optimally targeted use of resources to strive to achieve maximum impact on the ground. The unity of UN effort envisaged through UNMEER required the enabling of an adjustable field presence shifting from a centralised to decentralised models to best respond to requirements on the ground, the redirection of resources to areas of immediate need across the region, and the facilitation of transport and delivery of key assets from multiple partners at short notice.

Objectives for a lessons learned exercise

- Identify innovative approaches and strategies undertaken by UNMEER that are transferable to other missions and contexts
- Identify challenges faced by UNMEER in carrying out its' mandate, and related lessons learned
- Identify lessons learned and findings to be channeled into the High-Level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises.
- Support the codification of institutional memory on the deployment of UNMEER soon after its liquidation