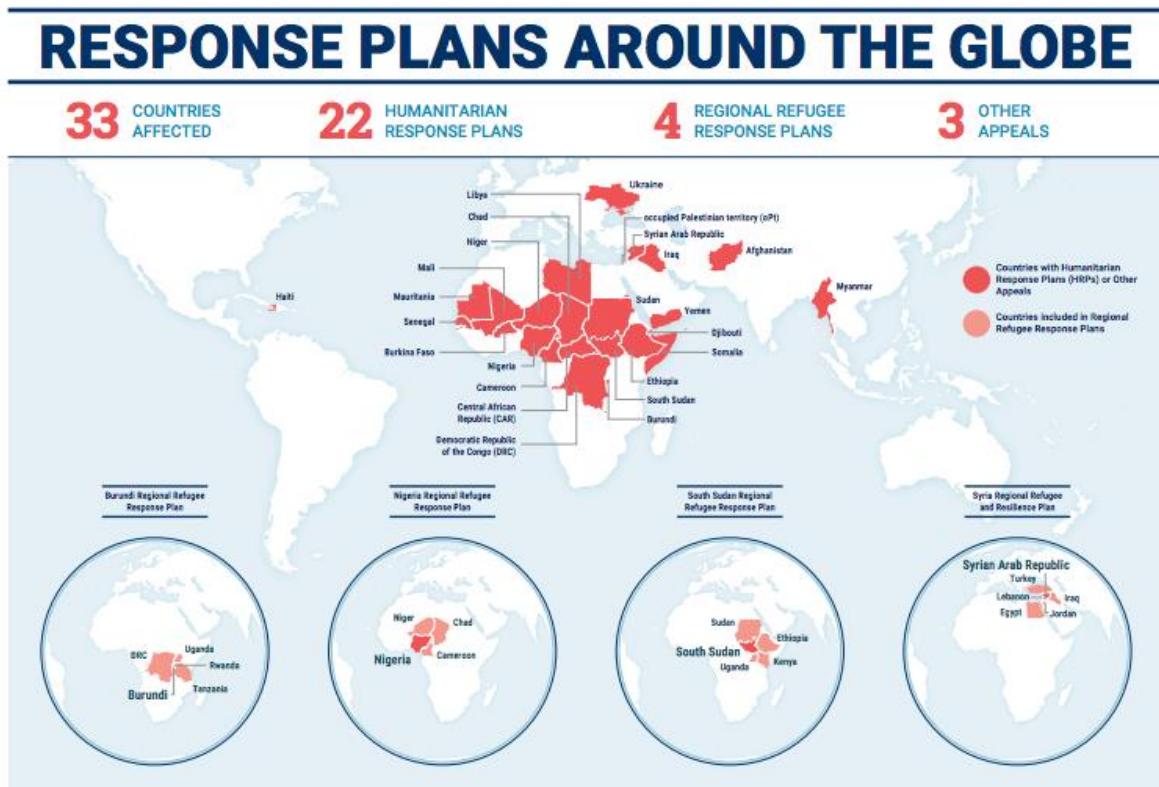


The challenges facing Mark Lowcock, the new UN OCHA chief

28 September 2017 In taking up his new position as UN Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs and U.N. emergency relief coordinator, Mark Lowcock follows fellow Britons Sir John Holmes, Baroness Valerie Amos and Stephen O'Brien. What will be his major challenges? OCHA faces accusations of being poorly structured, under-funded, unfocused and suffering from low morale. At a time when the whole UN system has been under critical light, OCHA has been separately judged as a poor performer. A survey on organisational culture put OCHA firmly at the bottom of 38 comparable non-profits, according to Boston Consulting Group. Dysfunction in the organisation is to blame, it said, adding that "challenges in the other areas of the review have had a negative impact on OCHA staff engagement and satisfaction."

Lowcock's immediate predecessor Stephen O'Brien recognised this so he will take over an agency in the midst of implementing internal reforms as part of upholding commitments made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. These changes set out to strengthen the protection of internally displaced persons and host communities and expand the Central Emergency Response Fund to \$1 billion by 2018. These budget cuts could also mean a return back to the agency's core tenants, and less focus on innovation.

In the short term, OCHA will close offices in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mauritania. It will reduce its presence in Colombia, Haiti, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Philippines. It will trim spending on Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, but scale up in Cameroon and Libya. Large offices in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Sudan will be reduced, and a Central Asia regional office will close. Some positions in New York and Geneva will also face the axe.

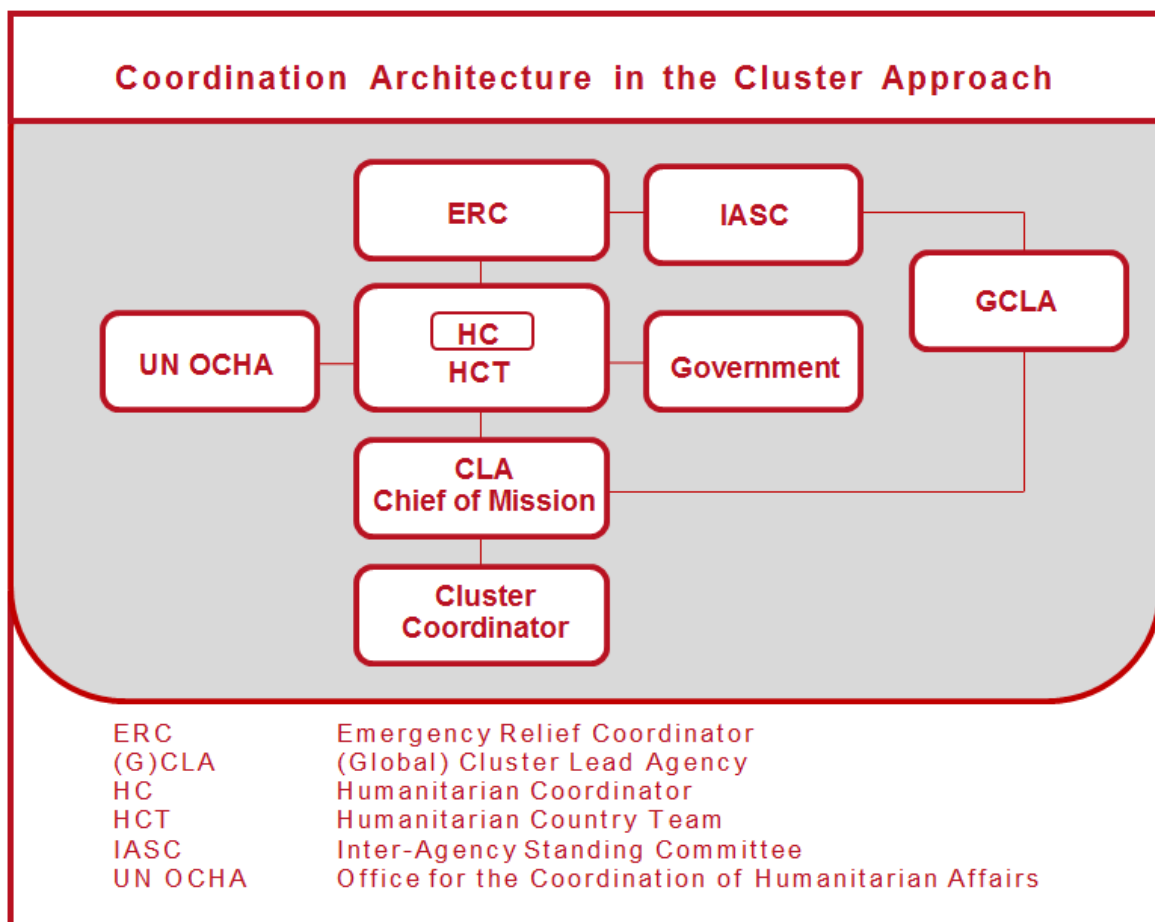


But are these cuts balanced? Stephen O'Brien had earlier commissioned the Boston Consulting Group to undertake a functional review of OCHA shortly after taking office more than a year earlier. If implemented, the recommendations of the Report will need to be coordinated with the changes following OCHA's 'shrinking' and refocusing.

The Boston Report identifies several issues undermining OCHA's work: competing centres of power at offices in New York and Geneva and between the organisation's leadership; fragmentation and duplication of positions across teams; and a failure to capitalise on economies of scale.

"The leadership team does not work well together," wrote the consultants. "There is entrenched polarisation and a lack of trust among many of OCHA's senior managers, who do not see themselves as part of a single, unified team." Shortcomings in the management model, the report continued, "have led to widespread organisational dysfunction." Further, there are accusations of "fiefdoms" within OCHA which can result in splits. To add to the organisation's woes, a recent UN audit of OCHA, dated 12 December, 2016, found its human resources management to be less than satisfactory.

So how can Mark Lowcock square this circle? Firstly, he needs to establish himself in the international arena as a leader, even shooting for the label of 'charismatic', a tough call for a career civil servant. Also, he needs to utilise to the full the well-earned international respect enjoyed by DFID, steered by him in recent years, to generate greater support from traditional donor states. Thirdly, he must set about the re-organisation of OCHA with fewer staff setting out to do more. Changes might need to start from the top. This chart shows the status quo.



Lowcock follows O'Brien in holding two senior posts, OCHA and ERC, able to appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator for a particular mission. His dealings with humanitarians will be defining, from being a donor to a supplicant, competing sometimes with NGOs. Rashid Khalikov, assistant secretary-general for humanitarian partnerships at OCHA admits it has struggled to attract the kind of humanitarian image of its agency cohorts. "Those who are providing assistance, health, and food, and nutrition, and shelter, they're much better off than we are," he said. Critics will claim that if this is so it is because they organise their deliveries more efficiently. So, diplomacy will be a key requirement also.

Having someone who can "speak the language of government with other bilateral donors can also be a huge benefit," said Jamie Munn, of the Norwegian Refugee Council. This will matter as OCHA pushes to gain support for underfunded political and humanitarian crises, such as the Central African Republic, whilst places like South Sudan for instance make it more difficult for humanitarian agencies to operate by imposing high registration and visa fees. "My hope is OCHA goes back to basics" say Munn. "Many of us who have field experience in the 90s, 2000s, and later, we remember a different OCHA, a more nimble OCHA, one more principled and driving for coordination and collective results. I think over the past few years, in part in response to the demands on OCHA, they have grown and it is hard to stay nimble when you are that big."

Christina Bennett, head of programme for the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute and former chief of policy analysis and innovation at OCHA views Lowcock's appointment to be an interesting choice. "This is happening at a time when the external geopolitical environment is challenging for multilateral institutions in the U.S., here in Europe and the U.K., and elsewhere, and when the UN Secretary-General himself is moving into a phase of reforming different aspects of the U.N. and its role."

UNA Westminster welcomes Mark Lowcock to his new appointment despite our long-held objection to key senior UN positions seeming to becoming long-term fiefdoms of powerful UN Member States (UNICEF-USA; OCHA-UK; DPKO-France). The qualities he needs to show from the start and to sustain these while powerful states demand more but offer less will test even the most experienced Whitehall warrior. And now a British candidate has been offered this responsibility, we must support him thoroughly.

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