

ETC Plenary Meeting minutes

24-25 April 2024

Hosted by GSMA in London, United Kingdom

Summary

The annual Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) Plenary Meeting for 2024 was held from 24 to 25 April, hosted by the GSMA in London, United Kingdom. A total of 37 participants from 21 different partner organizations attended the event in-person.

Participants discussed the future of humanitarian responses in today's ever-changing landscape, making sure ETC services remain adaptable and tailored to the dynamic needs and contexts that humanitarians face.

Opening Remarks



Jay Mahanand, WFP CIO, and Chair of ETC welcomes everyone.

The ETC Plenary meeting was officially opened by Max Cuvellier, head of Mobile for Development (M4D), and Jay Mahanand, WFP Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chair of the ETC. In their opening remarks, they provided a warm welcome to all attendees and reminded everyone of the importance of telecommunications in humanitarian crisis situations.

Kimberly Brown, Head of Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, GSMA, welcomed everyone to the GSMA

premises.

Brent Carbno, Global ETC Coordinator, WFP, welcomed Global ETC partners and invited all to review the two-day sessions, and the Plenary agenda was adopted.

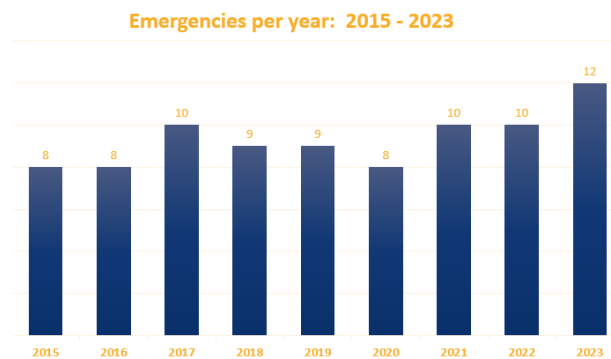
Sessions day 1 – 24 April

Global ETC updates

Caroline Teyssier, Deputy Global ETC Coordinator at WFP, provided a brief summary of the key achievements and updates. She briefed all participants about the ongoing review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and its subsidiary bodies. Caroline also addressed the main question raised by all global clusters on how best to continue supporting the field with the increased number of operations and support needed in non-cluster settings while at the same time, the availability of funding decreases.

In 2023, the ETC responded to its highest number of emergencies—12 (see right)—and supported eight countries to enhance their emergency preparedness as well as delivering five courses including a Training of Trainers (ToT).

Part of the major updates was the new [ETC competency framework](#), which outlines key competencies across all ETC core functions. Additionally, action points from the 2023 Plenary meeting were reviewed and addressed.



Humanitarian Landscape

Gemma Connell, Chief of Analysis at the Planning and Monitoring Branch (APMB) of OCHA, presented on the current humanitarian landscape, highlighting several significant trends impacting the sector, particularly the evolving operational challenges and funding shortages. Among the notable points discussed were:

- **Climate crisis impact:** The frequency and duration of climate-related crises, especially in correlation with conflict crisis.
- **Communication shutdowns:** Deliberate shutdowns of communication channels and attacks on communications infrastructure in places such as Tigray (Ethiopia), Sudan, and Gaza (Palestine).
- **Manipulation of communications:** Instances where communications channels were manipulated or misused.
- **Challenges in engagement:** The need to address the complexities posed by these challenges, particularly regarding communications, was underscored along with the importance of identifying solutions and safeguarding humanitarian operations and communities.

Several questions and challenges were raised:

- How to effectively respond to increasingly complex environments where communications play a crucial role, and what solutions can be identified to protect both humanitarian workers and affected communities?
- Strategies to better support communities in conflict zones, including potential partnerships with civil societies for initiatives such as the provision of e-SIMs.
- Dealing with the financial crisis affecting humanitarian efforts and ensuring the prioritization of aid delivery.
- Leveraging the unique engagement of the ETC with the private sector, balancing opportunities, and risks, and sharing critical information within partnerships.
- Addressing the necessity of communication in humanitarian efforts and advocating to prevent communications shutdowns or informing about their impact.

The session also delved into the need for nuanced approaches to transitions in humanitarian operations, emphasizing accountability and strategic presence. Additionally, discussions revolved around the role of technology, advocacy efforts, and coordination within the humanitarian community to address emerging challenges effectively.

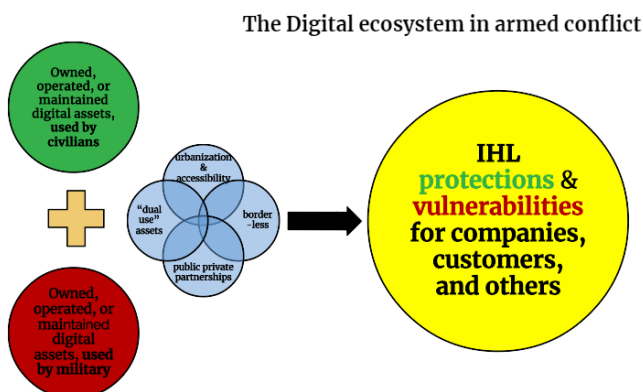
The session concluded with the imperative of adapting to evolving humanitarian landscapes, advocating for essential communications services, and fostering strategic partnerships to enhance aid delivery and support vulnerable communities effectively.

Impact of digital technology in humanitarian settings

In this virtual session led by Mauro Vignati, Adviser on New Technologies of Warfare, ICRC, the impact of digital technology in humanitarian settings was explored. The session delved into the intersection of technology and international humanitarian law (IHL), focusing on the implications for civilians and humanitarian workers in armed conflicts.

- **Digital infrastructure:** Various aspects of digital infrastructure were examined, including the roles of technology giants like Microsoft, Google, and Palantir in providing services to civilians and humanitarian organizations.
- **Civilian involvement in armed conflicts:** Concerns were raised regarding the participation of civilians in conflict scenarios and the principles of distinction to safeguard non-combatants.
- **Examples of technological impact:** Several examples were provided, illustrating the complexities arising from private companies' involvement in cyber defence, the 'civilianization' of military cyberspace, and the dual-use nature of technology assets.
- **Mitigation plans:** The need was emphasized for comprehensive risk assessments and civilian harm mitigation plans for technology companies involved in conflict zones.

Discussion points included considerations around applying IHL in different technological contexts, addressing dual-use technology challenges, negotiating humanitarian access to digital infrastructure, and reinforcing respect for IHL in cyberspace.



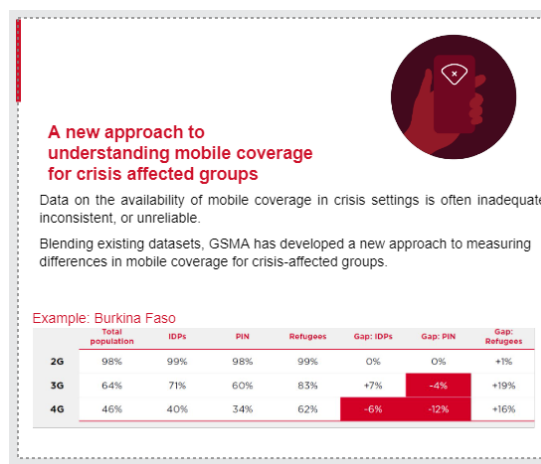
Throughout the session, the importance of addressing the ethical and legal dilemmas posed by digital technology in humanitarian contexts was underscored, with an emphasis on collaboration between technology companies, states, and humanitarian organizations to mitigate risks and ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers.

Connectivity in Crisis Research

GSMA provided an overview of the key issues and concerns identified in their Connectivity in Crisis Research and its work related to Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled social and environmental impacts, including use cases of disaster resilience. Zoe Hamilton, Senior Insights Manager, and Barnaby Willits-King, Director of Research and Policy at GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, presented:

- **Key questions and problem statements:** GSMA highlighted the need to analyse and find solutions automatically within a concise framework, considering the humanitarian implications.

- **Implications, risks, and opportunities:** The absence, loss, or presence of connectivity during crises and how this impacts protection, wellbeing, autonomy, economic development, and introduces risks like harassment and surveillance.
- **Closing the humanitarian coverage gap:** Challenges include mitigating the risks of dependence on connectivity, ensuring stability, and addressing coverage gaps, with discussions on business models, technologies such as low-orbit satellites, as well as cross-sector collaborations.
- **Reflections:** Efforts include raising awareness about connectivity as a human right, mapping population data to incentivize private sector investments, defining global standards for connectivity levels, and advocating for policy changes to address intentional connectivity shutdowns by governments.



In his presentation on AI, Bryce Hartley, Senior Manager, Strategic Partnerships & Market Engagement at GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, put the focus on responsible AI implementation and its potential impact in the telecommunications sector. Emphasis was placed on ethics and careful mechanisms for AI usage. He highlighted efforts to mainstream AI in the systems of mobile network operators (MNOs) and governments. The **AI for Impact Initiative** aims to unlock different products and frameworks to better leverage AI for the benefit of companies and socio-economic growth. While AI offers potential benefits, challenges include reluctance among MNOs to share information due to user privacy concerns, necessitating ethical considerations in AI implementation.

The discussion reinforced the critical role of technology—particularly connectivity and AI—in addressing humanitarian challenges and driving socio-economic growth, while emphasizing the need for responsible and ethical implementation.

Communication as Aid

The day finished with an insightful session on 'communication as aid.'

- **CDAC Network:** Liz Hendry, Programme Lead, emphasized the importance of communication as aid and the creation of technology services for communities, highlighting new work on digitization, integration of security into design, and community involvement in technology infrastructure.
- **UNHCR:** John Warnes, Innovation Officer, provided information on the launch of a new multistakeholder initiative to promote connectivity for 20 million displaced persons and their hosts by 2030.
- **Internews:** Stijn Aelbers, Humanitarian Advisor, updated on completed and ongoing projects, as well as geographic and thematic focus, emphasizing the importance of information integrity, including increased community resilience against disinformation.
- **ICRC:** Claudiu Mateescu, Head of Telecom sector, presented ICRC efforts to facilitate internet access on the ground for affected populations, highlighting the importance of not damaging privacy and cybersecurity.

- **Global ETC team:** Phyza Jameel, Global ETC Programme Advisor, provided updates on the two ETC service centres in the Sahel—one in Niger established since July 2023 and one new centre opening soon in Dori, Burkina Faso, as well as plans to provide access to connectivity in the Mbera refugee camp in Mauritania. The ETC Sahel project is unique to the region and is funded by the Government of Luxembourg.

In conclusion, the group suggested to consolidate a service package with ETC partners, as well as a joint advocacy plan to promote communications as aid as an integral part of humanitarian response and to be introduced as part of discussions within a rights-based framework.

In groups, participants posed key questions and hypotheses to move forward collective work:

- **Sustainable connectivity:** How to transition and handover services in a protracted crisis when the ETC is being deactivated? What is the business case for providing connectivity in disconnected communities? Who is responsible for the continuity and sustainability of such services—governments, development actors, and/or communities?
- **Frameworks laws and policies:** How do we identify and engage the right actors and potential local partners in a meaningful way? How do we build better bridges between economic development and humanitarian crisis responses? What are the different bottlenecks when it comes to the policies and frameworks and who can tackle them? It was suggested to conduct a mapping exercise to categorize bottlenecks such as laws, frameworks, and relevant agencies linked to these categories along with mitigations actions that can be taken. How do we assess the risk of providing connectivity and how do we act on it? How do we determine where our responsibility begins and ends? How do we identify incentives with regulators to deliver services?
- **Use, user, and use case:** Who is a primary user and a regular user of services? What are the needs of and approach to these user groups? Can we explore technologies to schedule certain things at certain times? How do we exit an operation or project and who do we talk to when we exit or want to exit? How can you make sure that the ‘wrong user’ (after defining what a wrong user is) does not have access to connectivity? How do we prevent access to humanitarian connectivity for those who uses to harm others? And is it a threshold question and if so, what is the threshold? As ETC, what are the limits for us while providing connectivity?
- **AI for population groups:** What is the value that it brings? What is the context? We may need to adapt. How much of the big data discussions can be re-used? How can the data inputted be used or misused and we mitigate it? Is there anything safe yet in terms of policies? What type of data do we need and want? What are the implications, are we creating a need for extra capacity in deployment (i.e. additional bandwidth needed to access the service)? Where does the accountability lie?



Matt Runyan, Cisco Crisis Response, presents the outcomes of his group.

Action Point 1: Global ETC team to put together the set of questions posed by the groups and share with all Global ETC members for further discussions.

Sessions day 2 – 25 April

Progress towards ETC2025 Strategy Implementation

Brent Carbno, Global ETC Coordinator at WFP, provided an in-depth overview of the progress to date towards implementing the ETC2025 strategy. He highlighted achievements, pending actions, and challenges encountered during the implementation process. Brent demonstrated to participants that the cluster is well on its way to achieve the majority of the ETC goals set at the beginning of the strategy implementation.

Operational Partnerships: Leveraging Local Private Sector

Kareem Elbayar, Private Sector Engagement Advisor at OCHA, led a session on leveraging the local private sector in humanitarian operations. Discussions revolved around the changing business context, private sector engagement strategies, and the need for more efficient collaboration.

- **Private sector engagement history:** OCHA highlighted its historical engagement with the private sector and emphasized the need for rethinking humanitarian strategies due to the increasing gap between needs and funding.

- **Changing business context:** The role of the private sector has evolved, with businesses seeking to be treated as equal partners and expressing willingness to contribute to humanitarian efforts beyond mere financial donations.

- **New private sector strategy:** OCHA outlined a new strategy aimed at mobilizing and coordinating the private sector during emergencies, increasing contributions to humanitarian funds, and positioning OCHA as a thought leader on private sector engagement.

- **CBi network and strategic partnerships:** Collaboration with networks like the CBi (Connecting Business initiative) and strategic partnerships with businesses are essential for leveraging resources and skills available within the private sector.

- **Challenges:** Challenges include measuring contributions, accessing networks such as chambers of commerce, and overcoming internal barriers within the UN system.



Kareem Elbayar, OCHA, presents on the increased role of the private sector in the humanitarian sector.

Questions focused on articulating the benefits of ETC membership for local businesses, examples of local business collaboration with the ETC, and leveraging CBi Member Networks for pilot initiatives.

The session underscored the importance of building trust, finding win-win solutions, and designing partnership strategies that align with the interests and capabilities of both humanitarian organizations and the private sector. It also highlighted the need for better coordination, capacity building, and effective communication to maximize the impact of operational partnerships.

Common approach towards Emergency Preparedness

In a panel discussion moderated by Joseph Burton, Senior Policy Advisor at the U.S. Department of State, representatives from various organizations, including Vanessa Gray, Head Environment & Emergency Telecommunications Division, BDT, ITU, Nabiha Faruqui, ICT Emergency Specialist, UNICEF, Bryce Hartley, Senior Strategic Partnerships & Market Engagement Manager, GSMA, and Phyza Jameel, Global ETC Programme Advisor, WFP, discussed the importance of preparedness in emergency response efforts. The main points included:

- **Importance of preparedness:** Panellists emphasized the significance of preparedness in saving lives and reducing costs during emergencies. Efforts included both internal preparedness within organizations and external preparedness with partners to equip local actors and governments.
- **Initiatives and collaborations:** Examples included ITU's "Early Warning for all" (EW4A) initiative, UNICEF's focus on child-centred approaches in National Emergency Telecommunications Plans (NETPs), and the ETC's regional approach to preparedness in the Pacific and the Caribbean.
- **Partnerships and coordination:** Collaboration between stakeholders, including MNOs, was highlighted as essential for holistic approaches to preparedness. Challenges included terminology discrepancies, lack of capacity, and visibility, as well as limited coordination—even between ETC partners.
- **Opportunities for increased coordination:** Panellists identified areas for improvement, such as better funding mechanisms, policy incorporation, evidence-based decision-making, and sustained momentum in collaborative efforts.



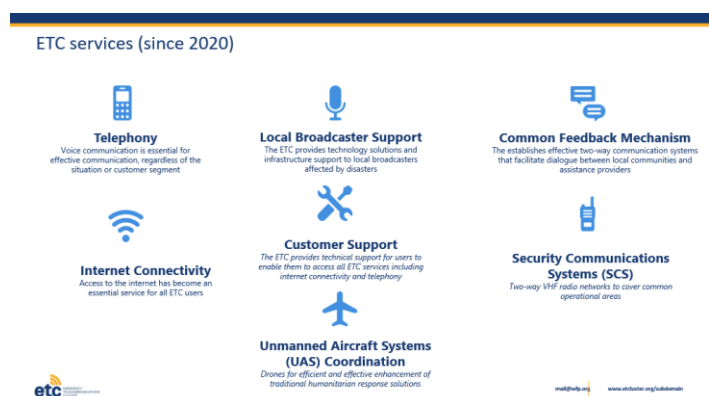
Panellists (left to right) - Joe Burton, U.S. Department of State, Vanessa Gray, ITU, Nabiha Faruqui, UNICEF, Phyza Jameel, Global ETC team, Bryce Hartley, GSMA – share their insights on preparedness efforts at country and regional

as better funding mechanisms, policy incorporation, evidence-based decision-making, and sustained momentum in collaborative efforts.

The discussion emphasized the need for a more coordinated approach to preparedness, leveraging partnerships, resources, and evidence-based strategies to enhance emergency response capabilities to mitigate the impact of crises.

ETC Services Revision

This session aimed to look at the current set of ETC services endorsed in 2020 and identify if they are still relevant or need to evolve considering each user category ETC serves: governments, humanitarians, and affected populations. Kimberly Brown, GSMA Head of Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, presented the current services and invited participants, in groups, to review the services and identify any missing or new emerging services which could be covered by the ETC.



Main outcomes of the discussions were that most of these services remain relevant, while some become less used, depending a lot on context. UAS Coordination raised questions and it was clarified that ETC primarily look at the coordination of existing capacity brought in emergencies, sharing of information collected via drones and capacity building around it. Potential **new services or areas** discussed include:

- Analytical services and greater role in Information Management
- Power related support, such as charging stations.
- Policy/advocacy/guidance.
- Data policy and standards.
- Capacity Building expansion.

It was also pointed out that better links between WFP's **{TESS+}**, the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) and the ETC would need to be established for security communications systems (SCS) and services. Customer support should address all ETC services offered, and Common Feedback Mechanism (CFM) should remain a service that ETC sets up from a technology and infrastructure side. Regarding partnerships, it was suggested to modify the existing agreements (i.e. standby partnerships agreements) to achieve more flexibility. A categorization of services was suggested.

The Global ETC team will retain the information to support further discussion as the ETC will embark on its next strategy development.

Capacity Building

In this session, led by Priyajeet Arora, Global ETC Project Officer Learning & Development, WFP, with insights from ETC Capacity Building working group member Mark Hawkins, Global Humanitarian Technology Manager, Save the Children, participants were provided updates on the Learning and Development (L&D) initiatives within the ETC. Key points were:

- **ETC Learning and Development calendar:** Priya presented the ETC L&D calendar and demonstrated how to utilize the competency framework.
- **ETC Capacity Building Working Group:** Mark Hawkins discussed the re-initiation of the ETC Capacity Building Working Group in 2021, which successfully implemented activities originally outlined in 2016 and aligned them with the ETC2025 strategy.
- **Contributors and commitments:** Eight ETC partners are actively contributing to the Working Group, committing to quarterly meetings and resource pooling.
- **Outcomes:** The group achieved significant outcomes in the past year, including the establishment of the ETC competency framework, sharing of resources for learning pathways, development of a shared learning calendar, creation of a repository of materials, and ongoing efforts to support training delivery and develop a joint Training of Trainers (ToT) syllabus.
- **Feedback and future planning:** Participants were invited to use Mentimeter to gather feedback and inform future planning.



Priyajeet Arora, Global ETC team, asked participants for feedback to inform

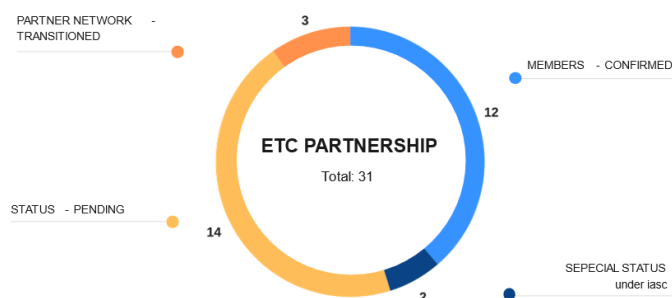
This session highlighted the collaborative efforts within the ETC to enhance learning and development opportunities, aligning with long-term strategic goals and fostering ongoing engagement and participation from partners.

Partnerships Model Implementation Session

In a session led by Lena Bock and Brent Carbno from the ETC, the focus was on the transition of organizations from former partner status to either a member or partner network. The key points are summarized:

- **Transition model and status update:**

The ETC presented the transition model's journey and provided an update on organizations transitioning from the former partner status. Organizations yet to engage with the Global ETC team on their partnership status were encouraged to determine this post-meeting.



- **Engagement with partner network:** Additional organizations, primarily from the private sector, expressed interest in joining the partner network. Some applications also came from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), prompting discussions on their potential value.
- **Decision-making process:** It was agreed that for the entry of new partners, the ETC Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) will first review a list of proposed partners and then seek feedback from existing members to inform the decision-making process.
- **Proposed partners day:** There was a suggestion to organize a separate partners day, distinct from the Plenary, to allow for a second annual meeting and broaden the scope of engagement and outreach efforts.

After that, participants was split into three groups to discuss communication channels, identifying who needs to be included, opportunities and benefits, and forums for discussions for all three following groups of actors:

1. **Member:** The idea to include all Stand-By Partners (SBP) was raised with a focus on looking at who can represent the ETC and furthermore, to identify key members that can help with key challenges such as access and regulations.
2. **Partner Network:** It was clarified that onboarding of new organisations to the Partner Network should be carried out in a phased approach to evaluate effort versus engagement, including vetting, to raise potential issues and mitigate reputational risk. As the group expands, some partners need to take leadership. Discussion around including other types of organization were raised, such as academia, etc.
3. **Local partners:** Proposals have been made to include the CBI network, the country ICT Working Groups, local community and civil societies networks, local telecommunications companies, champion MNOs, regional technology hubs, local NGO forums, and regional regulators. Identified opportunities for engagement were preparedness and scoping missions, national ICT working groups, virtual engagements, piggy backing onto existing events, and establishing clear stakeholder mapping. This could lead to joint research, training opportunities, shared advocacy, disaster resilience, maintaining connectivity, and sharing information on available connectivity assessments.

This session highlighted efforts to expand and strengthen partnerships within the ETC, ensuring active involvement and collaboration from a diverse range of organizations, including both private sector companies and NGOs.

Action Point 2: The Global ETC team will establish a shared calendar for all partners to share about planned events and encourage joint approaches or collaboration. A virtual communications platform will also be explored to remain connected throughout the year.

Conclusion

The 2024 Plenary meeting was closed by the WFP CIO and Chair of the ETC, Jay Mahanand, and Brent Carbno, Global ETC Coordinator. They both expressed their appreciation towards the commitment of each ETC partner and appealed to all for the need to continue joint efforts amid the unprecedented global and financial contexts that humanitarians are facing.



All information related to Global ETC activities and field operations can be found on the website:

www.etcluster.org

For more information please contact:

Global.ETC@wfp.org