

**Session Summary**  
**Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week**  
**Asbestos and Humanitarian Response – A Life-Threatening Humanitarian Challenge**  
International Conference Center, Geneva, 7 February 2020

### **Introduction**

This note provides a summary of discussions and further actions to consider arising from a session on Asbestos and Humanitarian Response – A Life-Threatening Humanitarian Challenge which took place on 7 February 2020 during the *Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week* at the International Conference Center, Geneva. The session was co-sponsored by the Environment Community of Practice of the Global Shelter Cluster and the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit.<sup>1</sup>

The two core questions posed in the session were:

- What are immediate actions which can be taken to reduce the asbestos risk in post-disaster operations?
- What are the long-term options for reducing overall asbestos risk and specific risks following disasters?

A session agenda and the list of registered participants are attached.

The following **Key Points Raised, Main Challenges Noted** and **Suggested Actions to Reduce Asbestos Risks in Humanitarian Operations** were (1) compiled from two sets of notes taken during the meeting, (2) reviewed by key participants and (3) then made available to all registered participants for comment. The session was held under Chatham House Rules, where discussions are documented but the specific identification of any speakers is not indicated.

### **Key Points Raised**

These **Key Points** are organized into common groups from specific points noted during discussions.

- Almost all the asbestos encountered in humanitarian operations is in processed form, e.g., roofing sheets. This limits how much fiber can be inhaled if the asbestos-containing product is not damaged and managed properly.
- Asbestos can pose low to high risks.
- Most asbestos risk in debris management is “low” risk.
- Communications and asbestos operations need to be tailored to local circumstances to reduce over concern about risks.
- There needs to be more awareness of the asbestos risk during initial post-disaster assessments.
- There needs to be an earlier organization of operations to deal with asbestos in the overall humanitarian response.
- Tailored information on asbestos needs to be developed for each humanitarian response in the absence of long-term health studies.
- Initial response to assess risk posed by asbestos include the following:
  - Site assessment
  - Sampling (if needed)
  - Photos (to collect pictures of possible asbestos and as visual examples of what asbestos may look like)
  - Training, based on local context
  - Operations
- Final disposal must be in a landfill site or a waste dumpsite – asbestos to be wrapped for transport, at the final disposal site a dedicated pit to be dug (fenced/marked with caution)

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<sup>1</sup> Comments and actions included in this note are not specifically endorsed by the Environment Community of Practice or the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit.

tape, coordinates registered by responsible authorities), asbestos to be covered with 0.5-1.0 m of waste or inert cover material after pit is filled – no reuse or repurposing.

- Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) is essential.
- Safety requirements require PPE, but cost is also a factor as most PPE is single use and cannot be reused.
- PPE for dealing with asbestos costs approximately \$7 to \$15/person/day, but costs can be much higher in complex situations.
- Who gets PPE – expatriate staff, workers dealing with asbestos, all the affected population?
- Asbestos is a public health issue.
- There are only a few long-term studies on the risks posed by asbestos during humanitarian operations.
- There is a balance between costs and ease of deconstruction.
- There is a need for risk assessments covering historical asbestos presence and current asbestos risks.

### **Main Challenges Noted:**

- There is a lack of awareness of risks posed by asbestos in the humanitarian sector.
- Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams may be exposed to asbestos while working in buildings and, in some situations, may not be properly protected.
- It is unclear if the standard insurance packages for humanitarian (expatriate and national) staff includes coverage for asbestos-related illnesses.
- Storage of asbestos is not a problem in theory but a challenge in practice.
- There is an issue of how and whether a Government communicates risk information on asbestos, particularly in countries where it is not banned.
- There can be weak regulations on use, handling and disposal of asbestos.
- Significant vested commercial interest in mining mineral (e.g. China, Malaysia, India)
- Severely damaged buildings can pose significant challenges. An example given of damaged buildings being blown up because they were difficult to deconstruct, but the explosions ended up spreading asbestos-containing dust.
- It can be hard to confirm the presence of asbestos in burned buildings.
- Are active campaigns with governments to deal with this issue/ban asbestos (e.g. lobbying on policy level) practical for the humanitarian community?

### **Available Information:**

- [Asbestos Essentials: Equipment and Method sheets](#) (2017) published by the Health and Safety Executive UK
- [Review of asbestos management practices in disaster planning](#) (2017)
- [Disaster Waste Management Guidelines](#) (48 pages; in particular pgs. 5-6, 9, 17, 34) issued by the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit (2011)
- [A Brief Guide to Asbestos in Emergencies: Safer Handling & Breaking the Cycle](#) published by UNEP, Shelter Centre and the ProAct network (2015)
- A case study conducted by the Mozambique Shelter Cluster and UNDP: [General Strategy for Risk Reduction linked to Asbestos Cement](#) (2019) and several [Cases studies of significant asbestos removal projects](#) (2018), published by the Australian Government – Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency
- Campaign on banning asbestos – more information is needed on this and similar efforts. See <http://www.ibasecretariat.org/>.

- Information on available training and training materials for safe asbestos removal can be found on the [UK Asbestos Training Association](#) (UKATA) and the [Independent Asbestos Training Providers](#) (iatp) websites.

### **Suggested Actions to Reduce Asbestos Risks in Humanitarian Operations**

- **The risk posed by asbestos to possible humanitarian operations should be assessed and mapped**, focusing on defining the presence or not of asbestos in locations where humanitarian operations are likely, e.g., an overlay of current and past asbestos use and disaster frequency.
- **Information on asbestos risk and personal protection** should be included in preparedness plans and pre-deployment briefings and shared with staff on the ground (Note: information may change from the initial assessment based on more detailed ground assessments).
- **Greater awareness** needs to be raised among expatriate teams and local populations and should become part of pre-deployment planning.
- Clarify whether standard insurance packages for non-local humanitarian staff **include coverage for asbestos-related diseases**.
- An **assessment of asbestos risks** should be initiated as part of initial damage assessments – earlier is better.
- **Inform disaster-affected populations:** Information on asbestos risks and risk reduction measures should be shared with the disaster-affected populations. Information and guidance developed to handle asbestos in disaster contexts need to be translated into local languages.
- USAR and other field operation teams (e.g., demolition waste (“debris”) management, construction, health care) should **establish protocols** for assessing and managing asbestos risks.
- Collaborate with INSARAG (International Search and Rescue Advisory Group) to raise awareness of risks posed by asbestos to first responders and to develop special pre-deployment protocols for network members.
- **Assess potential health risks:** The health aspects of asbestos exposure following a disaster should be explored, recognizing that asbestos poses a threat to human health.
- **Develop and provide training tailored to local circumstances:** Where asbestos is present in a humanitarian response, existing asbestos management training should be provided as part of the debris management process and adequate funding assured for safe removal and disposal. The type of training needed depends on the level of risk.
- Guidance on disaster waste management and tools such as the [Flash Environmental Assessment Tool](#) (FEAT) should be adapted, including risk reduction approaches for handling asbestos in disaster contexts.
- The potential for risk reduction activities in high disaster risk/high asbestos presence locations should be assessed and funded where activities will reduce significant risks.
- **A suggested risk reduction approach** would include:
  - Identify where asbestos is currently present
  - Overlap information with earthquake, flood and other hazards which can cause significant damage to buildings where asbestos is present
  - Prioritize locations based on risk assessment
  - Implement long term risk reduction process of
    - Stopping use of asbestos
    - Removing asbestos, and replacing where appropriate (e.g., asbestos roof sheet buy-back or exchange).

## Annex 1 – Agenda

The Asbestos Challenge to Humanitarian Operations – C. Kelly, Independent Researcher. An overview of why asbestos poses a challenge for humanitarian operations, with recent examples.

Managing Asbestos in the Humanitarian Context – David Smith, Independent Consultant. A review of efforts to date during humanitarian operations to manage the asbestos hazard.

Asbestos as a Long-Term Risk Reduction Challenge – C. Kelly, Independent Researcher. A review of how a disaster risk reduction approach can be applied to reducing asbestos risk before a disaster.

## Discussion

## Annex 2 – List of registered participants

Contact information are available through the HNPW website on Virtual OSOCC (VO) or on request ([ochaunep@un.org](mailto:ochaunep@un.org)).

#	Country/Organization	First Name	Last Name
1	UNEP	Martin	Guard
2	Amnesty International	Richard	Pearshouse
3	Australia, Information Management AUS-1 Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART)	Daryl	Rush
4	Brazil	Pedro	Piacesi
5	Georgia	Levan	Girsiashvili
6	International Humanitarian City	Jehad	Abd Almaula
7	IOM	Eva	Mach
8	Iran, Ministry of Health Rapid Response Team Member	Moselm	Sarani
9	IUCN	Verónica	Ruiz
10	UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit	Charlotta	Benedek
11	UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit	Julia	Krohn
12	OCHA	Pierre	Peron
13	Poland	Franciszek	Ksiazek
14	Switzerland	Magnus	Brunell
15	UNDP	Marta	Kucharski Duran
16	UNEP	Wynet	Smith
17	Environment Community of Practice of the Global Shelter Cluster	Charles	Kelly
18	Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)	Annica	Waleij
19	Bangladesh	Mohsin	Md
20	OCHA INSARAG	Winston	Chang
21	Global Shelter Cluster - IFRC	Pablo	Medina
22	OCHA Pakistan	Ullah	Sameen
23	Pakistan, National Disaster Management Authority (NOMA)	Iqbal	Raza

24	Independent Consultant	Thorsten	Kallnischkies
25	Independent Consultant	David	Smith