UN agencies and Non Government Organizations (NGOs) use situation reports, or sitreps as they are commonly known, to disseminate information to and from the field in a crisis. The World Health Organization puts out very regular sitreps on COVID-19 and these updates provide the latest information on the pandemic and the response to it. They include information like updated numbers of infected people and locations, and actions that WHO and other partners are taking in response to the disease.

These sitreps are designed to share information amongst UN/NGO partners, encourage coordination, and are also used to help donors understand challenges on the grounds and what areas the funds are most urgently needed.

Sitreps are a key feature of information sharing in any crisis and can be a great source of stories for journalists. While at a first glance, these reports may be intimidating and full of complex UN jargon and terminology, this handy guide will help you to find creative story inspiration amongst the dry organizational updates.

Here are some of the tips that will help reporters unearth stories out of the daily situation reports:

**Tips to help you create stories from situation reports**

**What is behind the numbers?**

A key feature of any sitrep is numbers and graphs. While this information is useful to understand the scale and impact of the disaster, they can be difficult to translate into something that your audience can relate to.
Tips to help you create stories from situation reports (continued)

Some questions to ask yourself when looking at the numbers are:
• What is being calculated here?
• Where does the data come from and what is included in this figure?

Equally important to ask yourself is, what isn’t being included in this figure.
• Are there groups or exceptions that are not being counted - why?
• What time period do these numbers relate to - what else was happening during this time that might influence the numbers you are seeing?
• How do these figures compare to other countries, contexts or cities in my own country?
• Do these numbers sound right? Who else can verify this information?
• Are the numbers absolute or relative numbers? Relative numbers give us figures like “deaths per 1 million population”, which are more meaningful when making country comparisons.

The WHO and other UN agencies resemble many other corporate organizations where authority and resources reside at the “top,” the headquarters in Geneva and New York, while the knowledge about how to operate resides in the field. Sitreps can be a great launching point to help you prepare for an interview with someone ‘in the field’ who may be able to add colour and the local element to the figures prepared at head office level.

Learn how to find stories in numbers and go beyond the numbers of cases and deaths. Read also these tips on data, sources, and angles from investigative journalists on the COVID-19 frontlines.

Learn the language

Situation reports are often full of acronyms, jargon and complex terminology common to this field. You can think of it as it's own language that is commonly understood by people working in public health, for example, but could seem totally alien to anyone else. The WHO sitrep is seen as critical for the purposes of circulating the shared understanding of medical personnel and humanitarian professionals and for that reason it is rife with acronyms and technical terms most commonly used in these two professions.
Tips to help you create stories from situation reports (continued)

Learning the terminology, and what it specifically refers to can also help to guide you in looking for story inspiration in sitreps. There are a number of good resources to help you out here, this glossary will help you to understand COVID-19 related terminology,

while you might also want to look at general public health terminology and common humanitarian terminology.

But while it’s important for you to understand this ‘language’ in order to understand the sitreps, you need to ‘translate’ this information for your audience. That generally means using as few of these terms and acronyms as possible!

Overuse of acronyms can reduce readability and jargon can alienate the audience. These tips on plain language writing help you cut through the jargon and communicate clearly with your audience.

Visualisation brings clarity, clicks and views

While some sit reps do include graphs and charts, they are designed to be practical and they might not be as eye-catching as you would like. Consider asking for the original dataset used to create the graph, and reproduce it in a way that will engage with your audience. These nice samples give you ideas how visualising those numbers will enable people to notice key numbers and big data that may be lost in the story. Check 10 useful ways to visualise your data.

Follow the money

Situation reports also give interesting leads to budget allocation, costs on health care, welfare, safety and social security services etc.
Tips to help you create stories from situation reports (continued)

Ask donors, governments and related agencies how the financial resources have been spent. What factor is the expenditure based on? Does it match procurement intention? Read this advice for journalists to do investigative reporting by tracing the actual players behind them.

Understand what you can, and cannot report

While sitreps are valuable for story information, they cannot be your only source. Always double check information presented and confirm with a source within the organisation before you publish. Information included should not be used ‘quotes’ from that organisation, you should always seek an interview wherever possible.

Sitreps are continuously updated. Make sure your story is not dated

Unless you are including a live link in your story, remember to reference the date when you consulted the sitrep, as the numbers are constantly changing.