The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

The SAR Mission Coordinator

Overview

The IMRF’s mass rescue operations (MRO) guidance is provided in 30 separate chapters at www.international-maritime-rescue.org. For downloadable documents referenced in this chapter please use the drop-down menus or return to the MRO project main page under ‘Resources’. For a general introduction please see chapter 1, ‘Complex incident planning – the challenge: acknowledging the problem, and mass rescue incident types’.

This chapter discusses:

- the general role of the SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC)
- the SMC’s place in a mass rescue operation (MRO) structure
- the need for the SMC to be able to focus on coordinating the maritime SAR elements of the operation
- the similarities and differences in coordinating a mass rescue compared with an ‘ordinary’ SAR operation
- filling the ‘coordination capability gap’
- a coordinating network
- the need to plan for and resource various possibilities: search, rescue and/or support
- the need to account for all involved
- the coordination of ‘remote area operations’

1 The general role of the SAR Mission Coordinator

1.1 As discussed in chapter 18, it is important to distinguish between the ‘SAR Coordinator’ – the person or agency with “overall responsibility for establishing and providing SAR services and ensuring that planning for those services is properly coordinated” – and the SAR Mission Coordinator. The SMC is defined in IAMSAR as:

“the official temporarily assigned to coordinate response to an actual or apparent distress situation.”

1.2 The SMC organises the SAR response to an accident. It follows from the IMO’s definition that the task lasts only as long as the SAR incident does, and that it can be delegated to anyone who is suitably trained...
and equipped – especially as regards communications and SAR planning capabilities. This person should be associated with an RCC:

“a unit responsible for promoting efficient organization of search and rescue services and for co-ordinating the conduct of search and rescue operations within a search and rescue region.”

1.3 An RCC may be designated as a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC); an Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC); or – as recommended by the IMO – a Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC), combining both aeronautical and maritime response functions. The IAMSAR Manual also designates Rescue Sub Centres (RSC), but these subordinate units are unlikely to be resourced sufficiently to conduct a mass rescue operation. In this guidance, we use the term ‘RCC’ generically, to mean the centre coordinating the MRO.

1.4 In most ‘routine’ SAR cases (as opposed to MROs) an officer on watch at the RCC will be assigned the role of SMC. S/he may be the senior person in the RCC at the time, or the role may be delegated by that senior officer to other members of the RCC team. This will depend on various factors, including the number of SAR cases running concurrently. There should be sufficient RCC personnel trained to act as SMCs to enable the successful prosecution of all ‘ordinary’ SAR cases, 24/7.

1.5 Volume II of the IAMSAR Manual, the Mission Coordination volume, is the principal source of international guidance on the SMC role. Volume III, Mobile Facilities, also contains useful information. Volume II Chapter 1.2.3 summarises the SMC’s tasks in general:

“SAR operations are normally carried out under the direction and supervision of an SMC, who is usually the supervisor of the RCC or RSC watch team. In multiple-incident situations this officer could be SMC for all incidents, or, for some of those incidents, the SMC role could be delegated to another suitably qualified member of the watch team. The SMC should in all cases be supported by RCC watch team members to undertake functions in the coordinating process such as communications, plotting, logging and search planning. For complex cases or those of long duration, the assisting team as well as the SMC must be replaced at regular intervals. The SMC must be able to competently gather information about emergencies, transform emergency incident information into accurate and workable plans and dispatch and coordinate the facilities which will carry out the SAR missions.

“The SMC is in charge of a SAR operation until a rescue has been effected or until it has become apparent that further efforts would be of no avail, or until responsibility is accepted by another RCC. The SMC should be able to use readily available facilities and to request additional ones during the operation. The SMC plans the search and rescue operations and coordinates the transit of SAR facilities to and from the scene.

“The SMC should be well trained in all SAR processes and be thoroughly familiar with the applicable SAR plans. The SMC must competently gather information about distress situations, develop accurate and workable action plans, and dispatch and coordinate the resources which will carry out SAR missions. The plans of operation maintained by the RCC provide information to assist in these efforts. Guidelines for SMC duties include:

- obtain and evaluate all data on the emergency;
- ascertain the type of emergency equipment carried by the missing or distressed craft;
- remain informed of prevailing environmental conditions;
- if necessary, ascertain movements and location of vessels and alert shipping in likely search areas for rescue, lookout (visual and electronic) and/or radio watch on appropriate frequencies to facilitate communications with SAR facilities;
- plot the area to be searched and decide on the methods and facilities to be used;
- develop the search action plan (and rescue action plan as appropriate); that is, allocate search areas, designate the On Scene Coordinator, dispatch SAR facilities and designate on-scene communications frequencies;
- inform the RCC chief of the search action plan;
- coordinate the operation with adjacent RCCs when appropriate;
- arrange briefing and debriefing of SAR personnel;
- evaluate all reports from any source and modify the search action plan as necessary;
- arrange for the fuelling of aircraft and, if necessary, rescue vessels and, for prolonged search, make arrangements for the accommodation of SAR personnel;
- arrange for delivery of supplies to sustain survivors;
- maintain in chronological order an accurate and up-to-date record with a plot, where necessary, of all proceedings;
- issue progress reports;
- recommend to the RCC chief the abandoning or suspending of the search;
- release SAR facilities when assistance is no longer required;
- notify accident investigation authorities;
- notify police and other government authorities where relevant and necessary;
- if applicable, notify the State of registry of the aircraft or vessel in accordance with established arrangements; and
- prepare a final report on the results of the [SAR] operation.

2 The SAR Mission Coordinator’s place in a mass rescue operation

2.1 The IAMSAR Volume II text above outlines the SMC’s tasks in what we are here calling ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ operations: SAR responses within the capability of the local SAR services. But MROs are ‘extra-ordinary’.

2.2 In this respect, IAMSAR Volume II says:²

“To the extent practicable, MROs should be coordinated by an SMC in an RCC, and the SAR element should always be so. However, depending on the magnitude, nature and complexity of the incident, the overall response may be better coordinated by an appropriate operations centre higher within the SAR agency or another Government agency, so that the SMC can focus on the SAR effort. Considerations in this decision include:

- extensive and complex SAR workload for the RCC staff;
- extensive support by organizations other than those commonly used for SAR;
- need for international diplomatic support; and
- serious problems in addition to potential loss of lives, such as environmental threats, terrorist actions, or national security issues.

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¹ As discussed in this chapter, in complex incidents such as mass rescue operations the SMC should be coordinating only the maritime SAR aspects of the operation, and will therefore be reporting on these aspects only.

² Chapter 6.15.27.
If this approach is intended, it is essential that it is pre-planned, with full involvement of all parties, including the RCC staff, to avoid confusion at the time of an incident. The plan may, for example, provide for the RCC to maintain coordination of the SAR response while the higher operations centre handles the wider issues.”

These issues are discussed in general in chapter 17.

2.3 It is not necessary that the SAR mission coordination process should be transferred to a ‘higher operations centre’ – indeed, this would have a damaging effect if that centre is not equipped and staffed for the purpose. It is the overall incident response coordination that may be better handled at a higher level and/or a different location.

2.4 Coordination of a complex incident such as an MRO will require additional resources and will (or at least should) be separated into a number of interlinked but specific functions. The diagram below is simplified, at least as far as the organisation of the shoreside response is concerned, but it shows in general how the coordination workload involved in an MRO should be sub-divided.

2.5 The diagram includes a number of coordination points ashore. The SMC is based at an RCC, the crucial coordination point linking the maritime and shoreside parts of the operation (see chapter 24). People being brought to safety may be landed at several different points, each of which will require local coordination. So will the reception centre(s) the survivors are then moved to, and the other support functions – medical, welfare, transport etc – that the operation requires. As discussed in chapter 17, all these elements of the response should be coordinated by a tactical group, whose work is distinct from the work of the RCC, although necessarily closely linked with it.

2.6 The tactical coordination group ashore should include staff from each of the responding organisations, ideally including liaison officers from the RCC, harbours receiving people being brought ashore and any industry organisation involved – a representative of the shipping company, for example, if the casualty is a passenger ship. This tactical group needs information from the RCC, and will have information to pass back to it, but it focuses on organising the ‘place of safety’ part of the rescue, in all its aspects.

2.7 Again as discussed in chapter 17, there should also be a strategic group, overseeing the whole operation and providing support and resources as and where required. It is usually the case that this strategic group works most closely with the shoreside tactical group, as shown in the diagram above. However, the coordinating RCC will also require strategic support, usually from its own parent organisation, whose
senior officers understand its specialist needs and can implement the organisation’s own complex incident planning.

2.8 It follows from this discussion that the SMC, working at the RCC, is a part of a wider coordination structure in an MRO. S/he should not be expected to coordinate the whole response. Instead, the SMC should focus – and be enabled to focus – on what s/he knows best: the coordination of the maritime SAR mission, and only that mission.

3 The SAR Mission Coordinator’s role in a mass rescue operation

3.1 If we refer again to the IAMSAR Manual’s summary of the SMC’s role above, we see that it summarises the role as gathering information, developing accurate and workable search and rescue action plans, and dispatching and coordinating the resources which will carry out those plans. The fundamental point here is that the SMC’s role in an MRO is no different. It will be more intense, and it will require the SMC – or, better, members of his or her team – to communicate with people and organisations they do not usually communicate with. But the role itself is essentially the same as in any other SAR response. The list of actions above is as valid for an SMC working on an MRO as it is for any other case.

3.2 It is important to note the need to keep the SMC focussed on coordinating the maritime SAR response along the same lines as in an ‘ordinary’ case, and to plan and train with this in mind. The seniority of the SMC is unimportant: it is his or her competence that matters. S/he needs to know the MRO plan and be able to implement it, but should not be expected to take on additional work beyond the SMC function. Conversely, no-one should be appointed as SMC for an MRO who does not usually do SMC work. It is a matter of using the right expert and using them only in their own area of expertise.

3.3 There are inevitable differences of scale in an MRO response. The SMC tasks are the same as in ‘ordinary’ operations, but are intensified by the situation. They will include:

- acknowledging that a mass rescue operation is or may be required
- initiating alerting procedures and establishing the MRO communications network required (see chapter 25)
- gathering information and ensuring that it is distributed as necessary
- initial tasking of SAR facilities, including the additional facilities required for an MRO (see chapters 13, 14 & 15)
- appointing an On Scene Coordinator (OSC: see chapter 20, and below)
- appointing an Aircraft Coordinator (ACO) and other specialist coordinators as necessary (see chapters 21 & 17, and below)
- developing search, rescue and/or support action plans (see below), in conjunction with the OSC and other responders, and ensuring that the plans are communicated to all the responding SAR facilities as necessary, and
- coordinating the responding SAR facilities’ actions, through the OSC and other coordination links as necessary, ensuring that the search, rescue and/or support action plans are implemented, and amended as required by circumstances.

3.4 It is vital that the SMC for a mass rescue operation should be fully prepared for the task. This means specific training, including a full understanding of the MRO plan, for all personnel who may be required to take the role on.
4 The SAR Mission Coordinator’s authority in a mass rescue operation

4.1 It is vital to the efficient conduct of the MRO that the SMC’s authority should be recognised – by other organisations, by senior officers, and by him or herself.

4.2 The SMC is a coordinator, not a commander – but s/he is in charge of coordinating the maritime SAR response, and all the responding facilities, and their parent organisations, need to acknowledge this fact. Coordination is a cooperative, collaborative effort and, although the SMC should be able to listen and, as necessary, respond to suggestions made by others, the efficiency of the response depends on everyone accepting the SMC’s authority to coordinate.

4.3 This applies to senior officers in the various responding organisations too, including the SMC’s own. Such officers must accept the SMC’s authority to act and resist the temptation to interfere in the conduct of the SAR part of the operations delegated to the SMC. If the SMC is under-performing in some way, it must be for his or her senior managers to nominate a replacement. Otherwise, the SMC must be protected, by those senior managers, from inappropriate interference.

4.4 The authority vested in the SMC should be clear at the outset, for part of the SMC’s responsibility is to recognise the need (or potential need) for a mass rescue operation as news of the incident starts to come in. The SMC should have the power to declare that an MRO is or may be required – for it is not always clear whether ‘normal’ SAR capabilities will be sufficient, especially at the beginning of an emergency – and to request the necessary additional resources accordingly. Senior staff in the SMC’s organisation will review this analysis, and may choose to override it – but the initial response should not be hindered by waiting until permission is given. If in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution. It is better to alert then stand down than to alert too late.

4.5 Similarly, the SMC must understand his or her responsibilities and the limits to these responsibilities in an MRO. If it is agreed that the SMC must be allowed to concentrate on coordinating the SAR response (as recommended here), the corollary is that the SMC must not allow him or herself to be distracted by matters that are someone else’s responsibility.

4.6 A clear understanding of authority and its limitations is very important to the success of an MRO response. That understanding should be attained by all responders at the planning and training stages.

5 Filling the coordination capability gap

5.1 A mass rescue operation is, by definition, one in which “the capabilities normally available to the search and rescue authorities are inadequate”. Finding the resources necessary to fill this ‘capability gap’ is discussed in chapters 4, 13, 14 & 15, and the SMC should be fully aware of how this issue is to be resolved according to the MRO plans for his/her own SAR Region. But the capability gap may apply to key coordinating personnel such as the SMC and to Rescue Coordination Centres themselves as well as to the other resources normally available for SAR. Part of the MRO planning must be to ensure that both SMC and RCC are ‘MRO-capable’ too.

3 Such interference is sometimes described as ‘trying to use a long screwdriver’ – that is, tinkering with details of the operation previously agreed to be the concern of a junior officer. The temptation is clear, but senior staff must have the self-discipline to resist it. It may help to remember the point made by the tongue-in-cheek acronym ‘CHAOS’: Chief Has Arrived On Scene...
5.2 This means that RCCs should be organised so as to enable an MRO to be coordinated effectively wherever it occurs in the SAR Region, and whenever it occurs. This may mean additional equipment – particularly communications equipment – and will always mean additional personnel. As noted in IAMSAR, “the SMC should in all cases be supported by RCC watch team members to undertake functions in the coordinating process such as communications, plotting, logging and search planning” – and this includes MROs. Liaison officers will also be needed, as discussed in chapter 17, in addition to tactical and strategic support. It may be possible to divert personnel from other tasks to provide these extra resources, or on-call systems may be necessary.

5.3 It is not necessarily the case that every RCC in a region should be so equipped and staffed or supported that it can coordinate an MRO. Always provided that the coordinating RCC can communicate with everyone it needs to and that it has the necessary local information available, it can be remote from the area of SAR action. Selecting particular RCCs to lead on MROs or other complex incidents is, of course, a matter for planning and agreement by all SAR authorities in the region.

5.4 Similarly, personnel who may be required to take on the SMC role in such an incident must be prepared for it. They should be carefully selected and will require specific training. They need to have a full understanding of the MRO plan, and ‘ownership’ of it (see chapter 2).

5.5 Other RCC staff, acting in support of the SMC, and including those brought in to assist with the additional workload of an MRO, should also have sufficient knowledge and ownership of the plan. If the RCC staff do not understand or support the plan, no-one will.

5.6 IAMSAR also notes that, “for complex cases or those of long duration, the assisting team as well as the SMC must be replaced at regular intervals”. An MRO is a high-stress and fatiguing affair for everyone concerned, including the SMC and the rest of the RCC staff. Regular reliefs are of great importance. RCC managers should ensure that they occur, and should, at the planning stage, consider whether watches should be shortened and reliefs staggered for the duration of the MRO, to keep people fresh and to ensure continuity of knowledge of the operation among the on-watch staff.

5.7 The same principles of regular relief and rest should apply to all staff deployed as part of the MRO response – including senior officers. Nobody is so important that they are not affected by fatigue!

6 On scene and other coordination links

6.1 In ‘ordinary’ SAR cases, with good communications and few responding SAR facilities, it is often the case that the SMC will be able to run the response direct, without the need for an On Scene Coordinator or other coordination links. But this is unlikely in a mass rescue operation.

6.2 The purpose of breaking up the coordination work into ‘bite-sized chunks’ is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the response. While doing so undeniably adds at least one tier of communications, which requires a little extra time, the alternative – an SMC trying to do everything – is likely to lead to overload and important matters being overlooked. We have discussed the various shoreside links in general above – and see also chapter 24. Here we will focus on the maritime coordination links.

6.3 The most important of these is the On Scene Coordinator. The OSC is essentially the SMC’s eyes, ears and voice on-scene. S/he receives the SMC’s response plan (or a part of it), discusses it with the SMC as necessary, then looks after its implementation, handling all the relevant on-scene communications. It is
hard to imagine an MRO scenario in which the careful use of an OSC would not be of significant benefit.\(^4\) Chapter 20 discusses the role in detail, including the factors which the SMC should bear in mind when appointing an OSC.

6.4 Other aspects of the coordination of the response can be similarly delegated, to specialist coordinators. IAMSAR mentions the Aircraft Coordinator (ACO) in particular, as a more or less essential role when more than one aircraft is operating on-scene, to look after flight safety. See chapter 21.

6.5 In chapter 17 we discuss further possible links in the chain, which we have called ‘sub-coordinators’. Examples would be a search coordinator, organising units assigned to that part of the operation; an on-board coordinator in cases in which significant support is being delivered to a casualty vessel or where on-board command or communication issues are a concern; and a marshal in cases in which numerous small craft are, or wish to become, involved. (See also chapters 9, 13, 20, 22 & 23.)

6.6 The potential use of sub-coordinators should be considered at the planning stage. Whether individuals or units will be needed for these areas of work will depend on the circumstances of the particular MRO, and their appointment will be a matter for the SMC to discuss with the OSC and strategic managers. It is a waste of time to appoint a sub-coordinator if one is not needed – but if there are ‘chunks’ of the operation that would work better under a sub-coordinator, then the process should be available and a reliable officer or unit appointed. As discussed in chapter 20, it is the SMC’s responsibility to ensure, so far as possible, that the OSC is not overloaded – and the pre-planned use of sub-coordinators is a primary means of achieving this.

6.7 A lot will depend on the circumstances on the day. If, for example, the OSC is fully committed to coordinating the rescue of people from large numbers of survival craft, appointing another unit to organise the on-scene search recommended in chapter 9 will be of great benefit: coordinating both a complex rescue and a complex search operation may well over-stretch many OSCs. Similarly, if the MRO is occurring in an area with many leisure craft nearby, wishing to assist (or just wanting to see what’s going on!), an OSC is likely to welcome the assistance of a sub-coordinator marshalling the small craft, assessing their potential usefulness, and so on.

6.8 As noted, it is the SMC’s responsibility to set up the coordination network necessary to the particular operation, and to do so in close cooperation with the OSC – and this task will be made much easier if the ‘sub-coordinator’ concept has been included at the planning stage. Suitable individuals or units might then be identified and trained.

7 Search, rescue or support?

7.1 As discussed in chapters 1 & 5, an MRO can take several forms. There will usually be some sort of search for the SMC to plan for; but the ‘rescue’ may take the form of providing support on-scene rather than – or as well as – ‘traditional’ retrieval. Initial aid, such as medical aid, will be a factor, and places of safety have to be selected and prepared.

7.2 While it can be argued that there will always be a search element for the SMC to consider (see chapter 9, and below), that search may be more or less complex depending on the circumstances. A widespread search for many small targets (a fleet of fishing vessels, for example) may be the major focus of the earlier stages of an MRO; or the search element may be precautionary, for example in an incident in which

\(^4\) Even an MRO happening over a wide area, as in the case of a fleet of craft overwhelmed by weather, will benefit from the appointment of an OSC, or perhaps several OSCs, with the area divided between them.
evacuation is either not happening or is proceeding in an orderly way. In the latter case the main focus
will be elsewhere – but the SMC must still not neglect the search requirement.

7.3 The ‘rescue or support’ question also arises. In some circumstances – a passenger ship evacuating at sea,
for example – the need for traditional rescue is clear. People have to be retrieved from survival craft, and
perhaps from the water too in an uncontrolled abandonment, and brought to places of safety, being
cared for in transit. In cases which occur near to harbours, survival craft may be able to make their own
way in, so the ‘rescue’ takes the form of escort and support; or it may be a mix of retrieval and escort, as
in the Costa Concordia case.

7.4 On the other hand, the ship’s master may be able to avoid the risks of evacuation if given sufficient on-
board support. In such a case the SMC’s task is a different one: the necessary support facilities need to
be arranged and deployed. Or then again, it may a question of providing on-board support to facilitate
evacuation.

7.5 In any case it is the SMC’s task to plan the SAR response. The wise SMC will plan for all eventualities, and
will keep the planning flexible to allow for changes over time. If on-board support is requested, s/he will
coordinate its provision, of course, but s/he will also be planning for evacuation or abandonment if the
situation deteriorates. In the latter case both rescue and search plans will be required. See also chapters
8, 10, 11 & 15.

8 Accounting for people

8.1 Put simply, the SMC’s task is to ensure that as many people as possible are rescued in an MRO, and that
all are accounted for. Rescue and/or on-scene support are a matter of identifying and coordinating the
response of sufficient numbers of the right facilities for the job. Making as sure as possible that everyone
at risk has been accounted for is a matter of searching – actively, knowing that people are missing, or as
a precaution – and keeping very careful counts of the people involved.

8.2 Both the search element and the counting are discussed in chapter 9. As we said there, at least in the
early stages of the response there will be confusion over numbers, and the SMC’s best option is to ensure
that precautionary searches are done aboard the casualty, so far as possible, and in the surrounding area.
There is little to be gained by attempting detailed counts while retrieval operations are still ongoing.

8.3 The counting comes a little later, as people are being brought to places of safety and after they have
arrived there. The SMC should ensure that, as rescue facilities leave the scene, a careful count is made of
those aboard each unit and the results reported to the RCC, usually via the OSC, although direct contact
may be preferable, particularly if the OSC is still heavily engaged on-scene. The SMC’s chief interest in the
numbers is as regards search action, which s/he should continue until everyone is accounted for.

8.4 Other organisations will also have a keen interest in the count, for the same and other reasons, and may
be able to help with it once people are ashore. If the casualty was a passenger ship or aircraft or an
offshore installation, the relevant company will have a leading part to play, providing information about
the people believed to have been aboard as well as assisting with the accounting. Medical and border
control authorities, among others, will also need this information.

8.5 If on-board support is being provided it is also the SMC’s responsibility to ensure that the number of
response personnel who have been placed aboard the casualty is recorded. These people too are at risk,
and need to be properly accounted for.
8.6 A system should be established at the RCC to record numbers reported involved in the incident; those in the process of being rescued; and those brought to a place of safety, together with current locations and other vital information such as medical needs.

8.7 Finally, we note again that counting people in these circumstances is more difficult than it might appear. The SMC should ensure that numbers are rigorously checked, and should continue search action until the numbers are confirmed or until there is no longer any likelihood of missing people still being alive.

9 Remote area operations

9.1 The IMO has agreed that there are ‘areas remote from SAR facilities’: areas where sufficient designated SAR units cannot reach the scene of an accident within survival times. In chapter 12 we noted that there are many parts of the world’s seas and oceans where this may be the case.

9.2 There are also SAR Regions without functioning RCCs to coordinate SAR action within them, or the local RCC may have lost functionality – in a catastrophic incident, for example. It is also possible that, while there may be an RCC functioning in the Region, it is not capable of coordinating a mass rescue operation. MROs in such areas will be particularly challenging.

9.3 The IAMSAR Manual says that, if a ship’s master or the commander of another unit becomes aware of a distress situation directly and communications “cannot be established with an RCC”, s/he should assume the responsibilities of On Scene Coordinator and “may have to assume SMC duties and actually plan the search and/or rescue”.\(^5\) This is further discussed in chapter 20, where we note that with long-range communications – satellite communications in particular – it will normally be possible for an OSC to contact an RCC somewhere for advice and assistance.

9.4 The staff at an RCC so contacted will have a particularly difficult task to undertake. As well as assisting the OSC to develop search and rescue plans – and perhaps support plans, if suitable facilities are available on scene or can be contacted nearby – the RCC should do all it can to establish contacts in the State(s) nearest the incident, possibly to arrange additional support on scene, but certainly to agree places of safety, with the necessary shoreside support infrastructure, to which rescue units can be directed (see chapter 24).

9.5 The RCC may need considerable support from its own strategic managers in this case, for assistance may be needed through diplomatic and other international channels. But action should be taken by whichever RCC is contacted, at least until coordination can be handed over to a more appropriate RCC.

10 Summary

- The SAR Mission Coordinator – “the official temporarily assigned to coordinate response to an actual or apparent distress situation” – has essentially the same role in a mass rescue operation as in any other SAR case.
- There will be a wider response structure, with other coordination nodes, of which the coordinating Rescue Coordination Centre is only one. The SMC must focus – and must be enabled to focus – on his/her specific part of the operation: coordinating the maritime SAR work.

\(^5\) Volume II Chapter 1.2.4. SAR in areas remote from SAR facilities is also discussed in Volume II Chapter 6.16.
There are inevitable differences of scale in an MRO response. It is vital that the SMC should be fully prepared for the task, including specific training and a full understanding of the MRO plan.

The SMC’s authority should be recognised at the planning and training stages.

MRO planning should include planning to fill ‘capability gaps’ in coordination as well as in other aspects of the response. Sufficient SMCs and RCCs should be ‘MRO-capable’.

It is not necessary that every RCC in a region should be able to coordinate an MRO, so long as there are enough MRO-capable RCCs to provide full coverage.

Fatigue is a danger to all involved in an MRO, and must be addressed by all concerned. Regular, staggered reliefs should be arranged for RCC personnel, including SMCs. Managers should consider shortening periods of duty during MROs, due to the intensity of the work.

The SMC should normally appoint, and work closely with, an On Scene Coordinator in a mass rescue operation. Other subsidiary coordinators, including an Aircraft Coordinator, should be appointed as circumstances require.

The SMC should plan for all eventualities – search, rescue and support – and should keep the planning flexible to allow for changes over time.

The SMC’s task in an MRO is to ensure that as many people as possible are rescued, and that all are accounted for. The SMC should ensure that reported numbers are recorded and rigorously checked, and should continue search action until all involved are confirmed as having been accounted for or until there is no longer any likelihood of missing people still being alive.

An RCC may be contacted by units responding to an MRO in another SAR Region if they cannot establish communications with an RCC in that Region. An RCC so contacted must assist as best it can.

Further reading

Volume II of the IAMSAR Manual is the principal source of guidance on the SMC role. Volume III also contains useful information. Volume II Chapter 1.2.3 summarises the SMC’s tasks; and Chapter 6.15 refers to the SMC in the context of mass rescue operations.

The IMO offers a Model Course on SAR Mission Coordination.