# HUMANITARIAN SURGE: STUCK IN A RUT?

United Kingdom
Humanitarian
Innovation Hub

Humanitarian **Outcomes**

# Humanitarian surge: Stuck in a rut?

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## List of acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **AI** | artificial intelligence |
| **ARC** | African Risk Capacity |
| **CBFPs** | country-based pooled funds |
| **CERF** | Central Emergency Response Fund |
| **CHS** | Core Humanitarian Standard |
| **DRC** | Danish Refugee Council |
| **DREF** | Disaster Response Emergency Fund |
| **ECHO** | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| **EDG** | Emergency Directors Group |
| **EHRC** | European Humanitarian Response Capacity |
| **GenCap** | Gender Standby Capacity Project |
| **HCT** | humanitarian country team |
| **HQAI** | Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative |
| **HR** | human resources |
| **HRP** | humanitarian response plan |
| **IASC** | Inter-Agency Standing Committee |
| **IFRC** | International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies |
| **IOM** | International Organization for Migration |
| **MDS** | Misconduct Disclosure Scheme |
| **NDMA** | National Disaster Management Authority |
| **NRC** | Norwegian Refugee Council |
| **OCHA** | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| **ProCap** | Protection Standby Capacity Project |
| **PSEA** | Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse |
| **SBP** | Standby Partnership Programme |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNFPA** | United Nations Population Fund |
| **UNHCR** | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| **UNICEF** | United Nations Children's Fund |
| **WHO** | World Health Organization |

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# Executive summary

Increasing numbers of people are being affected by conflicts and disasters, resulting in greater humanitarian needs. Already stretched thin by the large number of chronic crises requiring an aid response year after year, the humanitarian sector is further challenged when new emergencies demand rapid scale-up in the form of 'surge'– the ability to quickly mobilise and deploy additional financial, human, and material resources to meet needs where the existing response capacities are insufficient. Under the prevailing conditions of scarcity, surge responses to one emergency almost inevitably come at the cost of operations in another.

Governments and civil society actors in the global South are pushing back against the idea that surge capacity is something to be located at the global level – that is, within the international organisations that already control most of the world's aid resources – calling instead for investments in local, national, and regional surge capacity and more locally-led responses.

This report examines the current state and perceptions of surge in the sector, the structural and organisational challenges to effectiveness, and the potential opportunities for reconceptualising surge capacity more broadly. The study is based on research involving key informant interviews, data scoping, and a desk review of grey literature and agency documents. While there are a range of definitions of 'surge', for the purposes of this study, it is taken to mean the provision of necessary additional capacity in the event of a crisis to alleviate human suffering to agreed standards. Surge capacity includes people, logistics capacity, assets, and finance.

The rising number of emergencies suggests that future humanitarian responses will require more flexible surge capacity, which can respond within a fundamentally overstretched and underfunded system. Investments in international surge and localised capacities and responses are often framed as 'either/or'. Developing a 'both/and' approach, which better supports local and national capacities to respond, while maintaining international capacity to surge, when necessary, will require a fundamental reorientation with international surge supporting and reinforcing local capacity rather than displacing it.

## Surge: underfunded, overstretched, and not always welcomed

Multiple approaches to surge exist across the humanitarian sector in terms of: deploying people; getting financing to respond to emerging needs; and providing supplies through pre-positioned logistics. While organisational processes aim to ensure an objective decision about scale-up and surge, various other factors influence the decision. Global political and media attention and (potential) funding often will be weighed against the perspectives of those operating in-country, particularly the state, which may wish to limit international presence. In many current emergencies, access constraints are significant, hindering the deployment of people and assets. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) can also call for a system wide 'scale-up' to reinforce in-country capacities.

Personnel shortages for surge are common. Organisations often do not have the funds to maintain adequate standby capacity internally and so end up 'borrowing' staff from one crisis to respond to another. Too many surge deployments are short-term, with high turnover, and staff often lack

knowledge of the place they are working in. Global rosters of specialists – available through standby arrangements – provide additional capacity when called upon but suffer weak coordination between them and competition for too few individuals. Increasingly, there are demands for highly specialised profiles, which can result in standby partners having to search for 'unicorns' to add to their rosters. In many cases, people will be on more than one roster, making the supply of available people likely to appear larger than the reality. There has been a rise of more remote surge support – either temporarily while awaiting visas, for example, or to be able to support multiple contexts.

A perennial challenge facing surge remains the limited number of women in surge positions, which can negatively impact the ability to ensure the participation of women and girls from affected communities. Good practice suggests that organisations should incorporate exit strategies into their surge mechanisms and strategies from the beginning, but there is little evidence that this happens systematically.

In terms of financial resources, apart from the rapid response window of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) (USD 374 million in 2023) and smaller sources available through entities like the Start Fund, country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF), significant sources of advanced, unearmarked funding for surge are simply not available to most humanitarian providers. Investments in preparedness remain persistently underfunded, despite the well-documented evidence of the value of such investments. With 92% of humanitarian funding going to protracted complex fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the proportion of money genuinely flexible for surge is actually quite small.

In logistics, the focus has been shifting to more local procurement, in addition to greater use of cash and vouchers, reducing the need for pre-positioned supplies and global supply chain capacity (while increasing the need for flexible funding) on a day-to-day basis. But there remains a demand in exceptional situations as seen in Ukraine, the Türkiye/Syria earthquake and more recently Gaza, for specialised items and rapid stand-up of logistics capacity.

## As local as possible, as international as necessary?

Given the challenges that international organisations face in relation to surge, there are clear arguments for surge to be based more on sustained local capacity. There is, however, limited evidence that localisation commitments are leading to fundamental shifts in approaches to surge. While many organisations are investing in more local or regional staffing capacities and have made commitments to better and more directly supporting local and national humanitarian actors, surge capacity has not yet been localised in a meaningful way.

Resources to support the surge capacities of local and national actors beyond the narrow implementation of projects on a sub-contracting basis remain limited. Due diligence requirements of donors contribute to the limited, short-term funding available to many local/national organisations and lack of organisational development. The role of national governments and how the surge capacities of key line ministries and disaster management authorities can be better supported is another critical component of surge and localisation, but which has been neglected in policy and practice.

## Opportunities for improved outcomes for surge

Concerns around the projections for increased disasters due to climate change and existing critiques of the system are driving a range of initiatives. Novel financing instruments, such as disaster risk financing, and new forms of climate financing are being developed, including insurance models and concessionary finance instruments for national governments. Disaster risk financing can help incentivise greater ex-ante planning (to win approval for the funding), which can contribute positively to preparedness and trust between actors. There is greater engagement from institutions, such as the international financial institutions, lending their expertise in questions of structural finance and working with governments. However, greater collaboration across the different professional communities working on these types of financing with the more traditional humanitarian sector is needed so that the system as a whole is more flexible and responsive to context. Too often each 'hammer is looking for a nail', when what is needed is the whole toolbox and the ability to be led by context and need. Some of these tools work less well in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, for example, where a majority of current humanitarian funding is spent.

Some surge actors are increasingly seeing their role as one of support to local and national actors, where they facilitate, but do not lead, the humanitarian response. Efforts to make due diligence assessments 'passportable' could help reduce the burden on local/national organisations: if one organisation has approved a partner, another organisation might be able to accept that third-party due diligence as adequate. In Kenya, the ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN), a platform led by national and local NGOs, is turning the tables and inviting international organisations to provide expressions of interest for the capacities that ASAL identifies as being needed in the response.

Technology is also being used to support surge responses, for example supporting collaboration with local responders in 'hard-to-reach' areas using digital technologies and remote programming. Organisations are also exploring the role that artificial intelligence (AI) could play in supporting preparedness for disasters.

## Conclusions

Many of the problems facing surge are symptomatic of wider problems in the humanitarian response system. The current reactive fundraising model of emergency response means that investments in preparedness and longer-term strategies, including support for local and national actors, are not adequately incentivised.

Surge mechanisms could be improved by focusing on how to collectively better support local and national actors to surge. Such a shift requires a greater focus on preparedness, relationship building, and more thoughtful coordination and collaboration with local and national actors. It also requires re-orienting the focus of surge strategies to understand not only the needs but also the capacities and vulnerabilities of individuals of different ages, genders, and diversities within affected populations. It is then critical to consider strategic questions, such as:

- What local and national capacities exist and how might these be supported?

- What international capacities are already in-country?

- What is/are the most appropriate mechanism(s) of surge to collectively support local and national capacities?

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: Those working on disaster risk financing and operational humanitarian actors** should invest in greater coordination and collaboration to address systemic gaps in responses. Similarly, there needs to be greater coordination between **international humanitarian actors and national disaster management authorities/civil defence forces** to ensure more investment in preparedness and ex-ante relationship-building, particularly in countries where there are frequent and to some extent predictable emergencies.

**Recommendation 2: Donors** should use their leverage to incentivise collaborative preparedness activities and collaborative approaches to surge, which better support local and national actors.

**Recommendation 3: International organisations** should complement their international rosters with support for helping to create and strengthen national and regional personnel surge capacities, including volunteer networks, and develop plans for more effectively partnering with them (e.g. through mentoring or job shadowing as part of international deployments).

**Recommendation 4: Donors and international organisations** should continue and expand efforts to make due diligence 'passportable' for local/national organisations so that they can more easily access funding and partnerships.

**Recommendation 5: International organisations** should identify means to better support the organisational development requests of local and national actors to better enable their surge response capacities and determination of what and who is needed in an emergency response.

**Recommendation 6: Organisations** should make their data and learning about surge responses more publicly available to enable cross-sector learning. **Donors'** support is critical to ensure that those organisations willing to be transparent about their performance are not penalised.

**Recommendation 7: Organisations and standby rosters and partners** should undertake workforce planning for their surge capacities in line with their strategic ambition (such as strengthened ways of working with partners) and to ensure better coordination to avoid duplication of efforts.

# 1 Introduction

The premise of humanitarian action is, in many ways, about surge and emergency response. Most definitions of emergencies that trigger international humanitarian responses begin with the idea that local capacities are overwhelmed and need urgent additional resources. This study seeks to describe the current perceptions and arrangements for surge across international organisations, highlighting the challenges faced, gaps, and the opportunities for thinking about different approaches, particularly in light of moves towards more localised humanitarian responses and an increasingly financially constrained environment.

There are a range of definitions of 'surge', with some only considering the deployment of additional personnel. For the purposes of this study, surge is taken to mean the provision of necessary additional capacity in the event of a crisis to alleviate human suffering to agreed standards.[1] This capacity includes people, logistics capacity, assets, and finance. To be successful, surge should have effective ways of working with the capacity that existed prior to the emergency.

New emergencies continue to appear such as Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan, not to mention the growing frequency of weather-related disasters caused by climate change. In addition to the direct impacts of more frequent and more intense storms, floods, drought, and heat waves (some in 'new' geographical areas not familiar with such phenomena), the secondary impacts on food security, livelihoods, migration, and conflicts are significant. "Climate change is typically found to be one of the drivers of the conflict and the conflict exacerbates the local impacts of climate change…. The causes and consequences of disasters are complex and interconnected."[2] The number of small and medium-scale 'under-the-radar' disasters has increased five-fold in the last 10 years and the scale of climate change disruption is projected to lead to a further massive increase.[3] This increase in emergencies suggests a future of increased need for flexible surge capacity to respond to the rising number of emergent crises. The number of people targeted in humanitarian response plans (HRPs) reached a peak of 230 million in 2023, increasing from 120.8 million in 2019 to 180.5 million in 2024.

> ## "Surge is a Band-Aid for a broken system."
>
> *– Interviewee*

But humanitarian funding levels have not kept pace with humanitarian requirements (Figure 1), and neither has the capacity to respond to new emergencies. Until more resources can be mobilised to meet humanitarian needs, including by national governments investing in protecting and assisting their own citizens, humanitarian organisations need to find ways to respond to new crises within a fundamentally overstretched and underfunded system. Some donors are informally talking of returning to 2019 levels of funding. The strategic question for international humanitarian agencies is **whether to accept reductions in coverage and narrower targeting, or to take a different approach with modalities for surge based on leveraging local, national, and regional capacities.**

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[1]  See for example the Sphere standards: https://spherestandards.org/humanitarian-standards/

[2]  Wiggins M., Mala, M., Oxley M. (2023). *The Start Fund. Preparing for climate change impacts on small-medium scale crises.* Start Network. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/preparing-climate-change-impacts-small-medium-scale-crises

[3]  Ibid.

**Figure 1: Funding vs. requirements of humanitarian response plans, 2018–2023**



*Data source: UN OCHA 2024. https://humanitarianaction.info/*
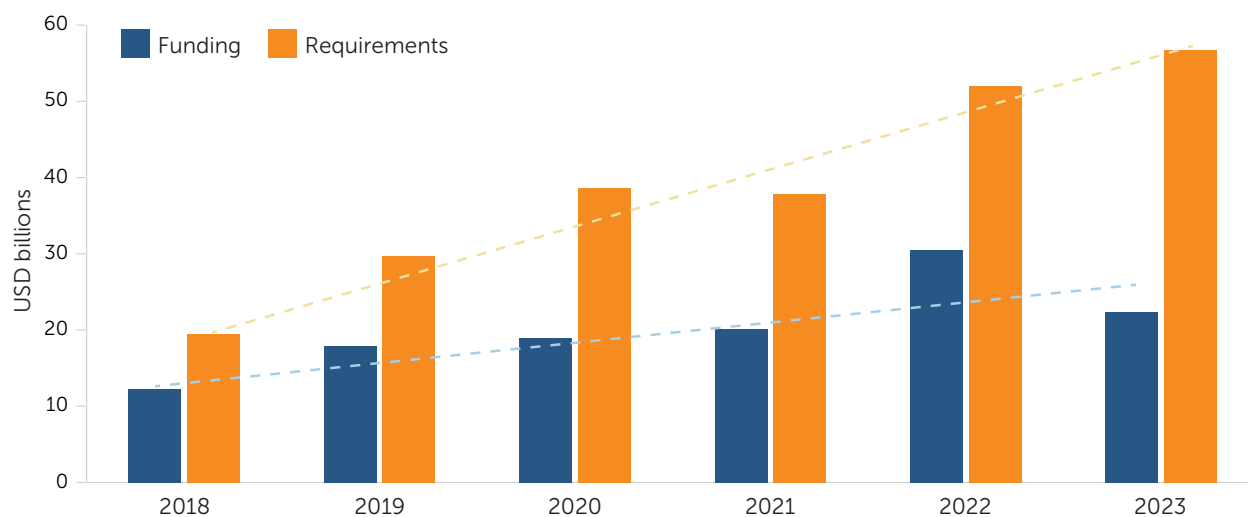
## 1.1 Methodology

In order to explore humanitarian surge capacity, a three-person team undertook research between October 2023 and February 2024, carrying out key informant interviews, data scoping, and a desk review of grey literature and agency documents.

The team conducted semi-structured interviews with 48 stakeholders, comprising humanitarians from national organisations, international NGOs, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, governments (donors and national disaster management agencies (NDMAs)), the private sector, and United Nations (UN) agencies. Snowball sampling was used to identify further key informants.

The literature review included assessments and policy documents on the state of surge within the humanitarian sector, evaluations on recent emergency responses, including surge deployments, and roster systems, crisis response summaries, and humanitarian appeals as well as other studies. This included the annual reports of 103 humanitarian organisations (UN, international NGOs, local and national agencies).

This report focuses on qualitative observations and recommendations: a lack of publicly available quantitative data meant that one of the original intentions of the study – to provide quantitative analysis – had to be dropped.

## 1.2 Study challenges and limitations

- While some organisations publish detailed information – such as number of deployments, the origin of surge staff, and the duration of the response – quantitative data related to surge capacity is not collected consistently across different organisations or responses and different metrics are used to report on scaling up operations.

- Few agencies publish reports that disaggregate surge funding and activities from wider humanitarian work, making it challenging to identify the specific contribution of surge capacities.

- Information from real-time reviews was limited since these are often internal learning documents and not publicly available.

- There was very limited literature specific to surge, all of it 'grey' rather than peer reviewed.

- The study took place at the same time as the Gaza conflict and response were starting, making it sometimes difficult to schedule interviews and identify further individuals to contribute.

There are currently multiple approaches to surge across the humanitarian sector, summarised in Table 1. They are a mix of people, money, logistics/assets, and ways of working.

**Table 1: Elements of surge capacity**

| | |
|---|---|
| **People** | **Deployable humanitarian experts.** A number of organisations hire staff specifically to be deployable in the event of an emergency. The contracts typically indicate an amount of time to be spent on deployment (50% to 80% of the year depending on the organisation). The staff member thus has a long-term contract, but no long-term placement. Staff cover a wide range of roles from leadership and coordination to technical specialists or operational support roles, such as human resources (HR), finance, and logistics. |
| | **Staff rosters or registers.** (Some organisations use these terms interchangeably, while others use both terms, making a distinction between internal staff and external contacts.) Humanitarian organisations maintain lists of staff who can be taken from existing roles and temporarily deployed to a crisis response. They may be existing internal staff or external individuals who have been pre-selected and possibly given training. |
| | **Secondments.** These are less planned than a roster or register, but in the event of a major new crisis, such as Ukraine, agencies simply send staff who volunteer to go. |
| | **Standby partnerships and third-party rosters.** Agencies request various types of experts to be provided for emergencies, but also for longer term deployments, particularly in protracted emergencies (e.g. NORCAP). |
| | Agencies also tend to maintain human resources procedures and policies that allow **rapid recruitment** in an emergency. This can include **HR surge:** investments in additional HR capacity to allow organisations to hire new people quickly. |
| | Support to emergent and **volunteer** humanitarian action that is surging locally (e.g. Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan and low-profile, informal aid in Myanmar). |
| **Finance** | **Standby financing mechanisms** (e.g. Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF), Start Fund, internal agency held funds) are dedicated funds for releasing grants at the start of emergencies. These also include donor rapid response funds. Donors and operational agencies establish mechanisms for the quick release of funds to pre-agreed partners (e.g. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) rapid response mechanism). |
| | **Anticipatory action funds** are mechanisms designed to release funding in anticipation of a severe disaster against a pre-agreed framework of triggers, recipients, and actions. The intention is to allow humanitarian organisations and communities to take action in the time between a predictable event (e.g. a cyclone forming offshore due to make landfall in a few days) and the event itself. These are sometimes windows within the above standby funds (e.g. CERF and DREF). |

**Emergency appeal mechanisms,** e.g. flash appeals, national appeal mechanisms (e.g. Disasters Emergencies Committee (UK), Consortium 12-12 (Belgium), Humanitarian Coalition (Canada), Giro555 (The Netherlands), Nachbar In Not (Austria) and Swiss Solidarity).

**Crisis modifiers.** A ring-fenced financing mechanism within a development programme designed to disburse humanitarian response funding in the event of a disaster taking place within the development programme area. These were designed to make access to funding faster and because any crisis might undermine the development objectives of the main grant.

**Innovative forms of disaster risk finance** are a growing area that "covers the system of budgetary and financial mechanisms to credibly pay for a specific risk,"[4] such as insurance-based models (e.g. African Risk Capacity (ARC)) or concessionary finance options for governments. At a government level they seek to recognise the disconnect between disaster response and the economic impact of disaster losses. While some of this financing is not about surge per se, such funds do include mechanisms to create financial liquidity for response, such as safety nets (e.g. finance for shock-response social safety nets), and insurance mechanisms that can be used to fund NGO responses. The ARC Replica partnership between the Start Network and ARC is such an example.[5]

**Logistics**

**Pre-positioned supplies** globally and in regional and national warehouses Emergency categorisation/classification/triggers for surge. There are warehouses with pre-purchased supplies that can be released quickly to operational agencies mounting a response.

**Standby framework agreements.** Pre-agreements with suppliers are established so that, in the event of an emergency, the procurement can happen quickly with reduced friction from tendering processes. It relies on the capacity of the suppliers to provide the resources quickly (which may be pre-defined).

## 2.1 Not always popular: choosing to scale up a response

Organisational processes for deciding to launch a scale-up seek to be objective by using impartial criteria – but in practice, such decisions are frequently internal 'political footballs'. Depending on the attitude of in-country and headquarters leadership, there can either be a push for an emergency designation in the hope of attracting resources (funding, people) or there can be a push for reducing the designation as a way of keeping surge personnel away. Even the quality of personal relationships among senior colleagues can impact the smoothness or otherwise of the decision-making process. Alternatively, there can be a significant push from headquarters because of media and fundraising opportunities and the need to be seen to be relevant.

> *"There is mixed feedback on how decision-making considers the field perspective and on a common understanding of roles and responsibilities. Personal relationships and people's personalities can play a significant role in the success of country offices' participation in decision-making."*
>
> *– Evaluation of IOM's Level 3 Emergency Responses*

For example, when the Russian Federation first invaded Ukraine, a number of humanitarian leaders privately lamented the level of coverage and funding that became available – and with it – the pressure to mount a response. While these leaders did not underestimate the suffering endured by the

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[4]   Centre for Disaster Protection (n.d.). Glossary of terms. https://www.disasterprotection.org/glossary

[5]   See: https://startnetwork.org/funds/disaster-risk-financing-support/arc-replica

Ukrainian people, it was in stark contrast to the resources and coverage of famine in East Africa that was happening concurrently. As one individual put it, "No children will die of starvation in Ukraine. Many will in East Africa."

The triggering of a surge response varies between organisations but has broadly similar elements. Agencies typically have a form of categorisation system that seeks to classify the scale of the emergency and the nature of the organisational response. The scale of impacts typically uses criteria such as the number of people affected in absolute and relative terms, mortality and morbidity rates, or other indicators such as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) scale. The level of agency response – often similarly a scale of low to high – is decided upon with a mix of the capacity to respond, the extent to which it falls within the agency's mandate or mission, and the added value that the agency believes it can contribute relative to government capacities.

Beyond individual agencies, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) can call for a system-wide scale-up. Based on a recommendation from the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG) to the IASC Principals, a decision can be taken to encourage all agencies to scale up a response. This decision is based on the need to reinforce in-country capacities for an adequate response rather that the scale of impact per se.

> **A humanitarian system-wide scale-up activation is a "system-wide mobilisation in response to a sudden onset and/or rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in a given country, including at the subnational level, where capacity to lead, coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance does not match the scale, complexity, and urgency of the crisis."**
>
> *– IASC Humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up Activation, Protocol 1*

IASC guidance for scale-ups requires that organisations deploy capacities needed to sustain the level of response required and that the humanitarian country team (HCT) from the outset of the response develops the following: benchmarks; a transition plan; and post-activation plans and measures. These revised IASC protocols replaced the previous Emergency Level 3 (L3) system, which ranked and classified the severity of a crisis to inform the subsequent response. Before these guidelines were revised, the deployment of surge was linked to the declaration of L2 and L3 emergencies and although the IASC no longer uses this ranking system, it is still used internally by some UN agencies.

There are a wide range of perspectives on the value of scale-ups. While some aid officials interviewed see the potential for having access to additional resources to do more, others fear the "chaos" and challenges of absorbing lots of new staff rapidly, pressure from headquarters to deliver more, and a loss of control. A frequent comment from in-country staff was that surge teams start things, but then leave in-country teams "holding the baby", as one interviewee put it, and having to deal with longer-term issues once the surge teams have left. Floods in Pakistan in 2022, which impacted 33 million people, led to calls for a system-wide scale-up, but in-country leadership felt there was a risk that this would bypass the Pakistan government, which has significant capacities at a national level. The decision not to call for a system-wide scale-up was therefore based less on the severity of the crisis and more on an estimation of the potential negative impact of surge on existing in-country capacities. Reviews subsequently lamented the lack of capacity for coordination and support at the state and lower tiers of government.[6]

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[6]    Harvey, P., Stoddard, A., Sida, L., Timmins, N., Munir Ahmed, S., Breckenridge, M.-J., & Jilliani, S. (2022). *Floods in Pakistan: Rethinking the humanitarian role.* Humanitarian Outcomes.

## 2.2 Approaches to surge need to adapt to constraints to access

The approach to surge, which relies on being able to deploy international staff or send supplies into other countries, is premised on the assumption of access. Organisations assume they will have permissions to operate, international staff will be given visas, and supplies will receive customs clearance. However, experience shows that access can be constrained by insecurity and bureaucratic impediments, making the assumption often not true.

Access constraints in conflict settings where parties to the conflict place restrictions on humanitarian actors are long-standing and governments affected by natural shocks sometimes also seek to limit levels of external international assistance. For example, the Moroccan government limited its acceptance of offers of support to the earthquake response in 2023, and some search and rescue teams were denied access. These restrictions reflect governments seeking greater control over how emergency response occurs within their jurisdiction and may translate into reduced access for humanitarian personnel and goods. Local partners are one way in which international agencies are seeking to address access challenges.

### Exit strategy and transition

Good practice suggests organisations should incorporate exit strategies in their surge mechanisms and strategies from the beginning, but there is little evidence that this happens.[7] Downscaling of staffing and capacities is often a result of reduced funding rather than intentional transition planning. Interviewees saw value in putting in place transition plans to longer term teams and programmes to better coordinate the end of surge and transition into a more sustainable response model, but this was seen as a weakness of current approaches. Downscaling can be particularly painful for national and local actors who, having built up new organisational infrastructure, find it difficult to scale down which can lead to long term damage to the organisation. The IASC scale-up protocol is intended to automatically end after six months but in many cases is extended as it is felt premature to suggest the scale-up is no longer needed and a transition plan is not in place. Evaluations call for more detailed deactivation processes and responsibility assignment among staff to ensure a smooth transition.[8]

## 2.3 Underfunded and overstretched: people, availability and competencies

The premise of surge is that additional capacity can be deployed to respond to new emergencies or new needs in existing crises. However, in practice the overall system is underfunded and overstretched, so surging capacities to respond to a new crisis means taking resources from a response somewhere else: similar to "robbing Peter to pay Paul".

In practice, there is very little genuine standby capacity. Most agencies rely on a model in which a small number of staff coordinate a small number of full-time deployable staff, complemented by registers or rosters from which to draw. These registers and rosters either require staff to be released on a temporary basis from other parts of the organisation, often other chronic emergency responses, or on roster members from outside the organisation being willing and available. These individuals have often been through a selection process, or are ex-staff, who can be called on for short-term assignments. Reluctance by managers to release staff from their substantive roles contributes to high turnover,[9] and high turnover can cause delays and inefficiencies. It seems that across many organisations' HR processes, internal bureaucracy and politics combine to add costs, reduce efficiency, and lead to delays

7   See for example: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). (2013). *Evaluation of five humanitarian programmes of the Norwegian Refugee Council and of the standby roster NORCAP.* https://www.norad.no/en/toolspublications/publications/2013/evaluation-of-five-humanitarian-programmes-of-the-norwegian-refugee-council-and-of-the-standby-roster-norcap/; International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). *Evaluation of IOM's level 3 emergency responses.* https://evaluation.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl151/files/docs/resources/L3%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20June%202023.pdf

8   IOM 2023.

9   UNFPA Evaluation Office. (2019a). *Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action 2012-2019.* https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/Final_Humanitarian_Evaluation_Report.pdf

in providing quality humanitarian assistance. Agencies also tend to seek the same types of surge profiles from standby rosters, given the overall lack of available people.

Dedicated staff for deployment are a small fraction of the numbers of staff working in the humanitarian sector. For example, across 13 of the largest humanitarian international NGOs, the total full-time staff specifically employed to be available for rapid deployment is approximately 340 people, compared to a total staff contingent across those same agencies of approximately 144,000. This equates to approximately 0.24% of staff being dedicated for surge.

**Trust: "People want to choose who they work with, so they will go around the system, as it does not permit that, to get the people they want."**

*– International NGO roster manager*

Trust is a key issue, as well as familiarity with organisational systems, and those agencies who reported having the most success often mentioned only working with ex-staff or consultants that they could repeatedly call upon. In several cases, these were more experienced senior staff who welcomed the opportunity to balance deployments with other personal commitments. This success required investing in capacity to actively manage the rosters, with dedicated staff maintaining regular communication with those on the register, providing agency updates, and keeping abreast of individuals' personal circumstances. Those agencies that invested less in HR staff capacity to actively manage their rosters reported less success with their roster systems.

The scale of these rosters is hard to determine as those of large organisations may not be centrally managed, with regional divisions establishing their own rosters or registers and no single overview of what capacity exists globally across the organisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of national and regional surge due to travel restrictions,[10] and organisations report investing in regional rosters because regional deployees possess greater contextual expertise, which can enhance their usefulness to the operation and quality of the response. However, such surge is not always straightforward. For example, in the Middle East, having Arabic speakers with surge rosters is a clear advantage, but obtaining visas for different nationalities to travel within the region can be extremely challenging.

**"We are more and more reliant on surge support and so you need a full support behind the coordination of those demands. But see that UN agencies are not equipped for the workload — you see it in every UN agency. In some agencies, you have one single person who is in charge of surge and the HR side of onboarding."**

*– Interviewee*

A further challenge to really knowing what capacity exists is that individuals may well be on more than one register at a time. So, while an agency might list that they have *x* number of deployable senior leaders or experts, in practice, the actual available number will be lower because they may have accepted work for another agency.

**"The surge market is a live market: it's first come, first serve."**          *– Interviewee*

**"...people are very busy in this business — 5 years ago, [you] would have had 5 good candidates, but now have to ask 10 to get one person."**          *– Roster manager interviewee*

[10]   Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2022). *Default to design: Shifting surge post pandemic,* p.21.
https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/default-to-design-shifting-surge-post-pandemic/

### Third-party and system-wide rosters

There is growing use of specialised third party recruitment services which can help source experts via an external roster and/or targeted recruitment. Some UN agencies go to the standby partner rosters for staff because, even if they have the funds to pay for a person, their internal systems are too slow to get people on the ground quickly. An example of this is the Standby Partnership Programme (SBP) mechanism, which started in 1991 during the Iraq war when the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) responded to UNHCR's request for surge personnel.[11] The SBP network now has 56 standby partners, which have memorandums of understanding with 16 UN agencies. In 2022, there were 750 deployments across 215 duty stations in 80 countries.[12, 13]

As one interviewee noted, standby partners are the "most fit for purpose...you can get people for a year and they are free for UN agencies. That's very attractive." The SBP has recently tried joint monitoring missions to a country with donors, UN agencies, and standby partners, which were cited by respondents as useful because they allowed a comparison across standby partners on issues such as salary and conditions. While such missions can be large, they can reduce the amount of monitoring missions that in-country organisations have to host.

There are also efforts to share what deployments are being requested by UN agencies and where experts are being deployed. At the same time, there remains space for greater coordination across the SBP network to avoid everyone "running after the same emergencies" and to see where there are gaps. However, such coordination would also require donors not to require standby partners to report on what they are doing in every new emergency and to let standby partners and agencies decide where surge capacity is needed most.

> **"...we see UN agencies asking different [standby] rosters [for the same surge people]. There is no coordination across the rosters to avoid that — which is a problem as we're all running for the same fancy emergency, instead of forgotten crises, like Haiti."**
>
> *– Interviewee*

The Protection Standby Capacity Project (ProCap) and Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap) are long-standing inter-agency sector-specific surge programmes, both managed by UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and NRC's NORCAP. ProCap was developed in the mid-2000s to help address protection gaps in the overall response, which has included support to protection clusters. Its approach has since evolved to support humanitarian leadership to operationalise the IASC's centrality of protection policy. GenCap, which was created two years after ProCap, has aimed to support the integration of gender into humanitarian responses, usually focused on supporting humanitarian coordinators and the broader system.

There have also been more recent additions to the types of subject-specific surge programmes, many geared at supporting humanitarian coordinators, including those focused on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), cash, and accountability to affected populations. Another example

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11   The SBP Mechanism, Standby Partnership Network: https://www.standbypartnership.org/about

12   Standby Partnership (n.d.). Standby Partnership Response Dashboard. Retrieved 10th April 2024 from https://www.standbypartnership.org/impact

13   Danish Refugee Council (DRC). (Sept 2009). *External evaluation of DRC's standby roster.* External Evaluation of the DRC's Stand-by Roster - Report | ALNAP

of a subject-specific surge programme is the iMMAP Inc. Global Surge Program, which consists of over 400 members specialising in technical information management who can be deployed for both in-person and remote surge responses.[14]

A challenge faced between standby partners and UN agencies receiving deployees, and even within agencies, is that information about performance is not readily shared, making it difficult to know why a deployment did not work well or why a deployee may no longer be wanted by an agency. Sometimes it is simply a matter of personalities not getting along, while in other cases, there may be more serious SEA cases. While there are demands for surge specialists focused on PSEA, the standby partnership system has yet to find ways to adequately manage cases of misconduct or SEA: "the dark side of surge", as one interviewee noted. While the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme (MDS) created by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) is designed to prevent perpetrators from moving between organisations, "If no one reports into the MDS, we can't do anything", lamented one interviewee, and this area of surge remains a challenge to address.

### Searching for unicorns: the demand for staff competencies has expanded significantly

UN, international NGO and third-party roster agencies interviewed for this study all reported ongoing demands for dedicated surge capacity, and some agencies were looking to increase the size of their teams and rosters. All types of staff were in demand, from technical specialist roles to leadership roles. When asked how agencies decided on what skill sets to carry within their deployable teams and rosters, it was generally the case that they monitored the nature of the requests they were receiving and sought to evolve the teams accordingly. In many cases, there was not strategic workforce planning, rather it was an evolving market responsive model. In other cases, such as NORCAP, which manages different thematic rosters, a strategy is developed for different regions and partnerships. If there is a request for a particular type of expert that is not available on their roster, some standby partners will recruit for that specific profile. The advantage of such a recruitment is that additional individuals may be added to the roster for the next time such a specialisation is requested.

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**"We needed a food aid person but were only able to get a livelihoods person and now we are looking at famine.... We need people who can pivot to different approaches."**

*– International NGO Country Director*

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There is a growing demand for surge actors who have strong interpersonal and soft skills who can provide support and coordination to in-country actors. Concurrently, evaluations have highlighted the need for more technical and operations staff.[15] Agencies interviewed reported growing demand for staff in particular roles, such as those linked to PSEA, protection, cash and voucher programming, and those with partnership and localisation skills. As the breadth of humanitarian action has grown, the variety and nuance of staff sought has significantly expanded. NORCAP and DRC have seen an increase in the complexity of the types of experts being requested in recent years, including specialists on inclusion, localisation, energy, climate, education, and accountability to affected populations. Yet the demand can also ebb and flow: for example, while experts in accountability to affected populations were in demand for some time, one standby roster partner went four years without receiving any such requests. Responding to requests for an expert with specific skills – such as a localisation expert with health experience – often requires specific recruitment, often delaying the deployment.

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[14]  See: https://immap.org/global-surge-program/

[15]  Stoddard, A., Breckenridge, M-J., Harvey, P., Taylor, G., Timmins, N., Thomas, M. (2023).
*Slipping away? A review of the humanitarian capabilities in cholera response.* Humanitarian Outcomes.
https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/cholera_response_2_23

There is a tension between identifying such 'unicorns' and finding 'good enough' candidates, given the pressure to mobilise capacity. Evaluations and interviewees noted some surge deployees arrived in emergency contexts without the proper skills or training, and with limited work experience.[16] In some contexts, organisations have deployed surge staff with extensive technical expertise, but without organisational familiarity, which compromised their usefulness to the in-country team.[17]

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**"There is mixed evidence of the effectiveness of surge and roving team deployees. Effectiveness depends on a number of factors, including (a) the experience, interpersonal skills, and attitude of deployed personnel; (b) the support provided by country senior management and existing staff; (c) the ability of the surge deployee to remain dedicated to the specific role rather than being viewed as an extra resource for the country office across a number of areas; and (d) contract modality."**

*– Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action[18]*

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In practice, both a technical knowledge of how to manage an emergency response, as well as a strong understanding of context is needed. However, achieving this balance was regularly reported as a challenge, with poor relationships between surge staff and existing in-country staff a recurrent issue in reviews and evaluations. There remains a different working culture and set of expectations between the sending/deploying part of the organisation and the recipient country team or national partners. These differences can often lead to tensions both at the start of an emergency, but even more so at the point that emergency teams exit and hand over. This is not to suggest country teams or national organisations did not recognise the need for technical expertise, and evaluations noted that they wanted more training and equipping in these aspects.

A range of respondents interviewed expressed frustration with the quality and capacity of HR support for ongoing programmes, leaving the surge teams and rosters to act as a kind of 'safety net' for the organisation. Bureaucratic delays within agencies – due to HR and internal procedures – meant deployable staff, rosters, and lists of pre-vetted consultants were partly about organisational preparedness, but also about mitigating the challenges of internal processes. Evaluations to the UNFPA Oversight Advisory Committee noted that it frequently relies on surge instead of "securing funding needed for both surge and roving teams' responses and for necessary longer-term positions".[19]

This constant juggling of scarce human resources exacerbates problems with staff wellbeing, as people are deployed from one challenging context to another. Duty of care and the wellbeing of surge deployees have emerged as increasingly important issues within humanitarian surge. In some emergency contexts, surge deployees have been sent to emergency situations without the proper training and/or they have been deployed to various emergency contexts back-to-back, creating risk of burnout.[20, 21]

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[16] IOM 2023.

[17] UNICEF. (2023). *Evaluation of UNICEF's response to support the influx of refugees from Ukraine.*
https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/evaluation-unicefs-response-support-influx-refugees-ukraine

[18] UNFPA Evaluation Office. (2019b). *Evaluation of the UNFPA capacity in humanitarian action 2012-2019.*
Thematic paper: Human resources. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Thematic_Paper_Human_Resources.pdf

[19] UNFPA Evaluation Office 2019a.

[20] IOM Central Evaluation Unit 2023.

[21] International Rescue Committee. (2023). *IRC Ukraine evaluation brief.*

## The challenge and risks of high turnover

The length of surge deployments varies widely. Full-time deployable staff or staff from third-party rosters can stay longer, but those who come via internal rosters tend to have much shorter stays since they are required back in their regular roles. Surge models with short-term deployments experience problems with weaknesses in the handover, and with deployees showing capacity and knowledge gaps. Operational respondents to this study noted that constant turnover also presents challenges in building high performing teams, which impacts levels of trust and performance. Mistakes and miscommunication are more likely despite good will. The evaluation of UNICEF's response to the influx of refugees from Ukraine noted that the short-term deployments that followed the standard emergency model of two to three weeks were designed to set up systems and the infrastructure needed for the crisis response. However, what was needed was using existing national mechanisms and filling gaps. The short-term deployees instead established parallel systems and the high turnover of staff created delays as "staff arriving for longer durations described spending their first few weeks in their new roles discovering what agreements had been made and with whom."[22]

In response to the challenges of short-term deployments, some changes in the approach can be seen. ProCap deployments used to last around 12 months, with the possibility of extending to 18 to 24 months. With the greater shift to supporting HCTs in implementing the IASC's centrality of protection policy, ProCap is now offering more sustainable support to ensure more system changes, with deployments now lasting around two to three years. NORCAP, in addition to offering shorter-term deployments of three to six months for life-saving programmes, also offers longer-term deployments in protracted situations, lasting one to two years. This approach allows the expert more time to implement and ensure proper programming, without having to worry about their contract being renewed, providing more stability for the individual and predictability for the receiving entity.

## Remote support

There has been a growth in remote working, where staff provide support through video calls to the local team leading the response without physically being present. This shift was particularly spurred on by better technology and the COVID-19 pandemic, when international deployments decreased significantly. In 2021, 80% of all deployments in the Asia-Pacific region were remote.[23]

This remote model continues to be driven by the following:

- the preference of some (senior and experienced) personnel to travel less

- country programmes happy to pay a reduced fee for the surge support, if they are not physically present

- central humanitarian departments being able to use key staff to support more than one emergency simultaneously

- remote support (in some cases) allowing deployees to start support immediately as they await visas and/or medical clearance.

However, some respondents questioned the impact on programme quality as it is not possible for surge staff to observe what is taking place and they wholly rely on the information chosen to be given to them. Remote working can raise challenges for coordination, accountability, relationship and team building, and systems management.[24] Some standby partners also cannot legally have their deployees work from home because of legal and administrative restrictions, such as taxes and insurances.

22  UNICEF 2023.

23  Humanitarian Advisory Group 2022, p. 10.

24  Henty, P., Lees, J. and Sutton, K. (2020). *Distance deployments: Australian Red Cross' experience with remote rapid response*. Humanitarian Advisory Group. https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/distance-deployments-australian-red-cross-experience-with-remote-rapid-response/

### The role of women in surge

The number of men being deployed for surge surpasses the number of women. According to the SBP, only 33.9% of deployees in 2022 to 16 UN agencies from 56 standby partners were women. A 2017 ActionAid and CARE study found that most humanitarian response teams are made up of men and that they speak mainly to male leaders in affected communities.[25] Having more women in humanitarian teams can enhance the participation of women and girls from affected communities and ensure their needs and diverse voices are taken into consideration when designing and implementing emergency responses.

To tackle this gender disparity, multiple organisations are taking measures to increase the number of women on surge rosters and their subsequent deployments. Among the challenges and barriers are personal safety and security concerns, confidence and skills, family, childcare and personal responsibilities, perceptions and stereotypes, hostile and sexist environments, and unsuitable living arrangements. These challenges need to be tackled through strong and adapted safety and security measures, wellbeing support, policies and procedures that support work/life balance, promoting women into leadership roles, fighting discrimination, and culturally sensitive living arrangements.[26]

> "NORCAP started an initiative to increase the number of female climate services experts in Africa. The aim is to boost representation of women in a largely male-dominated area and enable more women to be involved in decision-making processes on how to address the needs of communities affected by climate change."
>
> – *Norwegian Refugee Council's Annual Report from the Board 2022*

## 2.4 The Finance model: over-committed and perpetuating reactive approaches

Most humanitarian funding (92% of the USD 32.8 billion in 2022) goes to protracted crises, with humanitarian aid being provided to each of those crises for decades.[27] While 158 countries received international humanitarian assistance in 2022, seven countries – South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Yemen and Democratic Republic of Congo – were among the top 10 recipients in each of the years between 2018 and 2022 demonstrating how concentrated humanitarian funding is.[28] This has left international humanitarian assistance overstretched and maintaining large-scale operations with appeals that are consistently underfunded, leaving little funding for preparedness, early warning and early action, or capacity building for more effective emergency response.

[25] Ruparel, S., Bleasdale, C., O'Brien, K. (2017). *How can humanitarian organisations encourage more women in surge?* ActionAid and Care International. https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid_report_how_can_humanitarian_organisations_encourage_more_women_in_surge.pdf

[26] Ibid.

[27] Development Initiatives. (2023). *Global humanitarian assistance report 2023.* https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023

[28] Ibid.

**Figure 2: Number of humanitarian response plans, flash appeals, and rapid response plans, 2019–2023***
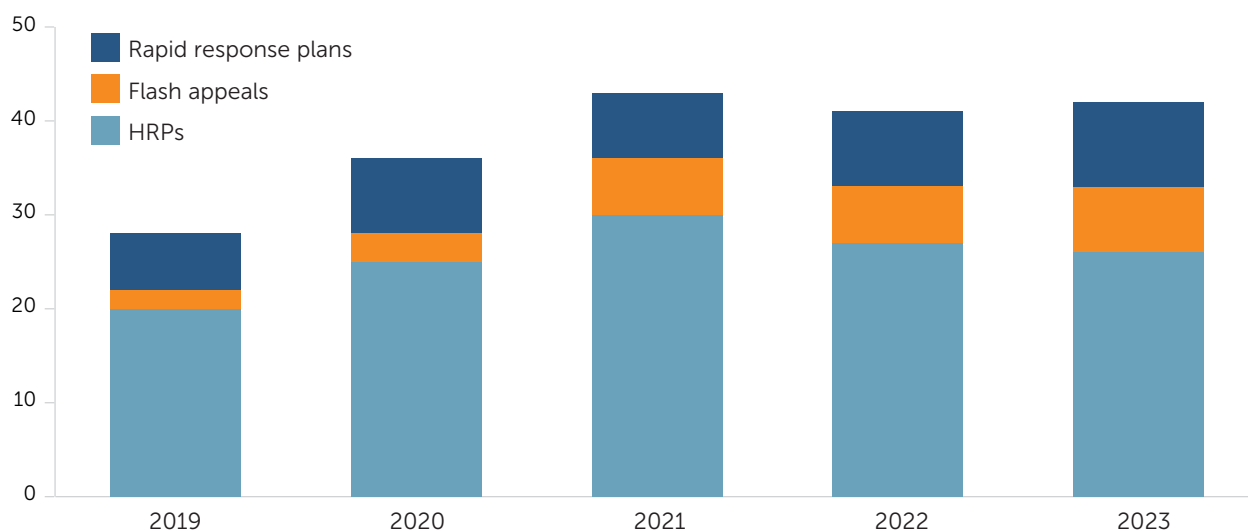


*Note: Not including 'non-HRP', COVID-19-related plans in 2020.*
*Source: UN OCHA 2024. https://humanitarianaction.info/*

Fast access to emergency funds is a key factor in enabling a rapid response. The largest source of such funding is the CERF, which in 2022 allocated USD 735 million,[29] up from USD 485 million in 2012.[30] The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) DREF allocated CHF 74 million (around USD 80 million) in 2023, up from CHF 23 million in 2012.[31] According to interviewees, in 2023, eight major international NGOs collectively had standby emergency funds of around USD 137 million. These funds are used to initiate responses with the expectation that other funds will arrive either from institutional donors and/or public appeals. In many cases there is an element of 'rotating funds' so that particularly well-resourced responses can offset the costs associated with less well-resourced emergency operations. Most administrators of such funds would allocate different amounts according to the categorisation/designation of the response.

## Box 1: Save the Children Humanitarian Fund

Save the Children International have been developing a Humanitarian Fund (HF) to enable more flexible and effective humanitarian response. In 2023, 17 Save the Children members pledged US$114m in flexible funding for humanitarian emergencies. The HF allocated over $145m to 69 emergencies. The Ukraine response allocations included planned earmarked funding balances from 2022, explaining the higher value of allocations versus the received contributions in 2023. More than 28 million people, including 15.4 million children, were reached in countries supported by the HF in 2023.

*Source: Save the Children. (2023). Humanitarian fund annual report.*

It tends to be only the larger agencies that have access to such funds. For those without central response funds, the gap between the start of a rapid onset emergency and access to donor or appeal funding creates a delay in response and negatively impacts timeliness. This was, in part, the inspiration behind the establishment of the Start Fund, which rapidly releases funds for a 45-day period to bridge

29   Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). (2023). *2022 CERF annual results report.* UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/cerf-annual-results-report-2022

30   CERF. (2013). *2012 Central Emergency Response Fund annual report.* https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/united-nations-central-emergency-response-fund-cerf-2012-annual-report

31   International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). (n.d.). *Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF).* Retrieved 10th April 2024 from https://www.ifrc.org/happening-now/emergency-appeals/disaster-response-emergency-fund-dref

agency needs from onset to larger funding streams becoming available – a function that remains valued, particularly among national and local civil society organisations (CSOs). However, the Start Fund remains relatively modest compared to global needs and other funds. Country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) are increasingly providing funds to local and national actors. Greater investment here would enable more rapid access to funds by local and national actors.

The flexibility and ease of access of humanitarian resources has diminished over time. In seeking to address the shortcomings of rapid finance availability, there has been an increase in the variety of funding mechanisms, such as anticipatory financing, crisis modifiers, and donor-specific schemes. The creation of such additional funding mechanisms requires the allocation of resources, which means more earmarking, as well as administrative procedures to access the money. The criteria for the then UK's Department for International Development's Rapid Response Fund were so rarely met that it was not used between 2015 and 2020 and then used three times in the one year.[32]

### Underinvestment in preparedness, early warning and early action

The advantages of investing in preparedness are well evidenced, yet despite increases it remains persistently underfunded. Prearranged financing[33] remains small at 2.7% of total crisis financing flows in 2021, or 2.2% of crisis financing across the five-year period 2017–2021.[34] In 2022, the five largest humanitarian funds disbursed a total of only USD 63.8 million for anticipatory action.[35]

There are strong arguments for new forms of disaster risk financing and greater engagement from non-humanitarian actors (development, climate finance and others) to better resource needs in long-running crises. There has been a shift in interest in fragile and violent contexts by major development actors such as the World Bank, but unless new funding instruments with additional resources are made available to tackle long-term humanitarian contexts, emergency funding will remain pulled into these situations and be inadequate to support surge capacity to meet new crises. Some agencies have a more flexible approach and allow their emergency funds to be invested in preparedness – but generally only in modest amounts since humanitarian departments expect country teams and their partners to fundraise directly for such work.

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**"We are bit reactive on surge – and every emergency said that we should be looking more at preparedness."**

*– Interviewee*

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The humanitarian system is designed for ex-post response based on the hope of more money, people, and assets becoming available rather than on a system with right-sized capacities at the local and national level that can be complemented when required.

## 2.5 Less logistics... until it is needed

Agencies report that the demand for logistics specialists remains high as the sector has become more professional and specialised. As one participant of many years' experience put it, "We used to have logs [logistics staff] who could do the building and fleet management, but now they need to do forward planning, professional procurement, engage with and sign contracts with financial institutions for cash and voucher programmes."

32  www.gov.uk accessed 15th March 2024.

33  Guaranteed financing to be released to a specific implementer when a specific, pre-identified trigger condition is met. Part of a wider set of disaster risk financing instruments that are broader than traditional humanitarian funding.

34  Plichta, M. and Poole, L. (2023). *The state of prearranged financing for disasters 2023.* Centre for Disaster Protection. https://www.disasterprotection.org/blogs/the-state-of-pre-arranged-financing-for-disasters-2023

35  Wagner, M. (2024). *Early action: The state of play 2023.* Risk-informed Early Action Partnership. https://www.early-action-reap.org/early-action-state-play-2023

The prepositioning of stocks ahead of recurring cyclical disasters, such as the monsoon season, has yielded positive results in disaster response, but there are mixed reports on demand for globally prepositioned assets.

Agencies with global warehouse stocks noted there was a general downward trajectory of demand due to increased local procurement policies, more mature markets globally and the shift to more cash and voucher-based programming leading to reduced regular demand for centralised logistics and warehouse facilities. However, when new and unexpected emergencies arise such as Ukraine, the Turkey earthquake, or the more recent escalation of conflict in Gaza, demand for emergency supplies can be greater than what is available.[36] European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) recently set up the European Humanitarian Response Capacity (EHRC) and reported significant demand when new emergencies occurred. While overall demand for global stocks is reducing, there appears to still be a requirement in the early stages of a large, new emergency for additional, rapidly deployable logistics capacity. In some cases, this can be highly specialised, for example the World Health Organization (WHO) uses dedicated teams for the specific technical requirements and legal requirements for importing restricted drugs or blood products.

> ### Box 2: European Humanitarian Response Capacity
>
> ECHO established the EHRC in March 2022 as a set of operational tools designed to fill gaps in the humanitarian response to sudden-onset natural hazards and human-induced disasters. The EHRC is a business-to-business model in which ECHO can provide operational humanitarian partners with three pillars of support sourced internally and from EU member states: in-kind logistics support (including air travel capacity, the most in-demand offer); pre-positioned supplies; and expertise. The EHRC is in addition to the state-to-state level support from member states' civil defence capacity (also coordinated by ECHO).

# 3   As local as possible, as international as necessary?

International agencies face practical challenges related to surge, such as access, inadequate numbers of appropriately skilled people who can be deployed, too many short deployments with high turnover, and inadequate contextual understanding. Given these challenges, there are clear arguments for surge approaches to be based much more on sustained local capacity – but there is limited evidence that commitments to localisation are leading to fundamental shifts in approaches to surge.

International organisations have an inherent advantage to maintain emergency funds and capacities because they respond to multiple emergencies globally per year and so are able to maintain and rotate capacities. The model of funding that is reactive to specific crises events creates a structural financial problem

**The Start Network successfully piloted a locally led approach to surge, which worked when it was funded, but then stopped when the funding stopped.**

[36]   IOM Central Evaluation Unit 2023.

for national and local actors. For example, while drought is cyclical and predictable, the funding is unpredictable and available, in part, based on what is garnering international attention at the same time. A national organisation might be well funded for a while but would have to downscale when the funding drops, losing capacities. When the next drought starts, the organisation has to again win funding and develop capacities once more. This impacts operational capacity and also has the effect of reducing absorption capacity the next time funding becomes available. International organisations have an inherent advantage as they are able to move their capacities to a different crisis elsewhere in the world and so retain some central capacity, even as individual country offices expand and contract.

For large, complex responses in new areas, a mix of international and national capacities can be the most effective. For example, UNICEF's scale-up to the influx of refugees from Ukraine to neighbouring countries relied on a mix of:

- staff of the same nationality as the host country

- international surge deployees

- local partners in the response – there were 19 new partnership agreements with the national government, 117 with national CSOs, and 19 with other public local entities.[37]

In an evaluation of UNICEF's response in Ukraine, it was noted that while national staff were deeply familiar with national systems and local governance arrangements, they lacked familiarity with emergency systems, coordination systems, and humanitarian principles.[38] In contrast, international surge staff had more knowledge of UNICEF emergency systems, the humanitarian principles and coordination mechanisms. It could be argued that successful surge teams need both national and international components.

A UNFPA evaluation summarises this point:

*The benefit of having a strong national staff presence is clear: understanding of context and commitment to long-term solutions within the country. However, in times of emergencies the benefit of international staff with experience from other contexts, experience of the cluster system, centralised pooled funding mechanisms, and global minimum standards is equally critical. International staff are also often less subject to partisanship and thus may be better positioned to guarantee the implementation of all humanitarian principles... UNFPA does not always get this balance right.*[39]

However, hiring experienced national staff often sets up competition with national actors. The better salaries many international agencies offer creates gaps for national NGOs and CSOs, reducing the capacities of local organisations and undermining locally-led responses.[40] National organisations have repeatedly called for commitments from international organisations to not recruit their staff, and mitigating this dynamic is mentioned in both the Charter for Change and the Pledge for Change, but no effective mechanism to address this perennial challenge has yet been found.[41]

This lack of real change, despite the rhetoric, is generating frustration among national and local actors, who are increasingly vocal about not wanting international surge, even if a need for international surge may remain. In interviews, some national organisations expressed cynicism, noting that international agencies are willing to use local capacity when it is perceived as too dangerous for their own staff – that is, there is intentional risk transfer rather than a genuine commitment to localisation.

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[37]  UNICEF 2023.

[38]  Ibid.

[39]  UNFPA Evaluation Office 2019b.

[40]  Featherstone, A. (2017). *Time to move on: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity.* CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide and Start Network.
https://library.alnap.org/help-library/time-to-move-on-national-perspectives-on-transforming-surge-capacity

[41]  See: https://charter4change.org/ and https://pledgeforchange2030.org/

## 3.1 Due diligence as a blocker

Reasons given for limited chances for funding of local and national organisations include due diligence requirements. International agencies are constrained by their donors and regulatory authorities to ensure that appropriate due diligence is undertaken before handing over large sums of money to local actors. However, at best this takes time, reducing the timeliness of a response, and in some cases may be almost impossible if the local organisation does not have the necessary organisational and financial due diligence systems in place. During the Ukraine response, international agencies seeking to fund local actors in Poland were hindered in their due diligence because Polish law made no requirement on smaller CSOs to submit audited accounts – a key component in many due diligence processes.

### Box 3: Sudan

Following the escalation of violence in Sudan in April 2023, humanitarian organisations scaled up their operations. Initially international staff remained in-country, but as security conditions deteriorated, many were evacuated, and shortly thereafter, organisations launched surge responses to meet the growing needs.

However, many international surge deployments were provided via remote support due to insecurity (including targeted attacks) and access constraints, such as difficulty obtaining visas for surge staff, travel permits within the country, and fuel shortages. Sudanese staff who were serving in other crises were brought back to the country to serve in Sudan, as they did not require visas. Some agencies, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which was very fast in deploying staff, were able to initially get people in before the restrictions were implemented. Collaboration between different organisations, which was already good, reportedly significantly increased during the beginning of the crisis.

Significant amounts of aid were provided by locally-led groups directly to people, including organising evacuations of civilians and delivering essential services and health care amidst intense fighting. Support to these groups was highly valued. Examples include the USAID/Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance Rapid Response Fund, which was able to provide funds to local partners via the International Organization for Migration (IOM) based on pre-crisis risk assessments, planning and prepositioning of life-saving assistance as well as capacity building for local communities and partners.

However, despite some good examples and local actors having direct access to deliver life-saving assistance, overall coordination with them was limited and frustration was expressed at the lack of a clear, informed approach from the international humanitarian sector to partner with national NGOs, Emergency Response Rooms and other locally-led assistance.

Standby arrangements with UN agencies can be specifically for experts to be deployed internationally. So even if experts are available from the same country from where the request for surge came, the MoU between the standby partner and UN agency does not allow a national to work for the UN agency in their home country. While efforts are being made in many organisations to change limitations related to diligence and compliance, there are other resulting challenges – often legal or related to taxes, insurance, or donor funding – to be addressed.

Many evaluations and humanitarian staff call for greater investment in capacity building. More organisations are incorporating elements of training into their surge responses to ensure the sustainability of their intervention and to build local capacity. However, surge deployees report that the

demands of their role were so large that they did not have the capacity to run training concurrently[42] and national organisations often contest the need for such capacity building. Country teams of international agencies and national and local partners report some frustrations with a perceived arrogance in the mindset of surge staff who can behave as if they know what needs doing while failing to take enough time to listen and learn more about the context.

Responding to some of these critiques, OCHA launched the Flagship Initiative in 2023, which recently produced its first learning report.[43] The Flagship Initiative is trying to move response away from being supply driven, the standardisation that underlies the HRP and humanitarian needs overview (HNO) process, agency mandates and supply chains. The pilot is running within sub-regions of four pilot countries: Colombia, Niger, Philippines and South Sudan. In year one, "five interdependent pillars emerged as central":

- systematic and participatory community engagement

- area-based decentralised humanitarian coordination

- prioritisation of programmes that incentivise and support local initiatives

- getting funding directly to local organisations and crisis-affected populations

- humanitarian planning and programming organised by community priorities.[44]

The initiative has committed to learning, with national learning teams and an international collation of learning planned for twice a year. It has the potential to provide good evidence on whether the silos of agency mandates and sectors can be overcome with a stronger focus on local context. It is not yet clear how this would work with any system wide scale-up protocols.

## 3.2 Weak national to international coordination

National governments bear primary responsibility for assisting and protecting citizens in times of disaster, but the role of government departments and national disaster management authorities (NDMAs) remains an often-neglected part of efforts at localisation.

In interviews, study participants from both international and local organisations with government experience noted the disconnects between civil defence capacities, search and rescue teams, NDMAs and the broader humanitarian community. In the event of a sudden onset 'natural' emergency, it is typically civil defence units, including military, police, and fire service capacities, that mount the initial surge response alongside the community. National disaster agencies in Latin America, for example, have a long history of leading surge responses. Some have comprehensive data collection systems and emergency teams that regularly engage in disaster preparedness and response. The National Institute of Civil Defense of Peru (INDECI) and Colombia's National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD) rapidly deploy emergency teams to disaster sites to carry out comprehensive assessments, data collection efforts, and to provide humanitarian assistance to populations in need. When needed, they also provide capacity building to other national and local authorities, and communities.[45] Programmatic interventions need internal coherence, but also alignment with governmental structures.[46] However,

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[42]  UNFPA Evaluation Office (2019a).

[43]  UN OCHA. (2024). *Flagship Initiative. Reimagining humanitarian action. Status update one.* https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/flagship-initiative-reimagining-humanitarian-action-status-update-one-february-2024

[44]  Ibid.

[45]  Government of Peru. (n.d.). *Instituto Nacional De Defensa Civil* https://www.gob.pe/institucion/indeci/institucional; Government of Colombia. (n.d.) *Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres.* https://portal.gestiondelriesgo.gov.co/

[46]  IOM Central Evaluation Unit 2023.

transition from these service providers (not specifically in Latin America and the Caribbean, but generally) to the UN, international NGO, and NGO-based responses was described in interviews as difficult, with weak coordination between them.

Additionally, different priorities, which shape how mechanisms are designed, lead to silos and disconnects in how funding flows between institutions and the activities it enables. An analysis of the findings of CERF anticipatory action pilot studies in Nepal and Bangladesh noted that there was a "clear and consistent picture of what scaled and sustainable anticipatory action should look like across both countries: government leadership. This consensus was striking given that those interviewed were predominantly from humanitarian agencies ... However, there is little strategic thinking or planning about how this might be achieved."[47] Further:

*"To move to the next level of scale and sustainability, Anticipatory Action has to stop being an add-on, instead becoming embedded in wider processes and activities. This is true within humanitarian processes (for example the Humanitarian Programme Cycle) but also beyond, crucially linking with government, development and climate processes (in connection with social protection, disaster risk reduction or early warning)."*[48]

In addition to the challenges of transition between institutions there can be gaps between nationally drawn up plans and the detail on the ground. One local NGO interviewee noted, "International support comes to the national or regional level but does not get down to local government level. They have equipment support, some personnel, but sometimes if you have a lot of money and need to deal with a lot of people it is a barrier - timeliness becomes an issue." Local NGOs can play a bridging role, translating national plans into local reality by supporting government to deliver services in ways that better align with community's needs.

> ### Box 4: Examples of local NGOs supporting effective government delivery
>
> The African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) works with ministries of health and other partners to provide training and capacity building to strengthen public health systems in Africa and to strengthen their resilience and responses to disease outbreaks.
>
> People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network (PDRRN) – a national NGO – works on supporting local government units in their disaster risk reduction work, for example filling gaps in terms of data, risk assessments, and planning. These are all guided by government plans but use participatory processes to engage local groups such as community-based people's organizations (CBPOs), local cooperatives or women's organisations to inform the detail of implementation.

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47  Scott Z. (2023, 29 August). *The future of anticipatory action: Four challenges to reaching scale and sustainability.* Blog. Centre for Disaster Protection. https://www.disasterprotection.org/blogs/the-future-of-anticipatory-action-four-challenges-to-reaching-scale-and-sustainability

48  Ibid.

# Opportunities and innovations

Against the challenges set out above, there are a range of initiatives that are making headway in addressing the difficulties and point towards opportunities for improved outcomes, mostly by taking a different approach to how humanitarian response is planned for in advance.

## 4.1 More predictable and prearranged partnerships and financing

Changing finance structures to provide resources that are predictable and proportionate to the scale of disaster would be an important step. There are a range of initiatives looking at innovative disaster risk financing, such as index-based and pooled insurance models. These have the advantage of paying out on the basis of objective criteria being met, rather than relying on media attention or political interest. Calculating risk to build a sustainable finance model and agree realistic premiums with criteria that work is challenging and continues to be developed. As well as successful examples, there have also been frustrating situations, such as in the 2022 Pakistan floods when pre-arranged flood insurance did not pay out as the nature of the flooding did not meet the pre-agreed criteria. This highlights the complexity of designing the right kind of insurance product. In addition, the key issue is who pays the premium? However, it does offer the opportunity for funders to spread cost and risk and create a mechanism for predictable funding.

There has also been growth in the work around anticipatory action,[49] which seeks to start a response in anticipation of an emergency rather than after the event. Some pilots have made a link between both an insurance-based approach and anticipatory finance. For example, in the Philippines, B-Ready combines an early warning system for typhoons with digital cash payouts to identified poor households.[50] Forecast data is combined with historical data on disaster events in the community and how the community was affected by those previous disasters. When pre-agreed triggers are met, cash is released to vulnerable households before the arrival of the typhoon, using digital platforms.

A hidden added value of disaster risk financing is that it shifts the incentives to a greater focus on preparedness. Reactive funding mechanisms reward quick analysis and early response. In theory, therefore, they should reward good preparedness, but in practice that is often not the case with preparedness plans often out of date or poorly prepared. However, in order to win disaster risk financing funds, the emphasis is on the quality of upfront analysis. It incentivises pre-disaster planning and inter-agency work in order to develop an instrument or programme that is robust enough to attract funding – whether from a donor, the national government or private sector. In so doing it incentivises more local partnerships and relationship building between different actors.

## 4.2 More preparedness to surge with prearranged relationships

Preparedness has been shown to reduce emergency response costs by over 50% in some contexts and allows for more effective and timely interventions.[51, 52] A recurring theme in evaluations was that organisations were more successful and efficient in their surge deployments when they already had

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[49]  Wagner 2024.

[50]  See: https://b-ready.org/philippines/

[51]  UNFPA Evaluation Office 2019a.

[52]  UN OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF and World Food Programme (WFP). (2017). *Return on investment in emergency preparedness. Phase 2 of a United Nations inter-agency project to develop a toolkit for the humanitarian community*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2019-01/return_on_investment_in_emergeny_preparedness_phase_2.pdf

## Figure 3: WHO's emergency medical teams methodology
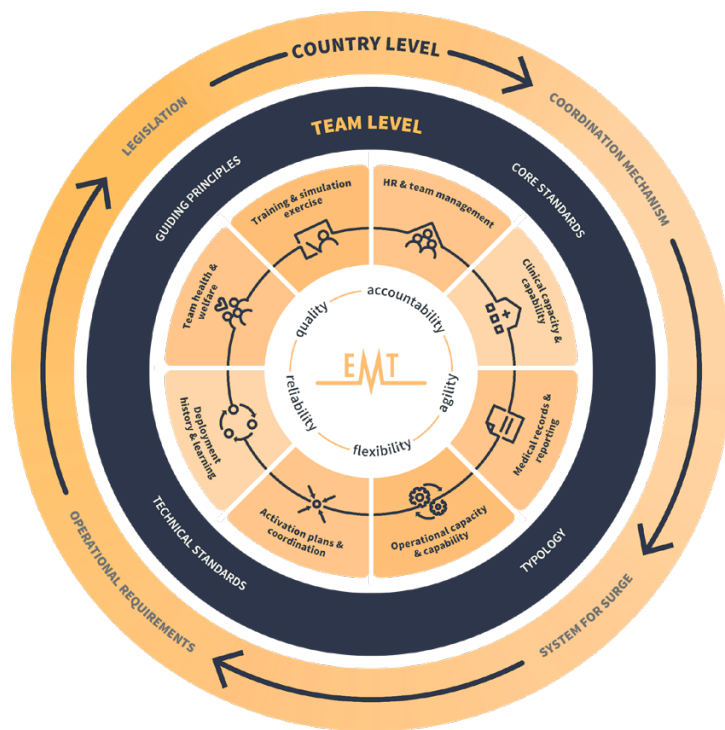


*Source: World Health Organization (2023) Emergency Medical Teams Strategy 2030*

## Figure 4: World Bank EP&R conceptual framework
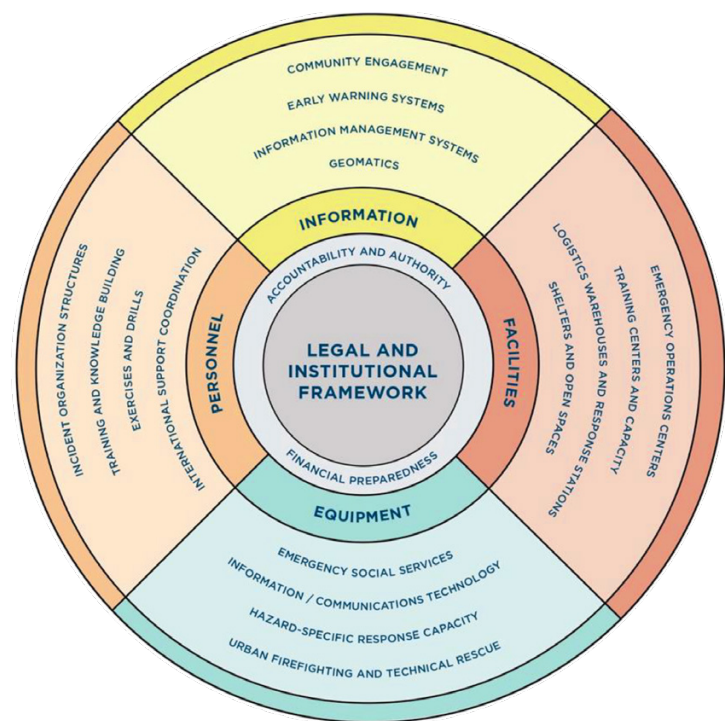


*Source: Ready 2 Respond Framework. Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery and Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice 2017*

a presence in-country and established relations with the government. When systems and some staff were already in place, the scale-up was far more successful and efficient in meeting the growing needs on the ground. Operations that had to be set up from scratch took longer to be deployed and faced additional constraints, and delays, when trying to meet needs in crisis contexts.[53] Success of a scale-up, in practice, is often contingent on interpersonal relationships and trust. One interviewee noted the most important elements of UNDAC training was it allowed people to get to know each other in a calm and safe environment. Having a pre-existing personal relationship with trust makes a significant difference when operating under pressure and making decisions quickly, often in the absence of clear data.

Various examples for preparedness exist. The WHO has established the emergency medical teams (EMT) arrangement, which is based on pre-agreements with governments and partner responders. WHO seeks to establish a programme at the national level, with a coordination system based in emergency centres in advance, that can be activated in the event of an emergency. This can be activated by the government, but with support from WHO if requested. The emphasis is on how the emergency surge capacities will fit in with/connect to established capacities on ground (see Figure 3).

In the response to the Türkiye earthquake of 2023, the Ministry of Health started the response, but WHO assisted with logistics, data management, and a system of coordination using its standardised systems and technical capacity. (The Türkiye government declined assistance from MSF as it was not pre-registered via the EMT system.)

53   Humanitarian Advisory Group 2022.

The World Bank has the Ready2Respond (R2R) diagnostic tool that analyses each of five component areas of an emergency preparedness and response (EP&R) conceptual framework (see Figure 4).[54] Each component includes a set of criteria that address a particular aspect within a jurisdiction.

Plans alone are not enough. They need to be maintained, with timely and frequent 'horizon scanning' and geopolitical analysis. It was noted in an evaluation of UNICEF's response to support the influx of refugees from Ukraine that UNHCR was warned in advance by governments of the war in Ukraine and had launched preparedness mechanisms, which allowed the agency to surge more quickly.[55] Similarly, Save the Children and MSF had both stepped up their preparedness measures as political tensions rose. These organisations had an advantage in terms of developing a timely response compared to many others. This is, of course, easier said than done, and there is a regular IASC Early Warning, Early Action and Readiness (EWEAR) report developed across multiple IASC agencies and submitted to the IASC EDG, but predicting which risks will actually materialise is an art not a science and even the process of scenario development can become political. In the case of Ukraine there were scenarios developed that showed Russian invasion as a fifth option – but the matter was not discussed as being seen to do so was problematic.[56]

The link between effective humanitarian response and high quality preparedness at the local level has been well established but there is still insufficient investment in disaster preparedness in many contexts, even when such areas are known to be high risk, with reasonably predictable hazards. The Philippines has some advanced disaster management legislation, which requires the central and local government to set aside money for disaster response given the frequency of hazards the country experiences. Nonetheless, at a local level, there can be a lack of awareness of what capacities exist and how to access them.

## 4.3 Greater focus on the roles and responsibilities of government

Rather than creating parallel systems, agencies could develop relationships with existing structures that can be scaled up in the event of a crisis. For example, work could be done on shock-responsive social safety nets whereby significant sums of money can be quickly distributed to households. The World Bank provided USD 230 million to support emergency payments under the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) in Pakistan. This reached over 2.7 million flood-affected families, with flood relief cash assistance of PKR 25,000 (USD 115) per household, demonstrating scale and speed.[57]

There are moves for greater government-to-government support within regions. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) already has an established mechanism for intergovernmental support, and it is expected that the African Union will imminently approve a pan-African civil defence capacity. Sponsored by the President of Algeria, and already endorsed at a ministerial meeting, the proposal is to be presented to heads of state in 2024. The proposal is that African nations will supply resources to a shared response within 48 hours. Relatedly, the Africa Multi-Hazard Early Warning and Early Action System (AMHEWAS) has been piloted. With one continental centre and five regional centres, the vision is that every person in Africa is protected by this system to the last mile. It is hoped to be established and working by 2030.[58]

[54] Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) and Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice (GSURR). (2017). *A framework for Ready2Respond. World Bank.* https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/R2R_FrameworkDocument_20170725.pdf

[55] UNICEF 2023.

[56] Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Timmins, N., Pakhomenko, V., Breckenridge, M.-J. and Czwarno, M. (2022). *Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March-May 2022.* Humanitarian Outcomes. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/Ukraine_review_June_2022

[57] Harvey, P., Stoddard, A., Sida, L., Timmins, N., Munir Ahmed, S., Breckenridge, M.-J. and Jilliani, S. (2022). *Floods in Pakistan: Rethinking the humanitarian role.* Humanitarian Outcomes. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/Pakistan_Floods_2022

[58] Reported in interview for this study.

## 4.4 Greater focus on enabling more locally-led responses

Investing in more localised response capacities holds the potential to maximise local capacities. Some surge actors are increasingly seeing their role as one of support, where they facilitate – but do not lead – the humanitarian response.[59] In some of its deployments, NORCAP has deployed a capacity building officer to support local/national organisations, a move that has seen positive results and feedback.[60] NORCAP is also focusing on support to localisation by providing localisation experts to organisations, as well as supporting local actors to engage in decision-making systems at country or regional levels – for example in the Lake Chad region and Southeast Asia – and raising their visibility.

The ASAL Humanitarian Network (AHN) in Kenya is a network of national and local organisations committed to supporting each other in the event of an emergency. They have established an interesting example of "shifting the power" by establishing a process where they invite expressions of interest from international partners against capacities they have identified as priorities, rather than accepting the support deemed necessary by their international partners.

In many contexts, local volunteers provide surge capacity in a humanitarian response. Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan, volunteers in Ukraine and popular resistance groups in Myanmar have responded at local levels. But international actors have struggled to engage with these emergent groups or support them, particularly financially, in a timely or effective way. In part this is because of due diligence requirements. Efforts are being made to address this, such as 'passporting', where if one organisation has approved a partner, another organisation might be able to accept that third-party due diligence as adequate. The Start Network has been working on a due diligence approach that can be 'passportable' to enable more local/national actors to access funding more directly.[61] The Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative (HQAI) is working with donors to recognise its certification as a way to greatly reduce due diligence requirements. The UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Danida, the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and Swiss Solidarity all recognise Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) audits within their due diligence processes and, to differing extents, use CHS audits as passports. The duplication between some donor due diligence requirements and HQAI audits against the CHS can be as much as 80%. Bridging from one assessment to another by using audit-validated data for more than one purpose holds the possibility of improving cost-effectiveness, simplifying reporting and reducing the administrative burden on agencies, including national and local NGOs.

## 4.5 Use of novel technology in surge

Organisations are also adopting new and innovative technology to adapt to increasingly demanding and compounding global crises. DRC, for example, as part of its "Improving protection of the hard-to-reach" strategy, includes scaling up in hard-to-reach areas by expanding its collaboration with local responders using digital technologies and remote programming.[62]

Agencies have been exploring novel finance, such as block chain-related technologies. For example, UNICEF has been trialling an approach in Nepal (the Rahat project) whereby funding is sent to local government offices. Recipients with the right code on their mobile phone are able to access an allocation by presenting themselves to the local municipality office.

Oxfam's UnBlocked Cash project is used in the Pacific region to reduce costs of distribution and delivery times following hurricanes in this hugely dispersed region. This consists of three elements:

[59]  Humanitarian Advisory Group 2022, p. 14.

[60]  Baker, J. and Narayanan, U. (2016). *Independent evaluation of the NRC expert deployment/NORCAP response to the Nepal 2015 earthquake.* Norwegian Capacity (NORCAP), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/evaluations/norcap-nepal-evaluation-report_final.pdf

[61]  Start Network. (n.d.). *Due diligence.* https://startnetwork.org/about/governance-and-assurance/due-diligence

[62]  DRC. (2023). *Annual report 2022,* p.22. https://pro.drc.ngo/media/yoolpwu0/annual-report_2022_drc_final-2023-06-12.pdf

e-voucher 'tap-and-pay' cards provided to beneficiary households, which can be used to purchase goods; smartphones with a pre-installed app through which vendors receive payments; and a single-payment online platform where NGOs like Oxfam can disburse funds and monitor transactions remotely and in real time.[63]

Private sector actors are also contributing by adapting technologies they have been developing to help scale up responses. Such developments are often born of partnerships between aid agencies and tech companies. Examples include: data collection using satellite imagery in hard-to-reach or large areas (for example to track displacement patterns in remote areas); remote data collection such as using individuals in affected communities with smart phones to gather data on the availability of medicines in pharmacies in insecure locations;[64] and other open-source intelligence.

Many organisations are seeking to explore what role artificial intelligence (AI) might be able to play. The World Bank suggests generative AI can be used to model the impact of natural disasters and help governments prepare for disasters by generating new patterns of disaster. Text and voice generation can facilitate real-time updates and information dissemination during emergencies, ensuring efficient communication with affected populations.[65] AI could also be used to help predict the movements of displaced people, and some are even suggesting that AI might be used to improve refugee status determination. However, there are also concerns about the potential for AI to perpetuate biases and inaccuracies in decision-making,[66] as well as risks around the use of open-source intelligence.[67]

## 5    Conclusions and recommendations

Surge and scale-ups remain beset by perennial dilemmas of insufficient capacity and funding, problematic relations in the field, a lack of good exit strategies, access challenges, and weak accountabilities to those affected by disasters and conflicts. Many of these problems are not specific to surge but are symptomatic of problems in the wider humanitarian response system. The current reactive, fundraising model of emergency response means that investments in preparedness and longer-term strategies, including support for local and national actors, are not strongly incentivised.

There needs to be stronger collaboration across those working on disaster risk financing, anticipatory action and early warning, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian operations. Humanitarian contexts might be very loosely categorised as those that suffer from well known natural hazards of increasing intensity, protracted complex and conflict-affected crises, and genuinely 'new', emergent crises. The approach needs to vary accordingly. The nature of finance and investment for the Philippines should self-evidently be different to that facing Yemen and our collective readiness for the next major crisis.

63  Rust, B. (2019). *Unblocked cash: Piloting accelerated cash transfer delivery in Vanuatu.* Oxfam Australia. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/unblocked-cash-piloting-accelerated-cash-transfer-delivery-in-vanuatu-620926/

64  Timmins, N. and Shevchenko, A. (2023). *Adaptive Innovation in the Ukraine humanitarian response: How context, leadership and partnerships matter. A case study from Ukraine for the Global Prioritisation Exercise for Humanitarian Research and Innovation.* Elrha. https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Elrha-Ukraine-Case-Study-Report.pdf

65  Allford, J.M., Karacaoglu,Y., Mocan,S., Park,J., Kim,Y. and Kawashima,Y. (2023). *Generative artificial intelligence.* Emerging Technologies Curation Series, Issue 5. World Bank Group. https://policycommons.net/artifacts/4490766/generative-artificial-intelligence-english/5293421/

66  Forster, M. (2022). *Refugee protection in the artificial intelligence era. A test case for rights.* Royal Institute of International Affairs. https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135324

67  Millet E. (2023, 5 December). *Deploying OSINT in armed conflict settings: law, ethics, and the need for a new theory of harm.* Humanitarian Law & Policy, International Committee of the Red Cross. https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/12/05/deploying-osint-in-armed-conflict-settings-law-ethics-theory-of-harm/

Unfortunately, the system seems slow to adapt, with weak collaboration across the range of tools and financial instruments being developed and perpetuates models of response developed in previous decades. Given the urgency of growing needs, the system must become more connected and agile in applying the right tool to the right context.

Improving surge mechanisms could be summed up by changing the question from, "How do we as an organisation ensure better surge capacities?" to "How can we collectively better support the affected community and local and national actors to respond?" Such a shift requires a greater focus on preparedness and relationship building – and more thoughtful coordination and collaboration with local and national actors.

## 5.1 Reorienting the focus of surge strategies

In order to reorient the focus of surge strategies (see Figure 5), it is necessary to first understand not only the needs, but also the capacities and vulnerabilities of individuals of different ages, genders, and diversities within affected populations. Once the diverse needs and capacities are understood, then it is critical to consider strategic questions, starting with national capacities, before considering existing international capacity, and then identifying ways to surge. Questions to consider could include:

- What local and national capacities exist and how might these be supported?

- What international capacities are already in-country?

- What is/are the most appropriate mechanism(s) of surge to collectively support local and national capacities?

**"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail."**

*– Interviewee*

**Figure 5: Reorienting the focus of surge strategies**
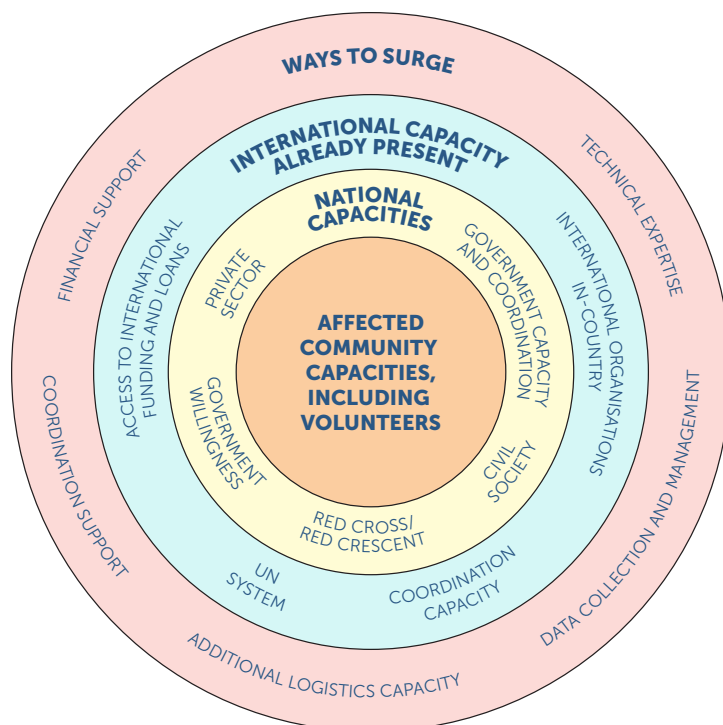


*Source: Timmins, Thomas*

Such an analysis is difficult to do in a timely manner and ideally is based on **greater investment in preparedness.** However, it is still possible: if there is time for a needs analysis, there is time for a basic vulnerability and capacity analysis, and agencies will learn as they implement. For slow onset crises or those that happen within the context of existing protracted emergencies, such an analysis and framing should be possible.

Figure 5 suggests an approach that is affected community-centric, starting with an analysis of their capacities – even in disasters all communities possess capacities – and building out the analysis from there to: other local capacities; national capacities and international capacities already in country that can be mobilised; and finally international capacities. But rather than analysing the gaps to be filled (the subtext of a

3W analysis), the question becomes, "How can we support and strengthen that capacity in a coordinated way?" In situations of conflict, this analysis will need to be conflict-sensitive: who is seen to provide aid can be inherently political, so analysis and the upholding of humanitarian principles will remain key.

A reoriented approach would require a change in behaviour and requires different incentives to be intentionally developed. For there to be a systemic change that is more locally and nationally focused and coordinated, incentives need to be shifted to reward collaborative behaviours. For example, donors and agency governance boards will need to reward agencies less for what they deliver directly and instead reward delivery with and via other local and national capacities.

## 5.2 Greater investment in preparedness, including financing

The humanitarian business model generally assumes skeleton upfront investments in anticipation of additional funds subsequently appearing. This model leaves power for decision making in the hands of donors (who may well be skewed by political priorities), international agencies, news editors and the level of media interest, and the resultant potential appetite for public appeals. The system overall lacks adequate and predictable financing for humanitarian responses. However, the level of connectedness between those working on novel forms of disaster risk financing and operational humanitarian assistance remains weak.

**Recommendation 1: Those working on disaster risk financing and operational humanitarian actors** should invest in greater coordination and collaboration to address systemic gaps in responses. Similarly, there needs to be greater coordination between **international humanitarian actors and NDMAs/ civil defence forces** to ensure more investment in preparedness and ex-ante relationship building, particularly in countries where there are frequent – and to some extent predictable – emergencies.

**Recommendation 2: Donors** should use their leverage to incentivise collaborative preparedness activities and collaborative approaches to surge, which includes better support for local and national actors and enabling surge deployments to better support less visible emergencies, not just high-profile ones.

**Recommendation 3: International organisations** should complement their international rosters with support for helping to create and strengthen national and regional personnel surge capacities, including volunteer networks, and develop plans for more effectively partnering with them (such as through mentoring or job shadowing as part of international deployments).

**"…the reality is that our rosters are prepared to deal with onset emergencies and localisation is usually only lined up at the end of the response."**

*– Roster manager interviewee*

## 5.3 Better supporting local/national surge capacities

Some progress is being made in investing in local capacities and the provision of remote support to local actors, but more attention needs to be paid to mitigating issues of risk transfer. This requires sustained investment and relationship building, with ongoing work around due diligence barriers and pre-agreed ways of working, including risk sharing.

**Recommendation 4: Donors and international organisations** should continue and expand efforts to make due diligence 'passportable' for local/national organisations so that they can more easily access funding and partnerships.

**Recommendation 5: Provide flexible funding for local actors to invest in organisational development.** Scaling up any response is akin to organisational development on steroids. Only providing project-linked costs fundamentally misses the point about what organisational development requires. International donors have long provided administrative overheads in recognition of this fact to international organisations, but many intermediaries do not pass on such funding to local actors. **Agencies who fund local organisations** should identify mechanisms to support the organisational development requests of local/national actors to better enable their surge response capacities.

## 5.4 Better data for more effective planning for surge in a rapidly changing world

At the same time, there will remain a need for organisations to be able to scale up their operations to meet the demands of new or escalating crises in certain situations. The lack of systematic data on surge, as distinct from broader humanitarian work, makes it difficult to develop a clear picture of the contribution made by surge, the issues faced, and therefore discussion on how best to address these challenges. As more disasters of different types and in new locations are anticipated, effective planning will matter more, not less.

While detailed data is not available, it is clear there is insufficient standing capacity for surge. The number of dedicated staff for response is very small and these staff are frequently deployed to ongoing protracted emergencies. There is a wider cohort of roster or register colleagues, but this resourcing is largely based on 'robbing Peter to pay Paul', rather than developing adequate staff resourcing in line with predictions of increased need. Staff released internally are often from other critical roles, putting strain on their existing work (which can often be in other chronic emergency contexts). Many staff feel overstretched, which is likely to impact performance as well as their personal wellbeing.

**Recommendation 6: Organisations** should make their data and learning about surge responses more publicly available to enable cross-sector learning. **Donors'** support is critical to ensure that those organisations willing to be transparent about their performance are not penalised.

**Recommendation 7: Organisations and standby rosters and partners** should undertake workforce planning for their surge capacities in line with their strategic ambition (such as strengthened ways of working with partners) and to ensure better coordination to avoid duplication of efforts.

The world is facing more crises, the number of which are predicted to increase with climate change, impacting even more people. The current humanitarian system is predominantly stuck in a rut of providing services in protracted, complex situations. A realignment is needed so that more development funding is made available in protracted situations so that humanitarian funds are less tied up in long-term responses to protracted crises and more flexibly deployed to surge support to existing capacities in new crises.

However, it also cannot be business as usual: a reactive ex-post model. There is a need for more predictable, proportionate funding built on effective preparedness, maximising early warning and early action. Humanitarian actors and those working on disaster risk financing, climate financing, as well as national governments, need to collectively overcome their silos of action. Collaborative preparedness built on relationships, trust, and putting the affected community front and centre over organisational imperatives is the only route to making the most effective use of our collective capacities in the service of those facing crises.

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# Annex A: People interviewed

Jermaine Baltazar Bayas, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator – Asia, Oxfam International

Tarik Begic, Global Surge Manager, British Red Cross Society (BRCS)

Amanda Ciabotti, Head of Emergency HR, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

Fanny Coussy, Consultant, Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)

Wendy Cue, Senior Coordinator PSEAH, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Florent Del Pinto, Head of the Disaster Response Fund, Information Management and Quality Delivery in operations & programs, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

Maria Dyhr Zangenberg, Programme and Operations Coordinator, Humanitarian Strategic Surge Capacity, Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

Merinda Dzanja, HR for humanitarian support personnel, Oxfam International

Robin Ellis, Deputy Director, UNHCR

Natacha Emerson, Senior Protection Advisor, ProCap and member of the ProCap Technical Reference Group, UN OCHA

Ludovico Gammarelli, Policy Coordinator, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)/ European Humanitarian Response Capacity

Moussa Sangara Ibrahima Garba, Humanitarian operations, World Vision International

Mark Gilkes, Head of Partner Engagement, MetricsLed

Isabel Gomes, Global Director, Humanitarian Operations, World Vision International

Ahmed Abdi Ibrahim, Convener, ASAL Humanitarian Network

Asier Pena Iturria, Senior Deployment Advisor, NORCAP (part of NRC)

Despina Johansen, Head of Inclusion and Empowerment, NORCAP (part of NRC)

Gatkuoth Kai, Former Technical Coordinator, Disaster Risk Reduction Unit, African Union Commission

Anita Kattakuzhy, Director of Policy, Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR)

Kehkashan Khan, Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer – managing ProCap and GenCap, UN OCHA

Bob Kitchen, Humanitarian Director, International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Esteban Masagca, President, People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network (PDRRN)

Aida Mengistu, Peer to Peer (P2P), UN OCHA

Mark Neeson, Finance Director, World Vision International

Amos O. Nyakeyo, Ag. Deputy Director, National Drought Management Authority – Kenya

Nic Parham, Humanitarian consultant, Independent

Asa Piyaka, Deputy Manager for Coordination (DMC) Sudan Complex Emergency Response Management Team (RMT), Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)/USAID

Gareth Price-Jones, Executive Secretary, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) (and IASC Emergency Directors Group, IASC Principals)

Janet Puhalovic, Humanitarian Affairs Officer, UN OCHA

Flavio Salio, Network Leader – Emergency Medical Teams, World Health Organization (WHO)

R. Anang Setiyargo, Country Humanitarian Lead, Oxfam Indonesia

Sudhanshu Shekhar Singh, Executive Director, Humanitarian Aid International (HAI)

Daniel Sissling, Thematic Manager for Localisation, NORCAP (part of NRC)

Marina Skuric-Prodanovic, Head of System-wide Approaches Section (SWAPS), UN OCHA

Atif Sohail, Deputy Country Director, Pakistan, Alight

Edmond Suluku, Sr. Director, People & Operations in Emergencies, IRC

Sophie Tholstrup, Consultant, Independent

Sandrine Tiller, Humanitarian Access and Networking Team Coordinator, Operational Centre Brussels, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)

Nicola Upham, Director of Humanitarian Strategy and Delivery, Save the Children International

Marta Valdés, Humanitarian Director, Oxfam International

Jonides Villarson, Programme Officer, Christian Aid – Haiti

Jeff Wright, Humanitarian Response Director –Global Rapid Response Team, World Vision International

Jenny Wright, Project Development and Reporting Officer, International Organization for Migration – Sudan

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